

Scarlett O’Hara, Solomon Northrup, and Ta-Nehisi Coates: Helping Students Grasp the Relationship between Popular Culture and Contemporary Racial Politics

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ABSTRACT

The post-racial perspective of many millennial college students can make it challenging for faculty to engage students in serious conversations about race in America and the relationships among popular culture, political culture, and race-conscious policies. This article outlines a three-week unit from a course entitled Popular Culture and Politics that uses *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) along with academic and popular articles to walk students through three interconnected concepts: (1) the conflicting images of slavery as a system in American political history; (2) the role of popular culture in constructing and disseminating those images; and (3) the connections between the cultural understanding of America’s racial history and the contemporary political landscape. This piece provides an overview of the objectives of each section of the unit, including summaries of readings, sample discussion questions, and a summative assignment—all of which can be adapted for a variety of disciplines.

Keywords: Political Culture, Ideology, Reparations, *Gone with the Wind*, *12 Years a Slave*

As a professor of American politics, I struggle to help students understand the role of race in American politics, both historically and today. Many of them express a view of race and racism as a problem of America's past addressed by the Civil Rights Movement. Popular culture provides a valuable resource for instructors seeking to introduce students—particularly at predominately white institutions—to a reading of American politics that regards race as a central component of American political development. Moreover, the images presented in popular media provide students an opportunity to grapple with conflicting versions of American history as well as the implications of the dominance of particular renderings. In this article, I review a unit developed as part of an upper division Political Science course entitled Popular Culture and Politics. The three-week unit draws on the films *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) as well as academic and popular writing to walk students through three interconnected concepts: (1) the conflicting images of slavery as a system in American political history; (2) the role of popular culture in constructing and disseminating those images; and (3) the connections between the cultural understanding of America's racial history and the contemporary political landscape. At the close of the unit, students read Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations" and debate how the images of slavery that dominate popular imagination influence the public's willingness to consider policies such as reparations. These texts expose students to the constructed nature of our perceptions of slavery as an institution, provide specific sites for working through different racial ideologies, and serve as a platform for considering how cultural images impact policy making. Ultimately, the curriculum addresses two pedagogical goals common to a number of disciplines. Students gain an understanding of three concepts—construction, ideology, and the relationship between culture and politics—which can then be applied beyond the specific topic of race. At the same time, however, the focus on America's racial past and present challenges students to critically examine their own perceptions of race and racial ideologies.

Before outlining the course, I discuss the challenges of planning curriculum that engages the current college population regarding race. I explain why I have chosen to use these films out of the multitude available on the topic of race in American politics and offer a detailed description of the three-week unit in question, including reading assignments and discussion questions along with the summative assignment for this section of the course. I close with some reflections derived from my experiences teaching this unit.

Race and the College Classroom

Many students enter college without the necessary historical knowledge to contextualize contemporary race relations, let alone discuss policies such as reparations or anti-mass incarceration activism (Okun; Shuster). Despite the wealth of evidence regarding the South's active rejection of Reconstruction, the North's retreat from enforcing Reconstruction policies, and the political and economic terror of the post-bellum era, Steven Sawchuk points out that "Americans in general have a shaky grasp of Civil War history and an even worse understanding of the Reconstruction."¹

Along with the lack of historical knowledge, contemporary students enter classrooms steeped in two racial ideologies—colorblindness and post-racialism. A racial ideology structures the "common sense" realities about race "that provide, at a non-conscious level, baselines for judging what is normal, moral, and legitimate in the world" (Haney-Lopez 808). Typified by the refrain "I don't see color," colorblindness posits that neither public policy nor individuals should recognize race and often casts references to race as the problem (Bonilla-Silva; Gallagher; Guinier and Torres; Neville). Post-racialism recognizes a "legacy of racial mistreatment" but suggests that racism in the current era is best understood "as individual bias and bigotry," thus relegating

1) Scholars in political science and history have produced monograph-length works assessing the reasons for and consequences of the failure of Reconstruction. Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution 1863-1877* offers an in-depth history of the Reconstruction Era. For analysis linking the failures of Reconstruction to the Civil Rights Movement see Philip A. Klinker with Rogers A. Smith's *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* and Richard Velely's *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement*.

systemic mistreatment based on race to the past (Haney-Lopez 826). Millennial students have grown up in a world steeped in post-racial proclamations from the media, a “social landscape dominated by colorblind racism,” and a culture that sees ‘real’ racism as firmly located in the “de jure white supremacy” of the past (Mueller 173).

Faculty in a number of fields have developed methods to give students the tools they need to interrogate the validity and consequences of these two common racial ideologies. Examples include teaching whiteness through hip-hop videos (Stein), introducing students to social topics through popular song lyrics (Martinez), researching their family’s racial autobiography (McKinney; Mueller), adapting the rules of Monopoly to show the lasting impacts of structural inequalities (Stout, Kretschmer, and Stout), and exposing students to America’s racial history through popular films (Slaner and Clyne; Kinney; Loewen).

Teal Rothschild points out that “‘talking race’ in the classroom needs to be tailored to the specific identities of students as well as to the specific social institutions in which they are enrolled” (33). Rothschild’s insight highlights the need for instructors to think carefully about the characteristics of their classrooms, their students, and their own perceived racial identity when preparing and deploying lesson plans or activities that focus on ‘talking race.’ I am a white instructor teaching at a predominately white institution located in central New York. My classes rarely include more than one or two students of color. The area where I teach—hard hit by the loss of domestic factory jobs as well as the current opiate and heroin crises—draws many white students whose family experiences may make it difficult to see their whiteness as a privilege. Over the last three years, I have discovered that starting the conversation with historical—rather than contemporary—conditions increases my students’ willingness to grapple with the role of race in American politics. When students learn about convict lease labor, the rise of the white primary, and early twentieth century race riots, it deepens their historical knowledge of events and policies relevant to a specific course while also creating a new context for classroom conversations about contemporary politics.² In addition to the broader historical context, I want students to understand how popular constructions of slavery and Reconstruction contribute to cultural perceptions of history and thus to the way Americans view policy options. To demonstrate how cultural perceptions change over time as well as how popular culture produces and is produced by ideological content, I show two films that offer dramatically different presentations of American slavery: *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013).

Gone with the Wind* and *12 Years a Slave

Based on Margaret Miller’s 1936 best-selling novel of the same name, David O. Selznick’s *Gone with the Wind* (*GWTW*) received critical and popular acclaim. The film centers on Scarlett O’Hara’s experiences from the Civil War’s onset through the initial stages of Reconstruction. Scarlett functions as a cipher for the South itself: mistreated by freed slaves and scalawag whites and determined to stand up against Northern oppression (Briley 460). Along with *Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Gone with the Wind* “played a crucial role in formulating popular perceptions and misperceptions of Reconstruction” as well as supplying images of how ‘good blacks’ behaved both during and after the Civil War (Briley 454). The lasting popularity of the film allowed it to shape “the nation’s perception of Reconstruction from a white Southern perspective” (Briley 464).

I juxtapose *GWTW* with the 2013 Best Picture Oscar winner *12 Years a Slave* (*12YAS*). Based on a slave narrative of the same name published in 1853, the film follows Solomon Northrup from his comfortable life as free man in New York through his kidnapping, sale into slavery, and ownership by three different slave masters. If Selznick’s approach to *Gone with the Wind* perpetuated a myth about the institution of slavery

2) I have found Klinkner and Smith’s work particularly useful for introducing students to these topics. In addition, Sam Pollard’s documentary *Slavery by Another Name* (2012; based on Douglas A. Blackmon’s 2008 book of the same name) offers a straightforward look at the creation and implications of convict lease labor in the postbellum era.

and experience of Reconstruction, director Steve McQueen's approach in *12 Years a Slave* seeks to puncture those myths protecting white Americans from the realities of chattel slavery. Despite the substantial number of films made about slavery, the institution itself traditionally serves as a jumping off point for stories focused on the emancipators rather than the enslaved (Morris). *12YAS* focuses on "the day-to-day workings of the system, the management of the human chattel, and the close-to-the-bone contacts between master and slave" (Doherty 8).

Ultimately, *Gone with the Wind* and *12 Years a Slave* offer two distinct renderings of slavery as an institution that structures behavior, bodies, and landscapes. As a result, viewing the films in conjunction with one another creates opportunities for students to discuss how popular culture texts contribute to understandings of history. For the remainder of the article, I focus on the three sections that comprise the unit entitled America's Peculiar Institution: Mythologizing the Past, Post-Racism, and A New Lens. I review the objective of each section as well as how I hope it challenges students and prepares them for the next phase of the unit. While I developed this material for a political science class, the content reflects concerns shared by a variety of disciplines, most notably sociology, history, and American studies. Indeed, the assigned readings come from these fields as well as political science. With slight changes in emphasis, instructors can adapt the presented material to fit their discipline's perspective on interactions among popular culture, race, ideology, and the state. For a summary of each reading as well as sample discussion questions, see Tables 1-3. For a complete outline of the viewing and reading schedule as well as class session objectives, see Table 4.

America's Peculiar Institution

I begin by asking students to create a timeline of African American history from the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement from memory. This activity shows where the class stands in terms of historical knowledge. I then ask them to consider the outsized role of popular culture on perceptions of race and racism. Most of my students report coming from racially homogenous (white) communities and spending their daily lives interacting predominately with others of the same race. Occasionally students suggest that their knowledge of race in America is limited to what they learned in school and see on television or in the movies. I tell the students upfront that our goal is to think about how cultural representations of slavery influence discussions about race.

I also prepare the class for the violent nature of the unit. The readings and films expose students to images of physical and sexual assaults as well as racial slurs. I invite students to prioritize self-care while challenging them to engage the material: if a conversation becomes overwhelming, students may step out and follow up with me after class. I encourage students to raise questions even if they are unsure of the appropriate language to use and extend the presumption of good intention to one another during challenging discussions. While I have designed this curriculum for a predominately white institution, I regularly have one or two students of color in my class. I email each of these students separately to reiterate the invitation for self-care and let them know they are welcome (but under no obligation) to contact me at any time if they feel I or a student have handled a conversation poorly.³

SECTION 1: MYTHOLOGIZING THE PAST

The first section, Mythologizing the Past, takes two course periods. In the first, we begin watching *GWTW*, which students finish on their own. During the second period, we discuss the film and the four

3) For an extended discussion of how instructors can support students of color during classroom discussions about race and racism, see Simpson, Jennifer S., Angeliue Causey, and Levon Williams. "I Would Want You to Understand It: Students' Perspectives on Addressing Race in the Classroom." *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2007. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, doi:10.1080/17475750701265274.

assigned readings. The assigned readings provide students a language to interpret the film in relation to politics, destabilize their understanding of racial stereotypes, highlight the cultural conditions that led to the production and popularity of *GWTW*, and underscore the continued presence of *GWTW*'s vision of slavery in American life. For summaries of each reading as well as reading and film application questions, see Table 1.

I have found that the reticence students often show in discussing race disappears when discussing *GWTW*. Popular culture produced over eighty years ago seems to provide a place for criticism that fits within students' colorblind/post-racial framework as the film's nostalgia for slavery can be justified as that of a less enlightened America. In addition, the assigned readings help students master the language needed to develop and express their criticisms of the film. Most notably, a short piece from Stuart Hall entitled "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media" offers a simple definition of ideology, links the concept to race, and introduces the phrase "grammar of race" to refer to racial stereotypes and related themes that reoccur over time (83). This basic framework is enough to help students begin organizing their thoughts. Two additional pieces, the first chapter of Micki McElya's *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* and Gerald Wood's "From *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* to *Gone with the Wind*: The Loss of American Innocence," introduce students to the supposedly comforting and nostalgic images of slavery provided to white Americans struggling to adapt to industrialization, urbanization, and political cynicism during the early twentieth-century.

The final reading for this section, Ellen Bresler Rockmore's "How Texas Teaches History" criticizes a 2015 social studies textbook released by McGraw-Hill Education for grammatical choices that obscure the reality of slavery. Sentences about masters introducing slaves to Christianity and slaves telling folk tales have clear agentic subjects, while those reflecting the reality of chattel slavery—beatings, brandings, and family separation—all happen to slaves without an agent in sight. This piece provides two benefits to the class. First, it sparks their imagination about the ways in which contemporary Americans, intentionally or not, downplay the severity of slavery. Second, it provides students their first exposure to a refrain I will issue over and over during class discussion: slavery did not just happen. The capture, auction, field labor, and reproductive labor of slaves occurred because white Americans, individually and collectively, captured, bought and sold, whipped, and raped slaves. It is intellectually dishonest to present slavery—within popular culture, classroom discussion, or college papers—in a way that obscures this reality. At the end of this section, students should have developed a level of comfort in identifying and talking about the grammar of race and the stereotyping of black characters along with knowledge of the role played by nostalgia (rather than history) in constructing lasting cultural images of slavery.

Table 1: Mythologizing the Past

Summary	Sample Questions
<p>In “The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media,” Hall defines ideology and explains how ideology functions both generally and within the media. He also introduces the phrase ‘grammar of race’ to refer to the stereotypes of people of color (the slave figure, native, and clown) and the characteristics (ambivalence and primitivism) that reflect the ideology of a particular time.</p>	<p>A Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What are the three characteristics of ideologies? 2) What are the components of the grammar of race? 3) Can you think of additional stereotypical characters that would fit within this grammar of race? <p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What is the grammar of race presented in <i>GWTW</i>? 2) How does <i>12YAS</i> upset this grammar of race? 3) How does Hall’s description of primitivism feature in <i>GWTW</i>? In <i>12YAS</i>?
<p>In the first chapter of <i>Clinging to Mammy</i>, McElya outlines the history of the Aunt Jemima brand and the broader reimagining of the history of slavery that took place a generation after the Civil War. Portrayed by a woman named Nancy Green and first unveiled at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, the mammy figure of Aunt Jemima drew on white nostalgia for the supposed convenience and comfort provided by slavery to sell instant pancake mix to northern and southern audiences.</p>	<p>Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Why did the R.T. Davis Milling Company choose a slave as the brand for their instant pancake mix? 2) How is the mammy figure constructed and consumed according to McElya? 3) How does the person of Nancy Green disappear into the brand of Aunt Jemima? <p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How does the character of Mammy in <i>GWTW</i> reflect the qualities of Aunt Jemima? 2) How does <i>GWTW</i> reflect a similar nostalgia to that which drove Aunt Jemima’s popularity? 3) Is there a mammy figure in <i>12YAS</i>? If no, why might Northrup’s experience and thus McQueen’s film exclude this character?
<p>In “From <i>The Clansman</i> and <i>Birth of a Nation</i> to <i>Gone with the Wind</i>: The Loss of American Innocence,” Wood contrasts the book and film versions of <i>GWTW</i> as well as the previous generation’s popular book <i>The Clansman</i> and its film adaptation <i>Birth of a Nation</i>. Wood argues that all four texts use family melodrama to frame American politics and suggests that Selznick’s adaptation of <i>GWTW</i> evidences a deep nostalgia for the antebellum south that reflects the cynicism and disillusion that plagued the post-World War I, post-Great Depression America.</p>	<p>Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Why does Wood call <i>GWTW</i> an American myth? 2) How do domestic themes and setting increase the appeal of <i>GWTW</i> for audiences? 3) How does the film version of <i>GWTW</i> reflect the political conditions in which it was created? <p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How does <i>GWTW</i> convey a sense of nostalgia in its narrative? Art direction? 2) What is <i>GWTW</i> nostalgic for? 3) How does this nostalgia effectively mythologize American history? 4) What leverage does Selznick get out of presenting the film as a family melodrama?

<p>In “How Texas Teaches History,” Rockmore criticizes a 2015 social studies textbook released by McGraw-Hill Education for using grammar that obscures the realities of slavery. Sentences about masters introducing slaves to Christianity and slaves telling folk tales have clear agentic subjects while those reflecting the reality of chattel slavery—beating, branding, family separation—all happened to slaves at the hands of unknown, unidentified actors.</p>	<p>Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Rockmore claims that grammar can be a moral choice. Do you agree? Why or why not? <p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How does the concept of present/missing agents apply to the presentation of slavery in <i>GWTW</i>? In <i>12YAS</i>? 2) How can you protect yourself against the ‘missing agent’ problem in your own writing about these films?
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SECTION 2: POST-RACISM

The second section, Post-Racism, takes one course period. To prepare students to consider the differences in the racial ideology of the time that produced *12 Years a Slave* as well as their own racial ideology, I assign Ian Haney-Lopez’ “Is the Post in Post-Racial the Blind in Colorblind?” The piece challenges students to consider that contemporary media has its own racial ideology and grammar of race and that each change over time. Haney-Lopez analyzes the history and implications of the mid-to-late twentieth century’s dominant racial ideologies: colorblindness and post-racialism. Importantly, he considers the way in which both racial frames contribute to the rise of mass incarceration and argues that post-racialism cannot address some policy challenges. After working through the content of the article itself, I ask students to use Haney-Lopez’ framework for deconstructing racial ideologies to develop their own model of the racial ideology present in *GWTW*. At the end of this section, the students have a deeper understanding of contemporary ideologies of race and a better ability to assess their own approach to race as fitting within a racial ideology. It also sparks their imagination about how the “common sense” racial ideology of a given time impacts policy-making.

Table 2: Post-Racism

Summary	Sample Questions
<p>In “Is the Post in Post-Racial the Blind in Colorblind?” Haney-Lopez analyzes the history and implications of the two dominant racial ideologies: colorblindness and post-racism. He argues that while post-racism recognizes race as a socially constructed category that plays a significant role in American history, it simultaneously embraces the central tenet of colorblindness which treats race as irrelevant for modern decision-making.</p>	<p>Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) What is Haney-Lopez’ definition of ideology? 2) Explain the history and implications of the two competing ideologies of race outlined by Haney-Lopez. 3) How does each framework answer the three key questions of racial ideology? 4) Given that the ideology of race in <i>GWTW</i> is neither colorblind nor post-race, what would it be? Hint: How do you think <i>GWTW</i> answers the three key questions of racial ideology? 5) Why did we read this piece?

SECTION 3: A NEW LENS

Students enter the third section with an understanding of the cultural moment that produced *12YAS* and a language for discussing the film itself. The final section, A New Lens, requires three course periods. I begin the fourth class with a discussion of Wesley Morris’ “The Song of Solomon” which offers an in-depth review of *12YAS* including a discussion of its declaratory style and its focus on the inner workings of chattel

slavery. Students spend the first part of this class period using Morris along with their notes from Wood and Hall to create categories to use when comparing *GWTW* and *12YAS*. While I occasionally begin *12YAS* in this class, I always allow students to choose to watch this visceral, often brutal film in its entirety without being surrounded by classmates. Students finish the film on their own by the fifth class. During that session, we complete the chart comparing and contrasting *GWTW* and *12YAS*. While there are a number of entry points for comparing these two films, I find the following two the most illustrative of the value of the juxtaposition.

The straightforward, sparse style of *12YAS* throws into relief Wood's claim that *GWTW* subsumes slavery into a romantic melodrama. The students readily note differences in the camerawork and scoring. Indeed, I have learned that the cinematography of *12YAS* disturbs students who claim McQueen lingers too long on the brutality of slavery. Their discomfort provides an opening to discuss why they find it to be 'too long,' what lies behind that sentiment, and what the lengthy, wide shots allow McQueen to convey. The most notable example occurs almost an hour into the film. While working on a plantation owned by Mr. Ford, Northrup chaffs under his still-new identity and attracts the attention of the plantation's white carpenter, John Tibbeats. When he moves to whip Northrup, Northrup quickly gains the upper hand and begins beating Tibbeats. The plantation overseer interrupts Tibbeats' attempt to hang Northrup to protect Ford's investment. He leaves Northrup roped to the tree, balancing on his toes while plantation life—slaves complete their tasks, the mistress stares out from her ornate porch—continues and day turns to dusk with only diegetic sound. In these two minutes, McQueen lays bare the banal nature of slavery's brutality. Moreover, the continuation of domestic life suggests that the brutality of slavery is a feature of genteel plantation life, not a disruption of it. *GWTW* views slavery as a feature of Southern gentility with brutality stemming from the Civil War and Reconstruction. Prior to the end of slavery, the O'Hara family lived comfortably with the support of loved house slaves who dote on Scarlett. Civil War and Reconstruction remove these slaves from the protection of the O'Hara family while looters desecrate Tara.

The films also provide an opportunity to assess the supposed primitivism of people of color that Hall notes as a key component of the grammar of race. Selznick represents the primitivism of African Americans and thus the need for slavery to protect both whites and blacks through a scene where two men attack Scarlett as she drives through a shanty town occupied by freedmen and poor whites. Big Sam, a former Tara slave, interrupts the attack and returns to Tara announcing "I've had enough of them carpetbaggers!" The plantation home provides safety and comfort for whites and blacks alike. *12YAS* inverts this presentation of primitivism again through a presentation of brutality. After cutting Northrup down, Ford sells him to Mr. Epps who first appears on screen preaching to his slaves about the Biblical justification for punishing any disobedience with 40, 100, or 150 lashes. He drunkenly demands his slaves participate in late night dance parties for his amusement while his wife seethes over the attention he pays to a slave named Patsy whom he rapes regularly. Epps' drunken, violent, sexual, and predatory behavior stands in stark contrast to Northrup's stoic, disciplined actions marking the slave master as primitive. The willingness of Ford, a seemingly thoughtful man aware of Northrup's history, to not only ignore this information but sell Northrup to Epps combined with Epps' reliance on the Bible to justify slavery invites the viewer to see the institution of slavery itself as one that encourages primitive behavior.

While the students have been watching the film and reading short pieces, they have also been working their way through Ta-Nehisi Coates' "A Case for Reparations." A 2014 cover story for *The Atlantic*, the piece challenges readers to consider reparations in the context of a history of racially-based violence and dispossession. Students read this piece along with one from Alyssa Rosenberg, popular culture critic for *The Washington Post*. Her article asks the question that drives this unit: Would white Americans be more open to reparations if the cultural narrative they drew on to understand slavery reflected the institution as it is presented in *12YAS* rather than in *GWTW*? We spend some time reviewing Coates' piece—largely filled with a

history of government sponsored or permitted racist practices that the students have never heard of—but spend most of our time interrogating Rosenberg’s claim. My objective in this section is not to convince students that Coates is correct in calling for slavery reparations. Rather, reading the piece provides specific information to use in considering his call as well as Rosenberg’s. At the end of this section, students display an understanding of how popular culture affects the policy making environment by offering images that contribute to what citizens and law makers believe about our history. Moreover, they learn to identify how beliefs about history may influence our understanding of what fellow citizens may deserve.

Table 3: A New Lens

Summary	Sample Questions
<p>In “The Song of Solomon,” Morris argues that McQueen’s declaratory style, evidenced in the limited scoring and camera work, combined with the narrative perspective from writer John Ridley results in a film that reveals the power and privilege that underscore chattel slavery. Morris emphasizes the unique nature of this film given the tendency of films about racism to focus on the role of good whites and America’s progress toward equality.</p>	<p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Drawing on Morris’ review as well as Hall and Wood, what should we pay attention to in order to analyze <i>12YAS</i>? 2) How does <i>GWTW</i> compare on each of these points?
<p>In “A Case for Reparations,” Coates argues that America’s position in the global economy stems from 250 years of government policies that created wealth at the expense of black labor, families, and bodies while offering whites economic and political protections unavailable to African Americans. Reparations offer an opportunity for the nation to face squarely the consequences of these policies for both white and black families. Coates explains the implications of specific policies, outlines the prevalence of extralegal, often violent enforcement of racial codes, and draws on academic research to make his case.</p>	<p>Reading Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Coates locates slavery as the first stage of an ongoing process to impede the ability of African Americans to build social and economic capital. Trace this process. 2) What is the relationship between slavery and American wealth? 3) How does the Jim Crow history offered by Coates add to your knowledge of Jim Crow laws? 4) Explain what Coates means in the following lines. Do you agree or disagree? Why? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A) “When we think of white supremacy we picture Colored Only signs, but we should picture pirate flags.” B) “More than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparation would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.” <p>Application to Films:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How do <i>GWTW</i> and <i>12YAS</i> represent the relationship between slavery and capitalism?

Rank

In “Culture Change and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s “The Case for Reparations,”” Rosenberg considers the way in which America’s cultural landscape, one in which <i>GWTW</i> is second only to the Bible in terms of favorite books, influences the (un)willingness of white Americans to seriously grapple with the history outlined by Coates.	Given the experience of watching these two films combined with the texts you have read, do you agree with Rosenberg’s claim?
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Summative Assignment

The summative assignment for this unit is a three-page paper that addresses an incredibly broad prompt:

Drawing on course material, offer an argument about the production of ideology within a media text from this unit.

I instruct students to draw on a minimum of one reading assignment and one popular culture text and offer a small, well-supported claim. I give students this prompt on the first day of the unit and encourage them to use class discussions to brainstorm and test out possible arguments. I also highlight potential paper topics as they arise and push students to ground their analysis of the film in the readings, thus helping them develop a sense of the type and amount of evidence a claim might require. The broad nature of this prompt allows students to engage in a topic within the film(s) that has particularly appealed to them, be it the intersection of race and gender, slavery as an institution, the intersection of slavery with class, religion, or immigration, etc. Over the years, students have produced insightful papers on these topics and more.

CONCLUSION

The unit outlined here introduces students to a valuable set of concepts that can be discussed with more or less complexity based on students’ knowledge and interests. To the first point, the unit exposes students to the constructed nature of our perceptions of slavery as an institution, provides specific sites for working through different racial ideologies, and serves as a platform for considering how cultural images impact policy making. All three concepts—popular culture, ideology, and the relationship between culture and policy—challenge students to identify and interrogate the role of race in American politics as well as their own racial ideology. To the second point, these films provide opportunities for analyzing how American slavery intersected with gender, class, religion, and regionalism. The broad nature of the summative paper encourages students to bring their personal interests to bear on their interpretations. When a student displays a desire to delve into a relevant but off-syllabus topic, I can easily incorporate it into our discussions without sacrificing the cohesion provided by the three-week structure.

Many instructors, myself included, seek out openings to help students understand how race and racism function from the perspective of a particular academic discipline. Doing so requires breaking through the post-racial ideology that typifies the position of many millennials. The unit presented here challenges students to consider the relationship among popular culture, ideology, and policy as well as the connection between their own understanding of America’s racial history and the contemporary politics.

Table 4: America’s Peculiar Institution Unit Overview

Class Session	Assigned Readings/Viewings	Class Objective
Mythologizing the Past—Class 1	“The Whites of Their Eyes” (Hall); <i>Clinging to Mammy</i> —Chapter 1 (McElya)	Watch first part of <i>GWTW</i> .

Mythologizing the Past–Class 2	“Loss of American Innocence” (Wood); “How Texas Teaches History” (Rockmore); finish <i>GWTW</i>	Review all four readings in relation to <i>GWTW</i> . Class discussion draws out how <i>GWTW</i> creates a specific image of the South (options for discussion include the presentation of capitalism, the institution of slavery, Reconstruction policy, freed slaves, and heritage).
Post-Racism–Class 3	“Is the Post in Post-Racial the Blind in Colorblind?” (Haney-Lopez)	Review the contemporary racial ideologies and their relationship to policy-making.
A New Lens–Class 4	“The Song of Solomon” (Morris); Begin “The Case for Reparations” (Coates)	Draw on Morris, Hall, and Wood to create points of comparison for analyzing the presentation of slavery and racial ideology more broadly in each film. Begin watching <i>12YAS</i> .
A New Lens–Class 5	Continue “The Case for Reparations” (Coates); finish <i>12YAS</i>	Compare and contrast <i>12YAS</i> and <i>GWTW</i> using the points established in the previous class period. Class discussion should draw out comparisons on the grammar of race, representation of primitivism, use of domestic scenes, style (melodramatic v. declaratory), camera work, score, narrative focus, nostalgia.
A New Lens–Class 6	Finish “The Case for Reparations” (Coates); “Culture Change and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s A Case for Reparations” (Rosenberg)	Consider Coates’ definition of and call for reparations in relationship to Rosenberg’s central claim that the political landscape for reparations policy would look different if the entrenched cultural view of slavery reflected the images presented in <i>12YAS</i> rather than those in <i>GWTW</i> .

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