

Black Counter-Representations (Amiens, 10 Dec 19)

Université de Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, Dec 10, 2019

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“Our Time Has Come”: Towards Transatlantic and Transdisciplinary Approaches to Black Counter-Representations, from 1945 until Today

Within the title of Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man* lies a hint of the “presence/absence” dialectic that has weighed on African-Americans throughout history: the artistic representations of this section of society are predominantly negative and stigmatizing. Indeed, examples of racist visuals in both France and the US are far from scarce, ranging for instance from the American “Coon” to the French skirmisher Banania—even “Jim Crow” was originally a character in one of the most popular Blackface Minelstry shows of the 19th century. Understood as a subjective racial construct, racialization has long permeated all forms of representations on both sides of the Atlantic, and first and foremost in iconographic representations. Black people have produced a body of (self)representations in response to the proliferation of racial stereotypes in mainstream culture, though these are less visible to a wider audience.

The central goal of this conference lies thus in the investigation of the multiplicity of visual representations produced by the Black population and diaspora between France and the United States in the second half of the 20th century. In particular, we invite researchers to focus on productions which have challenged—directly or indirectly—the traditional canon for Black representations. Of particular interest in this conference are examples demonstrating a visual/ideologic rupture with depreciative models that permeated the public imagination in the West, whether they be positive counter-models or new visual representations aiming to critically subvert formerly pejorative representational frames.

The primary, but not sole, focal point of our conference is still and animated pictures made by/about Black Americans and members of the Black diaspora; as such, (case) studies of images which circulated transatlantically and contributed to establishing new paradigms will be particularly appreciated. Beyond the images themselves, we are interested in learning about the context of their production (historical as well as material) and their reception, as well as their posterity and influence. For instance, papers conducting studies about how, in the time period, networks of Black production and circulation have been able to emerge are most welcome. All these reconfigurations have increasingly come to occupy public space, with renewed vigor since the “long post-war era,” during which dissentive representations came to light in the context of a “society of mass images,” also confronted with decolonization and multiculturalism.

Though such re-readings have become quite topical and now participate in contemporary debates

on visibility and the writing of history, their roots are in fact historical. 1945 represented a breaking point, the emergence of “new” Black counter-representations becoming more “audible,” while following genocides, a redistributed narrative pushed democratic consensus and relinquishment of racism to the fore. African-Americans’ renewed activism in the US was echoed in the agitated colonial context, in particular in Algeria where the French army bombed Setif and Guelma as early as May 8th, 1945, illustrating the undermining of colonial empires.

The transatlantic frame of analysis chosen for this conference will allow for new insights into the formation of a (counter)canon of Black representations, as they have long been produced at the intersection of complex interactions, various hybridizations and international fluxes, in the American context in the wake of the Triangular Trade, as well as in the French context, heir to colonialism until the 1960s. While both systems are distinct—based on segregation for the former and colonialism for the latter—singular analogies can be drawn between both republics, in terms of “imaging” the question of race. Using the tools of comparative history, we intend to approach the transatlantic circulation of these images by analyzing the intertwining of contact points, as well as their repercussions, between the US and French systems.

In order to do so, we encourage prospective speakers to consider the seminal notion of “double consciousness,” coined in 1903 by W.E.B. DuBois and subsequently developed in various disciplinary fields. In the Black-American thinker’s words, “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. It should be noted that the expression also touches upon the conciliation of the Africanness of individuals in Western societies. As a consequence, proposals tackling representations (be they visual, musical, literary) which materialize this “double consciousness,” or conversely which deviate from it in order to show its limits, will be considered particularly favourably.

During this conference, we will also focus on opening the reflection to the multiple possible configurations of these “new” imageries. In 1992, sociologist Stuart Hall put forward the provocative question: “What is this “black” in Black popular culture?” In the same vein, we could, for example, ask what is “black” in Black representations and thus raise the question of their authenticity, and therefore their legitimacy. In order to extend this reflection, participants will be able to focus on (counter)representations from cultural currents seeking to value the contribution of Black people to world history and the collective imagination, such as Negritude, Pan-Africanism or the Black Power movement, which may also form part of the reflection.

Another possible perspective could concern images ignored or even excluded from the research field of official history because they come from marginal actors or have simply fallen into oblivion and would therefore be confined “to the margins” of representation studies. The use of a range of diverse visual sources, coupled with the transatlantic observation prism, will allow speakers to revisit the common ground of Black representations, to deconstruct them and to propose a renewed reading in the light of the analysis of these imageries.

Finally, the issue of memorial conflicts related to these representations raises questions about the position that researchers can adopt in relation to these images, placing themselves in a given political, economic and social context as well as in historiographies that are sometimes in conflict with one another. We therefore invite future participants to reflect also on questions of epistemol-

ogy of stance and to examine the commitment of specialists to representations that are still the subject of much debate today. This more theoretical approach will allow participants to contextualise and put into perspective the case studies discussed in order to highlight their possible political nature.

Researchers across all disciplinary fields of humanities and social sciences (such as history, art history, American or French studies, English, sociology, etc.) are welcome to submit a proposal. Papers should be twenty minutes in length and may be delivered in French or English.

Please address a 300-word abstract with images, accompanied by a short biography, to the organizers by October, 30th 2019 at imagedenousmeme@gmail.com

Images may be included in the proposals.

We will confirm acceptance by November, 10th 2019.

We hope to publish the papers presented at the symposium, in a format still to be determined.

Organizing Committee

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