

Tomorrow's America

The fourth show consists of three short documentaries that explore the impact of race on a new generation of Americans. The documentaries can be shown and discussed individually or in various combinations.

“EveryOther”

Overview

“EveryOther” satirizes the racial classifications on the US census and the importance individuals and groups in the nation place on those classifications. The story is told from the perspective of a young woman who is of “mixed race.” Based on 1998 essay by novelist Danzy Senna, the film explores what the “mixing of the races” may mean for the future of racial identity in the United States.

Curriculum Connections

The film may be used in US history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and ethnic studies courses to introduce or reflect on what happens when the personal issues of identity collide with a political agenda.

Central Question: How do personal choices—the ways we identify ourselves and others—become a political issue?



Yong-Suk Jones, the young woman bewildered by the 2000 census, and her family.
Credit: Yong-Suk Jones

“EveryOther” is a satire. Dictionaries define a *satire* as an artistic work in which human vice or folly is attacked, often through irony. What folly does the film attack? The word *irony* describes a contrast between what is stated and what is meant or between what is expected to happen and what actually takes place. There are various forms of irony.

- irony of situation—an event that directly contradicts one’s expectations. To what extent is the young woman’s dream about the “census police” an example of irony of situation?
- dramatic irony—a contradiction between one’s thoughts and what one knows to be true. What is the irony in a debate over how to classify races at a time when scientists say it is impossible to determine with certainty whether an individual is from one racial group or another?
- verbal irony—a word or phrase that suggests the opposite of its usual meaning. To what extent is the term *racial preference* an example of verbal irony?

Every ten years, the United States government conducts a count of people living in the nation. A census is more than a count, however. It is a statistical portrait of the nation that provides detailed information about who we are as a nation. Every census has asked about race and every census has defined race differently. Why does the government consider race important to defining the nation even though it has never found a satisfactory definition? Why do many ethnic groups encourage the government to continue including race in its count?



Just before the 2000 census, journalist Farai Chideya wrote:

By some estimates, 80 percent of African Americans have at least some white blood, and a quarter have some Native American blood. Nothing demonstrates this fact more clearly than a story that made front-page headlines in November 1998: evidence that Thomas Jefferson had fathered at least one black child....

What happened in the Jefferson family is just a high-profile example of the way most black Americans became mixed with white blood through sexual unions—sometimes consensual, often forced—between white male slave-owners and black female slaves....

What is new in America’s racial classifications is the trend toward identifying as multi-racial. In the past, American defined anyone with “one drop” of black blood as black. And it became a point of pride in the black community for even those who could “pass” for white to proudly proclaim their black identity. It shouldn’t come as a surprise, then, that most young mixed-race blacks still identify as black. But more and more are identifying as multi-racial, and a few (depending on skin color as well as upbringing) as white. The issue is far broader than just a black and white one. Today’s young adults include black-Asian individuals like [Tiger] Woods, Asian Hispanics, white Native Americans, and every other possible combination.¹⁷

Journalist Clarence Page, an African American, once wrote, “It is not biology that determines race. It is bureaucrats.” How do his remarks explain why many individuals find it so difficult to find a box on a census form that describes their identity? How do explain why some feel it is important to find a box that defines their identity? What does the box represent?

¹⁷ From *The Color of Our Future*, by Farai Chideya. William Morrow & Co., 1999, 38-39