



Designing the New Negro: The Color of Late Nineteenth-Century Multimodality

Kristie S. Fleckenstein

Department of English, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1580

Abstract

Focusing on the 1900 publication of *A New Negro for a New Century*, this article examines multimodal design's "social and semiotic history" (Kress, 2010, p. 46), arguing that multimodality as semiotic potential and design as semiotic performance were both racially charged in the late nineteenth-century United States. By positioning multimodality, and thus designing writing, historically, this essay exposes the racial coding of design. It reveals the challenges posed by multimodal agency for African Americans as well as their concerted efforts to claim multimodality as a rhetorical resource serving the goal of racial uplift. To underscore the color of *fin de siècle* multimodal design, the article begins by addressing the racial valance of the book as medium, situating *A New Negro for a New Century* as a communication event within post-Reconstruction print culture, a transitional moment for technology and publication processes. Then, the article turns to the two key modes of image and word, contending that the White dominant culture sought to construe image and word as White resources. At the same time, the African American community fought back by seizing and exercising their modal agency despite overt and covert resistance. This analysis emphasizes that, as a semiotic performance, late nineteenth-century multimodality was neither neutral nor colorless. Instead, design was interpolated with race, suggesting the need to examine digital multimodality through a racial lens. Thus, the article concludes with a three-part heuristic by which the racial dimension of digital multimodality might be made visible.

© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Multimodality; Design; Race; Medium; Mode; Image; Language

Drawing attention to the 1900 publication of *A New Negro for a New Century* and its ascribed author, Booker T. Washington, the *Chicago Tribune's* [Among the new and books \(1900\)](#) column commended this "composite volume," claiming that it "merits sympathetic consideration" from the *Tribune's* predominantly White readership for its account of Negro "race regeneration" (p. 13). Chapters recounting the bravery of Negro soldiers, the role of Negro education in racial uplift, and the contribution of "colored women" to the "progressive life of the negro race" through their club movement all rated the reader's supportive attention (p. 13). But, the review pointed out, the presence of "sixty portraits of men and women who have been more or less successful" make an equally significant impact (p. 13). The inclusion of such images enhanced the book's efforts to render "an accurate and up-to-date record of the upward struggles of the Negro race," the review implicitly asserted (p. 13). Nor is the *Tribune* alone in this assessment. The Washington, DC-based *Colored American*, with an almost exclusive Black readership, concurred. As its 1901 review noted, among

E-mail address: kfleckenstein@fsu.edu

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2014.07.005>
8755-4615/© 2014 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

the “four hundred and twenty-eight pages of valuable information” appeared “nearly 100 portraits of prominent Afro-Americans, men and women,” who “lead and shape the destiny of the race” (“A New Negro,” p. 3). Language combined with “typographical and mechanical beauty” and “the numbers of excellent portraits of representative men and women” to yield a book unsurpassed in its account of the “colored people” (p. 3). Published at a critical moment in race relations, largely associated with Washington, the acknowledged leader of the Black community, and appearing at a transitional moment in publication history, *A New Negro for a New Century* highlighted *fin de siècle* use of and sensitivity to multimodal design—defined as the deliberative and intentional marshaling of multiple semiotic streams through a medium to produce a communication event—for recuperating Black racial identity. By integrating image and word, *A New Negro for a New Century* seized available communication resources to reshape White supremacist attitudes by visually and discursively asserting the good character and cultural potential of the Negro in the final year of the nineteenth century. The result is, at once, “a dignified and worthy presentation of the remarkable work now being done by negro men and women for their race” (“Among,” 1900, p. 13). It is also a thought-provoking demonstration of both African American multimodal agency and its limits during an era of racial instability and technological change.

More than a hundred years after its publication, this historical integration of image and word offers insights into aspects of designing/writing that are important for the current digital moment, especially in terms of Kressian multimodality. By examining *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900), I extend Gunther Kress’s (2010) claim that “communication always has been and will remain subject to social, cultural, economic and political givens,” arguing that multimodality as semiotic potential and design as semiotic performance were both racially charged in the late nineteenth century (2010, p. 19). A key advocate of multimodal design for more than two decades, Kress defined multimodality as the availability of multiple semiotic streams (word, static image, moving image, sound, gesture, and so forth) from which to compose messages that meld form and content through a particular medium (book, photography, film, radio, and so forth). In addition, multimodality involves design, defined as the intentional decision-making intrinsic to choosing specific semiotic resources and transforming them into a material, mediated message. Design is thus both verb and noun, highlighting the process of choosing (the composing) and the artifact (the composition) that materializes from those choices. Furthermore, initiated by the rhetor’s interests and crafted for an audience’s specific context, multimodal design in Kress’s hands constitutes an ethical process that extends beyond issues of competence and critique to implicate future actions (2010, p. 6). Finally, Kress claimed, attention to multimodal design is particularly exigent now given the digital revolution (p. 6). Although human communication has always been multimodal, Kress conceded, and thus “has a social and semiotic history” (p. 46), the shifts in late twentieth-century technologies from the page to the screen (p. 6) have rendered multimodality and design particularly pressing concerns.

In tying the salience of multimodality to the current communication landscape, Kress, as well as composition scholars as a whole, have left largely untapped the insights culled and the lessons learned from historical multimodal practices.¹ As an argument comprised of image and word and as an argument celebrated for such an integration of semiotic resources, *A New Negro for a New Century* (1900) underscores the validity of Kress’s assertion that instances of multimodality, and, by extension, instances of design, have a social and semiotic history (2010, p. 46). But, more important, it highlights the complex play of race in a multimodal text aimed at redeeming the identity of the *fin de siècle* African American. At the same time, it invites readers to consider the ways in which multimodal design in the twenty-first century might be similarly inflected. I begin coloring multimodality by addressing medium, the component of design by which the message obtains material form. I examine *A New Negro for a New Century* as a communication event within post-Reconstruction print culture, a transitional moment for technology and publication processes, in order to establish the racial dimensions of book as medium. Then, I build on that analysis by turning to *modes*, companion to medium in Kress’s theory of multimodality, arguing that modes are framed by culturally proscribed relationships between design choices and race. More specifically, I contend that the White dominant culture sought to deny multimodal agency to African Americans by construing image and word as White resources. At the same time the dominant White culture barred Blacks from the semiotic possibilities posed by language and image, the African American community fought back by claiming and exercising their modal agency. *A New Negro for a New Century* demonstrates both White denial and African American push back. Finally, I conclude by returning to digital

¹ While Jason Palmeri (2012) marked an exception with his history of multimodal pedagogy, his focus remains on the teaching rather than the practice of multimodal design outside the classroom. In addition, Palmeri limited the historical scope of his project to the 1960s–1990s.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/347718>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/347718>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)