

## Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

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**Article/Essay Title:** Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images

**Author:** Patricia Hill Collins

**Readability:** Easy/Moderate/Difficult

### Thesis:

Black women are conceived of and related to in terms of specific stereotypes that place them at the interstices of interacting oppressions. These stereotypes function as controlling images which make the relevant unjust social relations appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable in virtue of Black women's 'nature'. Within these portrayals, Black women are perpetually positioned as 'others' and, in particular, as multiply inferior things in relation to which privileged folks understand themselves as 'normal'.

### Key Definitions:

The key notion at play in this text is that of 'controlling images'. While Collins does not explicitly define the notion of controlling images in this chapter, the following things can be said about controlling images: Controlling images are "ubiquitous" (93), "pervasive" (88), "hegemonic" (90), and "taken for granted" (90) ways of portraying entities that are "dynamic and changing" (72) and "impossible to escape" (90). They can function as "ideological justifications for...oppression" (93).

### Brief Summary:

The Objectification of Black Women as the Other: Oppression is often underpinned by *binaristic thinking* about two things (e.g. Whites/Blacks, male/female, reason/emotion, fact/opinion, subject/object). In such binaries, the two things are often figured as *opposing*, and one is regarded as *superior* while the other is regarded as *inferior*. The inferior thing tends to be *objectified* or defined in relation to the superior thing. "African-American women occupy a position whereby the inferior half of a series of these binaries converge, and this placement has been central to our subordination" (71). In addition to showing this, throughout the chapter, Collins goes on to show how Black women are portrayed as having the negative qualities in relation to which superior others define themselves.

Controlling Images and Black Women's Oppression: "The dominant ideology of the slave era [in the U.S.] fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (72). These controlling images likewise scaffolded controlling images that affected all women. While propertied and middle class White women were encouraged to exemplify four virtues that characterized a certain ideal womanhood, Black women encountered different controlling images. Various domineering controlling images were applied to Black women in the U.S.: mammy, Black matriarch, the welfare mother, the welfare queen, the Black lady, and the jezebel, whore, or "hoochie". These controlling images work on gendered, racial, and economic dimensions to oppress Black women.

This section does an exceptional job of showing the ways in which controlling images of Black women result from, perpetuate, and compound the oppression of Black women and Black people and women more generally. “Taken together, these prevailing images of Black womanhood represent elite White male interests in defining Black women’s sexuality and fertility. Moreover, by meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States.” (84)

### Controlling Images and Social Institutions

Social institutions, including Black institutions, reproduce these controlling images.

### Color, Hair Texture, and Standards of Beauty

Controlling images of Black women influence their relations with other people in a powerful way, including their relations with other Black women. This is evidenced by considering the way in which beauty standards affect the social relations with and between Black women.

### Black Women’s Reactions to Controlling Images

Despite the pervasiveness of controlling images, Black women have found ways to resist them.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Possible Applications:**

Philosophy of Race  
Feminist Philosophy  
Philosophy of Oppression  
Political Philosophy  
Social Ontology  
Epistemology/Standpoint Epistemology

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- Miranda Fricker – “Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing” (controlling image as a problem for “reflexive critical openness”)
- Catharine MacKinnon – “Feminism, Marxism, Method, State”
- Sandra Bartky – “On Psychological Oppression”
- Iris Marion Young – “Five Faces of Oppression”
- Kristie Dotson – “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing”
- Charles Mills – “White Ignorance”
- Hilde Lindemann – “Identity and Free-Agency”
- Alisa Bierria – “Missing in Action: Violence, Power, and Discerning Agency”
- bell hooks – “Moving Beyond Pain” (Analysis of *Lemonade*)

**Possible Class Activities:**

Analyze and discuss bell hooks’s critique of *Lemonade* and the Janet Mock’s response

Watch excerpts from “Are You Still a Slave” panel at the New School (bell hooks, Marci Blackman, Shola Lynch, and Janet Mock) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJkohNROvzs>

Take and discuss implicit bias tests

Discuss the presence/absence of controlling images in literature and film. Are there ways artists invoke or avoid controlling images to support or subvert the white ignorance Charles Mills discusses?