

IMAGINING THE NATION: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF RACE FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH TO THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Session of the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH) at the GHI, April 22, 2006

Participants: Isabell Cserno (University of Maryland, College Park), Cynthia Patterson (University of South Florida, Lakeland), Barbara Ryan (National University of Singapore), Robin Veder (Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg).

In an attempt to bring the GHI and its programs to the attention of participants in this year's meeting of the Organization of American Historians (OAH), which took place in Washington DC, the GHI organized an OAH session in the Institute's building at 1607 New Hampshire Avenue.

In her presentation entitled "Selling the Nation: Representation of Blacks in Advertisement in Germany and the US, 1893-1933," Isabell Cserno analyzed how German and American advertising agencies drew on images of blacks to sell products such as coffee or chocolate. Looking at advertising posters and trade cards, she discovered similar visual strategies that made ample use of racial stereotypes and colonial imagery. In both countries, black figures appeared as innocent and child-like teasers to white middle-class consumers, but as racial and class others would have hardly been considered consumers themselves.

Dealing with images of African American washerwomen, Barbara Ryan's study "African American Washerwomen: Raced Images of Gendered Ascent" examined how their rendition in different kinds of visual media allow for different readings of female agency. Competing with washerwomen of other ethnic backgrounds, African American women constructed identities that ranged from domestic to self-employed to entrepreneur, claiming social mobility in a society that discriminated against African American men and women.

Cynthia Patterson also focused on boundaries of race and class in her talk, entitled "Racial Remnants: Coloring the Boundaries of the American Middle Class in the Philly Pictorials of the 1840s and 1850s." Looking at illustrations in such monthly magazines as *Graham's* and *Peterson's*, she argued that pictures often presented a racialized

and gendered subtext to the stories they accompanied, thus complicating the representations of middle-class life these magazines offered to their readers.

In her comment, Robin Veder further explored the connections between race, class, and gender that all three papers explored. She also suggested strategies as to how the readings of visual materials could be taken even further.

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