

Black Males: Empty Signifiers in America

Today, in 2013, citizens of the United States of African descent – those who choose to do so – *explicitly* identify themselves as African Americans on official documents of the United States, such as passports, census reports, Social Security administrative forms, etc. Although some citizens of the United States of African descent cognitively understand and *explicitly* identify themselves as African Americans, there exist emotive meaning and signification which *implicitly* accompany any interpretation(s) of people of African descent in America. Emotive meaning and signification are not always articulated, but are always, already there/here awaiting a chance to become enlivened and created anew. This emotive meaning, this emotive signification, has a long, detailed history in the Western world, particularly in the United States of America.

The *explicit* moniker of *African American* used to represent and symbolize citizens of African descent is a relatively recent phenomenon: originating in the 1990s. Some of the earliest recorded writings acknowledging the existence of darker hued, darker skinned people come from the Greeks. The Greek historians Herodotus (484-425 bc) and Thucydides (460-395 bc), when referring to “people with burnt faces” in what will become known as Africa, “used the term Ethiopians” (McKay 281). After the advent of Christianity and the codification of the Bible, these burnt-faced Ethiopians would become recognized as the children of Ham; Western racialized Biblical interpretation would lead some to conclude that the children of Ham, the Ethiopians and those settled in Cush and Put and sub-Saharan Africa, would be “the lowest of slaves to his brothers” (*Genesis* 9:25). The Berbers of North Africa referred to the people south of the Sahara Desert as *Akal-n-Iquinawen* “which survives today as Guinea” (McKay 281). By 1619, people considered to have dark-hued skin and inhabiting Africa south of the Sahara Desert were referred to as: Ethiopians, burnt-faced, Guineas and slaves – inheritors of the Curse of Ham.

John Rolfe, one of the earliest English settlers of America, was well aware of the history of the terms used to denote living beings with skin of the darker hue. He was also aware of another term: *negar*. In 1619, Rolfe used *negars* in describing the African slaves shipped to the Virginia Colony. As early as 1653, the term *pickaninny* is found in the *Oxford English Diction*: it denotes children of African descent. Thomas Jefferson, while owning and procreating with his slaves of African descent, used the term *black* to refer to people of African descent in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in 1781 “instead of *negar*, *neggar*, or *negger*.” His slave records indicate that he was not against using the term *neggar* to denote his human chattel. And, literary authors of the nineteenth century – keen, regarding the language usage of their reading publics – used *nigger* to denote people of African ancestry with great frequency and freedom. While Twain was reportedly careful to use *Negro* when referring to people of African descent in his own narrative persona, such as in 1883’s *Life on the Mississippi*, 1884’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

is littered with the term *nigger*, used to reference Jim and those of his ilk. Joseph Conrad's 1887 work *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* needs no explanation: at least it did not in nineteenth century America.

It seems that along with the eradication of the institution of slavery in America came a nostalgia, an emotional longing, for the visual representation of people of African descent – who by now began to refer to themselves as *colored* as opposed to *nigger* or *black* or *Negro* – whose very presence could connote and elicit understandings of people of African descent which are reflected in the following dead metaphors: *burnt-faced*, *Ethiopian*, *Guinea*, *children of Ham*, *slave*, *pickaninny*, *negar*, *neggar*, *black*, *Negro* (black object) and *nigger*. The response to such a longing, seemingly, was the blackface minstrelsy show. The history of the blackface minstrelsy show in America records quite the diversity of terms used to denote citizens of African descent, collectively grouped as coons. The most popular coon derivatives were: *Uncle Tom*, *Aunt Chloe*, the *pickaninny* (think *Our Gang*, *Little Rascals* but with black children), *Mammie/Mammy*, the *tragic mulatta/mulatto*, *Jezebel*, *Zip Coon* (always have a razor), *Dandy Coon* (fine dresser, sophisticated, knows his rights, ignorant), *Buck Coon* (physical brute, think 50 Cent, or his artist, Young Buck). I ask you: just what emotions are *Pepsi's* “Uncle Drew” commercials with Kyrie Irving suppose to elicit? From about 1880 to 1960, while the NAACP was fighting for the explicit representation and understanding of citizens of African descent as colored Americans, the minstrelsy thrived and profited off of the emotive, implicit meaning and signification of citizens of African descent represented as: *niggers*, *coons*, *mammies*, *bucks* and razor-toting toughs.

As for citizens of African descent in America, following the history of the terminology used regarding self-identification of the demographic as a whole is difficult; but, from my best research, the following has been deduced: from about 1619-1900 *niggers*; by 1900 *colored* replaced *nigger*; by the 1960s *Black* replaced *colored*; by the 1970s *Afro-American* replaced *Black*; by the 1990s *African American* replaced *Afro-American*. At present, there is, seemingly, a cultural war of signification between middle-class African Americans and those of African descent who refer to themselves as *niggas* over the public representation of citizens of African descent in America. This cultural war has been played out in the capitalist market place and has infiltrated the lexicon of popular culture (never left in my opinion, but I digress) and the popular imagination. All consumers of popular culture in America are susceptible to the influence resulting from the peddling of this seeming cultural war (not really, it seems Jay-Z has brought all of corporate American over to his side, the side of the dandy, zip coon: I digress); Rachel Jeantel and Trayvon Martin reflect this lexical entanglement; the verdict of the jury of the Zimmerman trial reflects an attempt to disengage from such an entanglement by whimsically deciding when to explore the explicit, denotative meaning of terms and when to appreciate the implicit, connotative meaning of terms.

By the time we arrive at the present year of 2013, America has experienced almost four hundred years of implicitly recognizing bodies of African descent as: *burnt-faced, Ethiopians, Guineas, children of Ham, slaves, negars, neggars, blacks, Negroes, niggers, uncles, aunties, mammies, Jezebels, mulattas/mulattos, bucks, coons, dandies, zips, pickaninnies, coloreds, Afro-Americans* and *niggas*. The prosecution in the George Zimmerman trial did not stand a chance in their attempt to get the jury – consisting of five white women and one Other woman – to understand the prosecution’s explicit understanding and explanation of Trayvon Martin as an innocent American male citizen of African descent. Such an understanding of the denotation of Trayvon Martin required the jury to employ their cognitive powers to understand Trayvon Martin; such a denotation of Martin as human could not compete with the emotive, connotative understanding and explanation of young men like Trayvon Martin. The ease with which defense attorney O’Mara painted Martin as thug (read Zip Coon, Buck, nigger), underscored by the jury’s apparent interpretation on Jeantel’s and Martin’s use of the terms *nigga* and *cracka*, could best be explained by the implicit, surplus-meaning of all things “coonish and niggerish” which accompany the bodies of citizens of African descent in America. Simply put, the prosecution could explicitly explain who and what Trayvon Martin was until the cows came home, but such an explanation could and would never compete with the intuitive and emotive and connotative understandings and explanations of African American bodies as inherited by jurors like juror B37. After all, she did refer to Trayvon Martin as a colored boy. Yet she claims race played no part in the trial process.

Black, African American bodies carry implicit, surplus-meaning in America in 2013. While some of us work diligently to define who we are explicitly, there seems no escape from the implicit connotations and interpretations of us that others carry buried deep in their subconscious – sometimes not so deep. George Zimmerman read the signs of blackness incorrectly. And, the person he perceived as a threat was not a threat. Nevertheless, Trayvon Martin could have been a threat because of the surplus-meaning accompanying blackness in America. Yes, we now know that he was an unarmed teen-ager, legally walking through his father’s place of residence; but, he could have been an evil, wrong-doer. His skin-color, his dress, his mannerisms – all suggested that he could have been a threat. And in America, even in 2013, those implicit signs of danger are enough to explicitly eradicate a threat when that threat is perceived to be an out of control, dangerous, sidewalk wielding zip coon. I mean colored boy. I mean young African American man of seventeen years.

Side-Note. In America, I believe that black, African American male bodies exist as empty signifiers. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “signifiers organize the very conceptualization of our world” (Colebroke 248). Signifiers are “examples of the ways in which life is expressed or differentiated” (249). Signifiers for Deleuze and Guattari are meaningless, in themselves: “there is such diversity in the forms of expression, such a mixture of these forms, that it is impossible to attach any particular privilege to the form of the signifier” (Deleuze and Guattari 111).

Phallogocentric signifiers should not be privileged any more than other signifiers for example. Signifiers are empty, until they are not. As a signifier of blackness, Trayvon Martin is empty until written and read by the societies of which he is a part, for example.

“In Deleuze and Guattari’s opinion, identity” is “an empty effect.” “Our identity is an objective illusion” (Massumi 47). Any identity attached to Trayvon Martin is “an empty effect,” an “objective illusion.” “Identification is arbitrary in the sense that there is no natural connection between a body and its category, but necessary in the sense that society nevertheless demands that the link be made” (Massumi 91). The jury of the Zimmerman trial, seemingly, deems it necessary that certain links regarding black, African American bodies “be shaped to the demands of desire” (Lott 140) of “white spectators as superior, controlling figures” (141).

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