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Racquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp. 236. ISBN: 978-1-47800-041-9.

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In *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture*, Racquel Gates explores the concept of representation, especially “negative” representations, of African Americans and the ways in which these designations attempt to impose certain standards of behavioral and cultural normativity at the individual and societal level. Gates locates the discussion of negative representation within the broader context of politics of “respectability”, which, in her estimation should be read as the positioning of White American middle-class values as universal and as the ideal that African Americans should aspire to. Viewed from this perspective, “negative” representations of African Americans in popular culture can be understood to be depictions that present a counternarrative to that of the politics of respectability vis-à-vis behavioral and cultural expressions. To the extent that such depictions are viewed as disrupting the collective effort of African Americans toward reaching a level of respectability as a means of entry into mainstream (i.e. White) American society, along with the attendant economic, political and social benefits, they become the objects of opprobrium for large segments of African American society (in particular members of the political class and the middle and upper classes).

For Gates, this approach toward “negative” portrayals of African Americans is problematic in two respects. First, the focus on the perceived impact of such representations on impressionable African Americans, and more importantly White viewers, substantially minimizes the role of White society in enforcing the structural oppression of African Americans. Put another way, negative images of African Americans are not the reasons for longstanding structural forms of oppression; they are the rationale put forward to justify the perpetuation of said oppression. The second way in which the undue focus and criticism of such “negative” representations of African Americans is problematic is its tacit approval of the concept of Black “respectability” as normative. The concept of Black respectability, which draws heavily from White (American) middle class values, can be understood both as a goal and as a means of exclusion through which “undesirable” individuals can be barred from the upward mobility. As such, “negative” representations of African Americans need not always be understood as inherently negative, but rather as representing alternatives to the cultural and social practices of respectability. Within *Double Negative*, Gates identifies the ways in which “negative” portrayals become a site for alternative readings of African American life.

*Double Negative* addresses these issues of “negative” portrayals in five sections. Initially, it examines the idea of the Black film as a cultural product, and then complicates this traditional construct by arguing for the inclusion of *Coming to America* within the genre. *Coming to America* lacks two of the most salient conventional markers delineating Black films from films

that feature Black actors/actresses: (1) the director (John Landis) is not Black; and (2) its parent company (Paramount) is not an independent film company. It appeared in between two films, *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) and *Do the Right Thing* (1989), that not only met the two aforementioned criteria, but by virtue of their commentary on racial politics within the film industry and society at large obscured its contribution to the genre. Moreover, the universality of its overarching storyline – a prince who, masquerading as an ordinary citizen, falls for a “commoner” – is only particularized to a Black audience by the fact that the prince happens to be from an (imaginary) African country (Zamunda). The “universal” plotline and the star power of the leading man (Eddie Murphy) resulted in spectacular box office success for the film, which has also led many to regard it as a film featuring Black actors and actresses rather than a Black film.

Gates argues convincingly that it is the secondary storyline, and its focus on aspects of African American cultural and social life (exemplified by vignettes in a barbershop, at a political rally for Black empowerment, and a running joke about Jheri curls, among others) that cements its position within the canon of Black films. For Gates, it is the presence and impact of Eddie Murphy that both lend the film the cultural authenticity necessary for inclusion within the genre, while contributing to the perception that film is not a Black film by virtue of his position as a “crossover” star. Murphy’s rise to stardom outside of the then-traditional avenues open to aspiring African American comedians and his prior acceptance of problematic roles positioned him as a star who happened to be African American. But, as Gates reveals, he was the driving force for much of the material in the film that has endured in popular memory. As such, *Coming to America* illustrates the ways in which a film can qualify as a Black film without some of the infrastructure traditionally associated with the genre, while complicating our understanding of the intrinsic nature of the genre.

Gates proceeds to examine an often-overlooked type of film within the genre of Black films: the “sellout films” of the early-mid 90s.<sup>1</sup> Using the films *Strictly Business* (1991), *Living Large* (1991), *True Identity* (1991) and *The Associate* (1996) as points of reference, the chapter explores the ways in which the films depict characters’ struggle to navigate the corporate world while maintaining a healthy relationship with their cultural identities as African Americans. The “sellout films” status as comedies allowed for the incorporation of elements of the surreal into the plotline.<sup>2</sup> An intrinsic part of each tale of the struggle to succeed in a White corporate environment while “keeping it real” are explicit formulations of African American culture and identity, as well as implicit critiques of the dominant White culture, which must be rejected by the protagonist in order to achieve the success he or she desires.

For Gates, the formulations of key elements of individual Black identity, particularly for male protagonists, can be simplistic and problematic, particularly in their tendencies toward misogyny. However, the films emphasize a communal ethos as an intrinsic part of African American culture that is essential to the success of the protagonist. In each film, the protagonist finds ultimate success only when he or she rejects wholesale assimilation into White society in favor of a proclamation of his or her Black identity.<sup>3</sup> Such films are noteworthy for exploring issues facing the then-emerging African American corporate class.

Gates examines the career of Halle Berry and the ways in which she has been understood through the prism of three narrative tropes. The three tropes – “around-the-way-girl”, “tragic

mulatto”, and “White man’s whore” – reflect different stages of Berry’s career as she moved from Black-cast/Black-themed films to blockbuster films. In the initial stages of her career, as the love interest in Black-cast/Black-themed films such as *Strictly Business* and *Boomerang*, Berry was perceived as embodying an “around-the-way-girl”,<sup>4</sup> a concept of femininity Gates categorizes as an African American reformulation of the concept of the “girl next door”. At this stage of her career, she was wholly invested in her identity as an African American actress.<sup>5</sup>

The evolution of Berry’s racial identity in the public’s perception is identified through Berry’s work on the miniseries *Queen*. She played a biracial woman attempting to pass for White in the antebellum South. In this instance, much of the credit for the altered public perception is attributed to the media and its propagation of the narrative of Halle Berry as the *biracial* actress in the publicity to advance the miniseries.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the narrative of Berry as a biracial actress was promoted against her protestations; Berry consistently affirmed her identity as an African American woman. However, for Gates, public perception of Berry as biracial, as a “less than *entirely* Black” actress, greatly facilitated her transition into mainstream acceptance.

The final phase in the evolution of Berry’s racial identity in public perception (in this instance, primarily African American) – as a “White man’s whore” – is inextricably connected to her role in *Monster’s Ball*. Her graphic sex scenes with a White co-star and her resulting Oscar, coupled with her subsequent relationship with White actors, contributed to a belief that Berry had distanced herself from the identity as an African American actress. She was no longer the “around-the-way-girl” African American viewers had come to know in the early days of her career. For Gates, Berry’s career trajectory is eerily reminiscent of the narrative arc of the “sellout films” of the early-mid 90s; the protagonist begins as promising with aspirations for success and swiftly climbs the corporate ladder while simultaneously compromising key aspects of her/his “authentic” Blackness. Normally, he/she must face a reckoning for her/his cultural “transgressions,” But for Halle Berry, she has yet to face cultural reconciliation with her Blackness.

The fourth section of *Double Negative* explores the genre (outside of mainstream hip hop) most often associated with the generation and perpetuation of “negative” representations of African Americans in popular culture: Black-cast “reality” shows.<sup>7</sup> For many, Black-cast reality shows are problematic in their perpetuation of “negative” representations of African Americans, particularly women, and their immense popularity among that precise subset of the viewing public. While explanations of this popularity often focus on the idea of the audiences as detached observers, Gates posits that the popularity lies in a kind of release viewers experience in vicariously transgressing the “rules” of respectability through the cast members. This is particularly true for African American women, who have historically been excluded from full recognition as women, and who thus derive some satisfaction in instances in which individuals challenge the underlying assumptions of a system of respectability.

The politics behind the shows, and their relationships with their parent networks (Bravo and VH1) reproduces some of the exploitative practices of society at large vis-à-vis African American women. The channels have benefitted from an increase in viewership that is directly connected to the shows but have consistently avoided attributing their recent success to the shows for fear of being identified as *Black* networks, and thus losing segments of their White audience. To the extent that the individual cast members understand these exploitative practices

and work to maximize their earning potential through alternative revenue streams both on and off the respective shows, they also reproduce traditional strategies employed by marginalized segments of American society in response to oppression.

However, for Gates, the chief value of “negative” representations of African Americans (generally women) found in Black-cast reality shows is the way in which counternarratives to the sexist, classist and heteronormative narrative is inherent to the politics of respectability. The cast members of these shows promote alternative visions of African American life, love, and success, not necessarily tethered to patriarchal, heteronormative concepts. In so doing, these shows open spaces for traditionally marginalized voices within the African American community, voices that have been silenced by the demands of the politics of respectability.

In the final section of *Double Negative*, Gates examines the success of the show *Empire*, and the ways it has defied conventional thinking vis-à-vis Black-cast programs and their appeal to diverse audiences. Of particular interest to Gates are the ways in which *Empire* reproduces much of the content of Black-cast reality shows but has managed to escape much criticism aimed at these shows for their “negative” portrayals of African American people and culture. For Gates, this paradox of reality show style content with scripted show respect is indicative of *Empire*’s status as a *faux* revolutionary program, a show that appears at first glance to challenge the system but has traditional markers of conformity “baked in” to its infrastructure. The pedigree of the cast, production and parent station (Fox) established the show as a “respectable” scripted program. This is important, inasmuch as it is indicative of the fact that *Empire* does not represent a challenge to the norms of respectability and scripted programming in the manner of reality shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* and *Love and Hip Hop*, but rather is an adaptation to meet the challenges posed by these programs.

*Double Negative* is a valuable contribution to the discussion of representation, and the true nature of “negative” representation, precisely because it interrogates the concept of respectability that is so often an affirmation and normalization of values imposed upon a group via political and economic subjugation. In essence, *Double Negative* identifies the politics of respectability in part as a compromise with systems of oppression in the hopes of gaining entrance into the dominating society. Such a conversation is equally applicable within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and the United States, as locally-informed versions of a politics of respectability are legacies of slavery and colonization. With the continued emergence of Continental and Diasporic African media, the question of representation, and what constitutes “positive” and “negative” representation, becomes crucial. Members of these communities are increasingly making decisions as to how to represent themselves and will have to come to terms with the legacy of oppression and our understandings of what aspects of indigenous cultures are valuable.<sup>8</sup> This is a conversation that is taking place, haltingly, in the United States, but that is equally relevant in other areas of the Diaspora and in Africa itself, particularly in the areas in which there is a developed Black media infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the question of representation is an integral part of the process of self-definition at the communal level, and with *Double Negative*, Gates makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the factors that inform the choices we make in presenting ourselves to the world outside of our immediate cultural context.

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<sup>1</sup> Gates labels these films as such because they are all comedic explorations of African Americans' attempts to balance material success in the corporate world with their identities as African Americans.

<sup>2</sup> The protagonist of *Livin' Large* is tormented by the manifestation of his alter ego, who appears to him on television (the protagonist is a local on-air personality) and becomes increasingly "whiter" phenotypically as he "sells out" by compromising key aspects of his integrity to climb the corporate ladder. *True Identity* and *The Associate* take this concept one step further; the protagonists each resort to literal "white face", one in an effort to conceal his identity from mafia hitmen (*True Identity*), the other as a last-ditch effort to climb the corporate ladder in the face of a racist, sexist business environment (*The Associate*).

<sup>3</sup> Rejection of White culture does not include rejection of White allies. In each film, sympathetic White individuals play important roles in the protagonists' ultimate triumph, often encouraging them to embrace their Black identities. These figures themselves can be problematic, as they often revisit paternalistic old tropes, especially that of the White father figure (c.f. *Strictly Business*, *Livin' Large*).

<sup>4</sup> This term was popularized by the rapper/actor LL Cool J in a song of the same title about a type of woman from "the neighborhood" who can be down-to-earth and classy, innocent yet sensual.

<sup>5</sup> While Halle Berry is biracial, a fact about which she has always been candid, she has always defined herself publicly as an African American woman.

<sup>6</sup> Gates attributes the media emphasis on Berry's biracial identity to the desire to mitigate the fact that she did not have a "biracial look" (in the manner of actresses such as Jennifer Beals and Rae Dawn Chong), and as such, was not perceived as being believable in the role of a woman who could pass for White. The idea would then have been to condition the public to identify Berry as biracial, so that viewers would "buy into" her as the character in question.

<sup>7</sup> Gates focuses on the shows *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Love and Hip Hop*, and its spinoff, *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.

<sup>8</sup> Another important conversation along similar lines (particularly for Diasporic Africans) will be the question of the very nature of indigenous Diasporic cultures.

<sup>9</sup> Nigeria and the development of Nollywood comes to mind, as it is currently the third largest locus of film production in the world, after Hollywood and Bollywood, respectively. No other entity on the planet has greater ability (particularly in terms of human capital) to produce representations of Continental and Diasporic African life and culture, and with that comes tremendous possibilities and responsibilities.

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