

SCREENING BLACK WOMEN IN FILM “HIDDEN FENCES”



A LESSON PLAN | SCREENING BLACK WOMEN IN FILM

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LESSON OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, you should be able to:

- name drop at least 2 Black actresses and the films they were in;
- name at least 2 Black authors and the books they've written which have been made into films;
- use the name of at least one Black feminist scholar in a complete sentence;
- track the ideas about race/gender that circulate within a cultural text;
- be able to discuss the way American racial history and politics effects Black women's representation in U.S. visual media

RESOURCES NEEDED

- Access to at least one of the films from the filmography
- 75 minutes of instruction time (at least)
- For best results: access to a University library's books, journal articles, and films

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED READING

These are my highly recommended picks. For a complete list visit thedoctorlane.com.

Theory Readings: Theory heavy, maybe dense, but most likely just heavy on concepts

- Giddings, Paula. 1996. *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*. New York: W. Morrow.
- Hall, Stuart. "What Is This "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20.1/2 (51-52) (1993): 104-14.
- hooks, bell. 1992. *Black looks: Race and representation*. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Ferguson, Roderick A. 2004. *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique..* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bobo, Jacqueline. 1995. *Black Women as Cultural Readers*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Application Readings: Applications of important theory or concepts

- Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Keeling, Kara. 2003. "Ghetto Heaven": Set It Off and the Valorization of Black Lesbian Butch-Femme Sociality." *The Black Scholar*:33-46.
- Snorton, C. Riley. 2014. *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

FILMOGRAPHY

Biopics

- *Hidden Figures* (2016)
- *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999)
- *Bessie* (2015)
- *The Josephine Baker Story* (1991)
- *What's Love Got to Do With It* (1993)

Books turned into films

- *Beloved* (1998)
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (2005)
- *The Color Purple* (1985)
- *The Women of Brewster Place* (1989)
- *Waiting to Exhale* (1995)
- *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974)
- *Precious* (2009)

Written and/or Directed By a Black Woman

- *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)
- *Pariah* (1991)
- *Bessie* (2015)
- *Drylongso* (1998)
- *Eve's Bayou* (1997)
- *Selma* (2014)
- *Down in the Delta* (1998)
- *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)
- *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961)

Blaxploitation Films

- *Black Mama, White Mama* (1972)
- *Cleopatra Jones* (1973)
- *Foxy Brown* (1974)

Divas

- *Carmen Jones* (1954)
- *Lady Sings the Blues* (1972)
- *Dreamgirls* (2006)
- *Mahogany* (1975)
- *Out of Darkness* (1994)
- *The Bodyguard* (1992)

End of the 20th Century

- *Set it Off* (1996)
- *Crooklyn* (1994)
- *Thin Line Between Love and Hate* (1996)
- *Soul Food* (1997)
- *Players Club* (1998)

Post-2008 Films

- *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012)
- *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)
- *I Can Do Bad All By Myself* (2009)
- *Precious* (2009)

IN CLASS ACTIVITIES

Below are activities I've designed to engage students in a discussion about Black women in film. I offer only general descriptions of the activities which must be tailored to the film and the lesson objectives that you have in order to be effective.

The (Black Vagina) Monologues 15 min lecture + Deep analysis of monologues

PREP WORK

1. Choose a film for students to screen before class. I strongly suggest one that seriously deals with issues of black women's sexuality (hence the title of this activity).
2. Pick 2 or 3 powerful, thought provoking, pivotal monologues from the film that are either delivered by black women or that are about black women. Find the text or transcribe these monologues yourself. Have the text available (digitally or eco-friendly paper) for students during their preparation for class.
3. Prepare a short lecture, I'm talking 10-15 minutes that contextualizes the film and offers insight into the particular reason you wanted them to see it in the first place. ***This lecture should include a discussion about the importance of allowing black women to speak their own truths and listening to what they have to say.***
4. For each monologue, prepare 1 or 2 questions that do one or more of the following:
 - considers how the monologue can be related to a black feminist theory or text;
 - relates the monologue back to an important aspect of black women's experience;
 - places the monologue within the broader context of black women's representation in U.S. popular culture.

IN CLASS

After your short lecture (10-15 minute lecture), ask students to pull up (digitally) or to pull out (hard copy) one of the monologues you had them review. Allow students some time to re-read and write down their reflections (10 minutes or so). Then open up the floor for discussion.

Screen or read each monologue (or have brave students deliver/read the monologues out loud for the class) in turn before you open up a discussion to talk about them. Try to ask the questions, and let the students do the majority of the talking. Long pauses are okay, because if you do this right, they'll be chewing hard on the monologues and your questions.

Special Note: This activity would work well in the context of an online, hybrid, or "flipped" course.

Expert Panel Discussion

Student panels where students express ideas and field tough questions

There are two different ways that you could organize a panel discussion. First, you could invite 3 or 4 experts or non-experts to come and discuss their reaction to the film. Have students prepare questions for the panelist, and really just turn the discussion over to panel as you facilitate. This works well for a new film, or a film that has deep local roots.

The alternative to this is my personal favorite (works best in a small class of about 15-18 with at least 2 hours of instruction time): Expert Panel of Students.

EXPERT PANEL OF STUDENTS

This exercise is all about getting students to feel confident about talking about complex issues, and thinking on their feet. There are a few steps that you'll need to do prior to the class to make this activity work:

1. Have students screen the film on their own.
2. Pick 3-4 scenes from the film that you believe are especially relevant and warrant deeper consideration.
3. Assign 4 to 5 students one of those scenes to become an "expert" on.
4. Instruct students to prepare remarks regarding their specific scene, to prepare discussion questions for the other scenes, and to be prepared to take questions from the audience about the scene they've been assigned. Their remarks must be 3-5 minutes and may be:
 - **Freeform:** Students' remarks will address how the scene engages in discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and/or class (graduates and upper-division students).
 - **Guided:** Students' answer an instructor-developed question in relation to the scene, to be given to students when you assign them their scene (lower-division and high school students).

On the day that your class meets to discuss the film, set up a row of chairs at the front of the class corresponding to the number of students you assigned to each scene. After showing the first scene, ask the students who were assigned that scene to have a seat up front. Allow 20-25 minutes for the panel to talk about their reaction to the scene (in conversation with one another) and to respond to questions from the audience.

Checking the Receipts: An Interactive Research Project

In-class active learning exercise

I regularly use this assignment in my classes. The main purpose is to hone students' "rapid" research and synthesis skills. They should also learn to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources. I like this activity for films where there is a clear and important historical component, because this gives students an opportunity to "check the receipts" on the story: is that how it really happened?

I encourage you to implement in a way that works for your situation and the film you choose, but here are the major components you need to have:

1. In the session before, instruct students to bring laptops, tablets, and other e-devices to class (usually students can borrow a computer from the library if they don't own laptops).
2. Pick one of the films (I strongly suggest a bio-pic or a historical narrative) and have students screen the film before class.
3. You will prepare a Google Document for the in-class research project (takes all of 10 minutes):
 - » Include a research question that is intentionally multilayered about the historical context of the film,
 - » make sure there is a place-holder for a title (students should collaborate to come up with a title),
 - » briefly describe the purpose of the assignment,
 - » and short instructions for students at the top of the document.
 - » Share the Google Doc with students. I suggest grabbing a shared link (ensure those with the link can edit the document) and placing it in an easy to find spot in your learning management system (such as Blackboard, Canvas, or Moodle).
4. At the beginning of class, spend about 10 minutes talking students through the historical context in which the film is situated. For example, if I were teaching *Beloved*, I'd talk them through the context of black motherhood during and just after the era of slavery. After your micro lecture, break students into groups of about 4 or 5. Instruct them to open the Google Doc. Together, review the research question and ask them what they need to know in order to answer the question. You will guide them to 3 or 4 topics (depending on how many groups you have) and each group will use their laptops, tablets, and cell phones to research as much information about that topic as possible reporting those findings, including sources, in the class Google Doc. The information may be reported in bullet points, charts, illustrations. Whatever they like.
5. For example, using *Beloved*, I might prepare a research question that asks about the history of chattel slavery, the Reconstruction era, black motherhood and parental rights, and violence against black women during the era of slavery. Then, we'd break the question down into three different parts with each group tackling one topic.
6. It is important that students have a basic understanding of how to use the library's resources, though at this point, it won't be necessary for you to restrict where they get information from (though you may if you want to teach them how to use a specific resource). I usually have given them a tutorial already about how to discern credible sources.
7. Use the last 10 minutes of class to review what you all learned and prepare a synthesized answer to your research question. For me, this often happens during the following class-period, because students get really into the research. If students really get into the research, you've done your job.

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