HISTORY 399 (SS)
Seeing Race in Modern America
Greg Carter, Associate Professor of History

Reading

We will read three full-length books and some additional articles, resulting in no more than seventy-five pages of reading any week. These secondary sources will include:

Guterl, Matthew Pratt. Seeing Race in Modern America.
Jablonski, Nina G. Living Color: The Biological and Social Meaning of Skin Color
Smith, Shawn Michelle. American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture.

Books covering particular artists, historical periods, and identities will help our archive-building. Available on reserve, these will not be part of the required reading:

Fulbeck, Kip. Part Asian, 100% Hapa.
RoseLee Goldberg, and Nikki S. Lee. Nikki S. Lee: Parts.

Course Description

The scientific community has proven that we are 99.9% identical on the genetic level, advertising has sold us the idea that ambiguity is desirable, and critical race scholars have articulated how race is a social construction. But it is still common to think of race as biology, inherited traits, and physical appearance; as Matthew Pratt Guterl emphasizes, “Seeing race is making race.” This course will explore how Americans have discerned race merely by looking at others, from portraiture by Rembrandt Peale and advertisements describing runaway slaves in the Colonial period to Barack Obama’s assertion, “If I had a son, he’d look like Trayvon,” in 2012. Over time, visual culture has changed, retained old meanings, and mirrored itself. Today, in this supposedly post-racial moment, we process more images than ever, scanning, measuring, and categorizing at the same time we frown upon stereotypes. As current events show, these everyday practices have repercussions as serious as life and death.

How do we train our eyes to see race accurately? What historical precursors inform this process? How many representations have worked in favor of racial equality? How do contemporary visual artists (for example, Kara Walker, Adrian Piper, and Hank Willis Thomas) re-tool historically charged images to critique the act of seeing? How can knowledge of these things lead to broader, anti-racist practice? This Honors seminar will focus on these questions in discussions and by reading and analyzing a range of interdisciplinary sources.

Course Requirements

Regular attendance, completion of assignments, and active participation (15% in class and 10% online) constitute the basis for success in this class. The other facets emphasize critical thinking and written communication. There will be three six-page papers (15% each) responding to issues in the reading. Each student will lead two discussions on specific themes (15% each). Throughout the semester, we will work together to gather an online archive of images. Resembling a searchable Tumblr blog, this will be our diary. I require students to revise the short papers for credit. This course will be instructive, and I hope appealing, to anyone interested in race, diversity, and popular culture.