
Aytén Tartıcı

Juxtaposing public images of the rapper-turned-reality show host Flavor Flav with those of Barack Obama, film and media theorist Racquel Gates contends that the positive/negative binary that dominates the social interpretation of blackness is reductively zero-sum. Obama is seen as a positive, uplifting figure, with his “clean-cut appearance” (p. 5), Ivy League credentials, and ability to navigate the delicate divide between black and white constituencies. By contrast, Flavor Flav seems to embody, at least for some in the African American community, an embarrassing negativity, through his theatrical replication of stereotypes. Without dismantling this binary of intra-black cultural politics, the likely inescapability of which Gates acknowledges, *Double Negative* endeavors to recover what “negative” representations or texts from black popular culture may have to offer in the critical evaluation of race and identity in America.

Over the course of four wide-ranging chapters and a brief conclusion, Gates thoughtfully deconstructs five different variations of such negativity: formal, comparative, circumstantial, strategic, and false. The first chapter, a close reading of Eddie Murphy’s *Coming to America* (1988), grapples with the film’s critical neglect. Gates argues that its apolitical, light-hearted plot, white director, and stable of stock black characters likely contributed to its academic dismissal as well as its status as a formally negative text. Wedged between Robert Townsend’s biting satire *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987) and Spike Lee’s now canonical *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Coming to America* was, as director John Landis suggested, a “big hit” that no one ever thought of as a “black movie” (p. 39). Gates revises that judgment by uncovering, among other things, the malleability of Murphy’s different performances, from a regal African prince to a loquacious barber, a local band frontman, and even at one point, an elderly Jewish man. Gates finds in these supporting, comedic avatars of Murphy a polysemic ability to speak to both black and white audiences that belies the film’s supposed superficiality as a feel-good Hollywood comedy.

Gates delves deeper into how comedy, as opposed to drama, can shed light on the black experience through her comparative analysis of a string of mainstream comedies from the 1990s, including *Strictly Business* (1991), *True Identity* (1991), and *The Associate* (1996). These “sell-out” films tackle the “messy territory of black success” in corporate America, with all the attendant anxieties about assimilating to white normativity (p. 88). The moniker “sell-out” distinguishes them from the contemporaneous genre of social realist “hood” films that instead privilege representations of black marginality. For example, the protagonist of *Strictly Business* is Waymon, a black real estate executive eager to make partner. Waymon’s foil is a young, black mailroom clerk named Bobby, who unlike Waymon knows Harlem, and the authentic black identity it supposedly stands in for, inside and out. Waymon’s buttoned-up sartorial decisions and stiff manner of speaking leads Bobby to tease him for being “straight up whiter than the whitest white man” (p. 90). Even though Gates concedes that negative texts such as *Strictly Business* are not always fully redeemable, given their sometimes regressive gender attitudes, these films nonetheless lay bare in surprising ways the difficulty of defining what it means to be black enough or to act white.

The rest of *Double Negative* is devoted to Gates’s conceptions of circumstantial and strategic negativity. Gates deploys the former via a careful reconstruction of shifting black attitudes towards the biracial actress Halle Berry. In particular, Gates documents how Berry went from being the black it girl of the early 90s to, in some critics’ eyes, “the white man’s whore,” for her Academy Award-winning role in *Monster’s Ball* (2001). The controversy over *Monster’s Ball* allows Gates to unpack productively the intersecting tensions of race, gender, subjectivity, and representation at the heart of this nuanced
and sensitive study. Turning her attention to what she calls strategic negativity, Gates proceeds to dissect the sub-genre of lowbrow, “ratchet” reality TV programming, such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Basketball Wives*, and *Love & Hip Hop*. These shows are perhaps the most difficult negative texts that Gates analyzes. She is not shy in calling them the gutter of negativity given how they seem to foreground women of color behaving poorly. And yet, paradoxically, these shows actually portray black women, including some who identify as queer, actively resisting the social and institutional pressures of respectability that would seek to pigeonhole them. While the shows outwardly dwell on the negative dimensions of melodrama, that focus can only partly obscure the fact that some of the women featured are savvy entrepreneurs who are using the program’s offer of publicity to launch commercial enterprises. In a final, somewhat brisk epilogue, Gates posits that the hit Fox series *Empire* (2015–present) is “a positive text masquerading as a negative text” (p. 185). On the surface, it features negative characters who have drug-dealing pasts or who trade in the stereotypes of macho young rappers. And yet, with its bevy of Academy Award-winning black cast members, mainstream appeal and prominent position on a white network, *Empire* is in fact a *sub rosa* emblem of cultural advancement.

*Double Negative* is a penetrating piece of theoretical scholarship, and while scholars of African American studies, critical race studies, and contemporary media studies will find Gates’s intervention particularly useful, her trenchant analysis of the double bind generated by minority representation is likely to be valuable beyond those fields as well. One can initially feel that Gates’s taxonomical impulse has gotten the better of her, but as the book continues, and the abstractions that organize her chapters are made concrete, those scruples lessen. Gates moves effortlessly and clearly among theorists, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Mikhail Bakhtin and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Double Negative* could perhaps have benefited from a more extended engagement with critical theories on the division between low and high culture. Nevertheless, Gates persuasively argues against the aesthetic gatekeeping of black respectability politics in favor of an ecumenical, nuanced, and generous appreciation of black popular culture that is equally sharp in its both historical and analytical observations.

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**Tyler M. Williams**

*This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom* presents nothing less than a theory of the meaning of life. In this ambitious, highly persuasive book, Martin Hägglund challenges the religious teleology that posits a transcendent, eternal afterlife as the culminating aspiration of a meaningful, mortal life. Arguing that all religious faith in eternal salvation depends upon a sense of value and responsibility that can only be accounted for secularly, Hägglund guides his reader through early Christian confessional literature, modern philosophy, contemporary literature, the American civil rights movement, and ongoing debates about the limits of capitalism to highlight the intrinsic—indeed, the constitutive—role temporal finitude plays in our everyday commitments. Finitude, the mortal fact of this life, rather than a divinely timeless afterlife, solely motivates why and how we live our lives the way we do. “The depths of life are not revealed through faith