DOUBLE NEGATIVE

The Black Image & Popular Culture

RACQUEL J. GATES

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To Luke and Solomon,

The two of you inspire me to be better in all things, in all ways.

Mommy loves you.

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INTRODUCTION

NEGATIVITY AND THE BLACK POPULAR IMAGE

In order for black people to truly reach the Promised Land, Flavor Flav has to be shot. These are important times. We got a black man running for president. We don't need a nigger running around with a fucking clock around his neck and a Viking hat on his head. —**CHRIS ROCK**, *Kill the Messenger*

All I did was get on the tube and be myself, man, now I got the whole world climbing down my back. All because I was too black. And too strong. But that's all right, man. Yo, they're going to want me back one day. —**WILLIAM DRAYTON, AKA "FLAVOR FLAV,"** *Fight the Power,* B-side

If them motherfuckers was going to call you a crispity, crackly, crunchity coon *anyway*, you might as well get them motherfuckers for everything. Everything? Everything.
—**KATT WILLIAMS**, *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*

Few media figures have elicited as many accusations of "negative representation" as Public Enemy's hype-man-turned-reality star William Drayton, better known by his stage name Flavor Flav. Part of the popular 1980s and 1990s rap group Public Enemy, Flav is perhaps best known for the oversized clock necklaces that he wears and his theatrical behavior, a marked contrast

from the more activist intellectual demeanor of Public Enemy's front man, Chuck D, and the militant Black Power vocals of fellow member Professor Griff. Though Flav was actually responsible for writing a large amount of Public Enemy's music, he is primarily known as the group's "hype man," or the one to excite the crowd. Within the context of the group, therefore, Flav's boisterous antics have typically served as a means to prep the audience for the more serious messages delivered by the rest of the group.[1]

Flavor Flav's onstage persona, however, took on a very different context when he made the jump to reality television in the early 2000s. After a period of inactivity marred by several run-ins with the law, the former hype man made his triumphant return to public attention when he appeared on a series of VH1 reality shows created by the producing team of Cris Abrego and Mark Cronin (51 Minds Entertainment): *The Surreal Life* (2003–2006), *Strange Love* (2005), and *Flavor of Love* (2006–2008). Though the shows were huge hits for the network and resuscitated Flavor Flav's career, his appearances were almost immediately accompanied by scathing criticism. In spite of the fact that Flav's over-the-top shenanigans remained much the same as they had during his rap days (the attire, catchphrases, etc.), the new televisual context in which he was now ensconced carried with it a history of problematic historical associations, stemming back to controversies over black representation in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) and the television sitcom *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, 1951–1953; NBC, 1954–1966). Similar criticism surrounded the premier of *Flavor of Love*, a comedic version of the popular dating show *The Bachelor*, where a group of women competed to win Flav's affections. Though I have argued elsewhere that *Flavor of Love* is best understood as a satire of *The Bachelor* and white heteronormativity, many saw the show as just another example of a black man acting foolish for the pleasure of white audiences.[2] Now removed from the community-empowerment message of Public Enemy, Flav's performances were no longer seen as a helpful component of a larger message of uplift, but, rather, as a type of "negative" black image that harkened back to the cringeworthy buffoonery of early cinema and television.[3]

The issue, to put it plainly, was that Flavor Flav had become a negative representation. In other words, some perceived him to be perpetuating a stereotypical view of a black man, one that presumably helped to foster racist attitudes among television viewers. Indeed, much of the criticism of Flavor Flav's reality television performances charged him with "coonery," a term that combines the racist trope of the "coon" with the word "buf-

FIGURE I.1. Flavor Flav in *Flavor of Love.*

foonery." Comedian Chris Rock explicitly connected Flav's image to then-presidential candidate Barack Obama's political ambitions in his 2008 HBO comedy special, *Kill the Messenger*, suggesting that Flav's "modern day minstrelsy" (to quote one journalist) had the potential to harm Obama's chances of winning the election: "In order for black people to truly reach the Promised Land, Flavor Flav has to be shot. These are important times. We got a black man running for president. We don't need a nigger running around with a fucking clock around his neck and a Viking hat on his head."

Rock's statement evidenced a Du Boisian double consciousness, presuming that Flav's negative representation would be perceived by whites as indicative of all blacks, including Obama. Rock had conveyed a related sentiment years earlier in his *Bring the Pain* comedy special, in which he (now) famously stated, "I love black people, but I hate niggas." In *Bring the Pain*, Rock's "black people" versus "niggas" routine captured the politics of respectability that would later play out in his statements about Barack Obama and Flavor Flav: "There's black people, and there's niggas. And niggas have got to go. Every time [that] black people want to have a good time, ignorant-ass niggas fuck it up."

The logic of Rock's "black people" versus "niggas," or Obama versus Flav routines, relies on the assumption that those that perform blackness in a negative manner bear the responsibility when their positively performing counterparts have their rights and privileges taken away. Yet this reasoning overlooks the fact that neither positive black people nor negative "niggas" actually hold the structural power to confer or deny these privileges. The assumption that underlies Rock's routines, therefore, obscures the manner in which antiblack racism functions in ways both big and small, and it elides a broader consideration of structural oppression in favor of the logic that "one bad apple spoils the bunch." Lewis Gordon argues that this idea of the "racial representative" indicates a society that views blackness through the lenses of anonymity as well as overdetermination. Gordon writes, "We can stand as a society without responsibility for the blackness we exclude by way of the blackness we include, which we identify as blackness *in toto*."[4] Rock's punch line—that Flav must be sacrificed for the good of all black people—may have been a joke, but its implied violence suggests the genuine fears about the impact that negative representations have in the real world.

At the same time, however, Rock's joke about killing Flavor Flav reveals the slipperiness of the "negative" label, as well as the particularly thin barrier between categories of "positive" and "negative." Later in the set, Rock admonishes Flav, "Put a suit on, nigga," implying that Flav can indeed be made respectable (or at least enough to fool white people) via something as simple as changing his outward appearance. But if Flavor Flav can be made respectable by relinquishing the clock and donning a suit, does that not mean that Barack Obama might become a negative representation should he switch into a different racialized code of behavior? Flav's actions only became perceived as negative once he left the setting of Public Enemy and entered the already disreputable landscape of reality television, thus revealing that the categorization of his behavior, and hence his identity, depends on the context in which it circulates.

The comedian Katt Williams also took the 2008 presidential election as his inspiration in a routine for his special, *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*. Whereas Rock chose to place the onus of Obama's election on Flavor Flav's shoulders, Williams shifts the burden onto those of the white voters. Williams begins by criticizing whites for failing to comprehend why Obama's campaign is so meaningful to black voters: "You selfish motherfuckers. White people, ain't y'all had all the goddamned presidents?" He then continues with a direct appeal, "White people, I don't think that you should vote for somebody just

'cause of their race, but I will say if you was ever going to vote for a nigga, if you was ever gon' vote for a nigga, this is the nigga to vote for. Right here. This is the one. Yes. Absolutely." By addressing whites instead of blacks, Williams correctly identifies the role of whites (and whiteness) in the discourse surrounding Obama's candidacy as well as in his election to office.

While Rock's routine unintentionally hints at the idea of Flav casting aside his negativity via a wardrobe change, Williams humorously, but accurately, observes the social construction of Obama's positivity. Obama's positivity is not a given, but, rather, a classification that arrives as the result of many socially legible factors such as his clean-cut appearance, his prestigious educational background, and his lack of any stereotypical markers of blackness. To this last point, Williams says, "He is nigga lite. This nigga been running for two years: he ain't had no baby mama come out the woodwork, this nigga don't owe nobody $200 for nothing, he ain't never had a pit-bull puppy, don't have an earring, never had a tattoo. Where the fuck did you get this nigga from, a cave in Salt Lake City some-goddamn-where?" Williams's joke points out the reality of Obama's popularity among white voters: namely, that it is predicated on a seeming exceptionalism to all things deemed too obviously "black."[5]

Humorous though the Williams routine may be, it hits on the reality about racial categorization that would hover over Obama's two terms as president. For all of Obama's intelligence, charisma, and thoughtfulness, his identity as a positive figure has never been stable or gone unchallenged. Instead, he has always performed a tenuous balancing act in the face of those who would read his unquestionably "black" moments as the tip of the iceberg for the negative blackness presumed to be hidden behind his respectable exterior.[6] For example, in 2009 when James Crowley, a white police officer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, arrested African American Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. for trying to enter his own home, Obama gave a press conference in which he plainly stated that racial profiling had probably played a role in the incident. However, after uproar by members of law enforcement as well as white civilians who viewed Obama's comments as "playing the race card," the president quickly retracted his statement and invited both Crowley and Gates to the White House to discuss the incident over beers. The famous "beer summit," as the meeting came to be called, showed just how delicate a position Obama found himself in as the first African American president. While his initial statement was a straightforward acknowledgment of the long, documented history of racial

profiling by law enforcement and should have been uncontroversial, the very fact that Obama brought up race *at all* was enough to result in harsh criticism from some fronts. For, as Devon Carbado has noted, Obama had always been deliberate and strategic in the ways that he addressed or didn't address race.[7] The resulting beer summit, therefore, had less to do with reconciling tensions between Crowley and Gates or between the police and the black and brown victims of profiling, but, rather, had everything to do with Obama's identity as a positive, respectable black figure. As the beer summit at the White House demonstrates, however, this respectability often comes with the consequence of muteness. Or, to be more specific, the burden of respectability places limitations on the forms that certain types of discussions can take. Obama recalibrated his frank talk about race to avoid coming across (to some) as an angry, race-obsessed black man, going instead as the race-neutral mediator who could reconcile black and white.

Likewise, the respective Rock and Williams comedy routines demonstrate the contours of positivity and negativity when they serve as delivery methods for cultural critique.[8] Indeed, Chris Rock and Katt Williams themselves represent positive and negative poles. On a superficial level, the two comedians' positive and negative categorizations are most apparent in their use of language and in their respective professional backgrounds. Whereas Rock is judicious with his use of curse words and rarely discusses sex or drugs in his special (therefore adhering to a seeming code of respectability), Williams litters his statements with profanity of all types, most notably his liberal use of the n-word. And contextually, whereas Rock's identity is buffered by a respectability conferred by his time in media with a mixed audience—in popular television shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color* and in Hollywood films—Williams's celebrity is largely confined to the black community. When he has appeared in films, like the 2007 Eddie Murphy vehicle *Norbit* (Brian Robbins), Williams has played characters indistinguishable from his onstage persona.

More broadly, Rock embodies a global cosmopolitanism with appeal to both black and nonblack audiences, while Williams more aesthetically and functionally invokes aspects from the history of black comedic traditions.[9] These differences first become evident in the two men's attire and styling in their specials. In *Messenger*, Rock alternates between three different outfits: an effortlessly stylish all-black suit; a more traditional black suit, white shirt, and black tie combination; and an all-leather ensemble. The variety of his wardrobe suggests that Rock would feel equally at ease on an urban street corner and on the Oscars red carpet.[10] Williams also wears a shirt and

tie, but he completes his ensemble with baggy jeans and a jewel-encrusted belt buckle, incorporating aspects of urban street style and "bling culture" and negatively riffing on those sartorial symbols of middle-class professionalism. Whereas Rock's hair is close-cropped, Williams sports his signature straightened bob, a hairstyle that visually references 1970s drug dealer and pimp characters like the ones found in blaxploitation films like *Super Fly* and *The Mack*. The pimp reference is not accidental, as Williams titles his special *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*, a marked contrast with Rock's *Kill the Messenger*, which broadcasts the truth-telling tone that Rock adopts as he talks about issues of social and political importance.[11]

The mise-en-scène and editing of the two specials, along with the comedians' respective performative styles, likewise reflect different sensibilities. Rock's *Messenger* is a composite of his shows in Johannesburg, London, and New York, and this assemblage of footage evokes the comedian's widespread global appeal to a range of international audiences. The opening sequence, featuring grafs that list impressive statistics such as the names of the eight countries in which he has performed and the number of people who have attended his shows (554,781), conveys the wide reach of Rock's popularity. Rock confidently walks out onto the stage as a song, "Duffle Bag Boy" by the rap group Playaz Circle (feat. Lil Wayne), blasts over the speakers. Rock's body is presented in isolation—often in backlit silhouette—with cuts that alternate between his solitary figure and sweeping views of the audience. This device serves several purposes. First, it visually represents Rock as "Chris Rock the icon," rather than Chris Rock, the man performing comedy. Next, it creates a visual distinction between Rock and his audience, separating the two into categories of performer and audience. This visual isolation reinforces the concept of Rock as exceptional as well as solitary: he stands apart from the audience both literally and figuratively.

Unlike Rock's cosmopolitanism, Williams might be said to possess "black common sense," insofar as his presentation of self and of his material draws more explicitly from a recognizable black cultural tradition rather than from a mainstream white sensibility.[12] The opening of Williams's *Pimpin'*, in contrast to Rock's *Messenger*, connects the comedian to his audience as well as to a longer legacy of black comedians and their concert films. Williams's *Pimpin'* was shot during the Washington, DC, leg of his tour. Though it is the home of the United States government, DC is also colloquially known among its black residents as "Chocolate City" because of its rich history of black American history, culture, and activism.[13] *Pimpin'* opens with Williams

FIGURE 1.2. The opening of Chris Rock's comedy special *Kill the Messenger*.

FIGURE 1.3. Chris Rock onstage in *Kill the Messenger*.

visiting various black-owned and black-frequented establishments, such as the famous and historic Ben's Chili Bowl. These scenes do more than simply establish the setting for Williams's special, however. Rather, the anthropological opening is a conceit that many black comedians have employed to open their concert films in order to show their connection to the places and the people that inhabit them, especially in those locales with a particularly rich black cultural history.

This motif of community continues in the editing of the shots where Williams takes the stage. Whereas Rock appears in solitary profile, shots of Williams entering the stage are framed to show both the comedian and the audience at the same time. Like Rock, Williams enters to a rap song, "Int'l Players Anthem (I Choose You)" by UGK (featuring Outkast), but he takes several seconds to dance to the beat before launching into his routine. This seemingly inconsequential moment establishes the sheer joy that Williams takes in sharing this experience alongside the audience members. At one point, he lifts his arms as if he is conducting an orchestra or a choir, again reiterating the communal nature of his performative relationship to the audience.[14] Shots of the audience in *Pimpin'* are meant to show Williams's *connection* to the audience in contrast to Rock's isolation. Whereas the sweeping shots of the audience in *Messenger* highlight the sheer number of people in the concert venues—thus again confirming Rock's immense global popularity—the shots of the *Pimpin'* audience build on the earlier "anthropological" tone of the film to convey Williams's connection and membership with the audience members, stand-ins for the black community writ large.

At first glance, it is easy to be misled by the stylistic choices of the two comedians and assume that Rock's avowedly political stance (as indicated in the title of the special) automatically signifies that his material offers more insightful critique than that of Williams, but we should not presume that Williams's liberal use of curse words and his aesthetic similarity to blaxploitation characters disqualify his comedy from offering pointed analysis of matters of identity and politics. The form that Williams's critique takes, markedly different from that of Rock's, privileges a black insider knowledge between Williams and his predominantly black audience, one that is highlighted visually by Williams's aesthetic references to black popular culture (in his hairstyle and clothes), his use of black vernacular, and the subject matter that he takes on. As in the above joke about Obama being "nigga lite," Williams cites examples that would be instantly recognizable to black audiences—the pit-bull puppy and owing someone $200, most obviously—not just those stereotypes

FIGURE I.4. Katt Williams with Washington, DC, locals in *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*.

FIGURE I.5. Katt Williams onstage in *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*.

about blackness that have circulated in mainstream popular culture. And his repeated use of the word "nigga" to refer to the president—used in this context to imply camaraderie—brings Obama into the fold of black community rather than isolating him as the exception to it.[15]

Even more interesting than Williams's bringing Obama into the fold with his use of the n-word, however, is Williams's reference to Flavor Flav in the same special. Williams tells an anecdote about the time that he hosted the televised Comedy Central roast of Flav, and how he was angered at the unapologetically racist tone of the jokes directed at the rapper–turned–reality television star. Yet unlike Rock, whose comedy places the responsibility of racist perception primarily on Flav's shoulders, Williams directs his ire at the Comedy Central writers and producers: "I saw the William Shatner roast and the Pamela Anderson roast and it wasn't all about them being white. But on Flavor Flav's shit, every other word was 'Flav is a crispity, crackly, crunchity coon. He's a black sizzly, crunchity, crackly coon. Flav is a big black crispy, crackly, crunchity coon . . . all through the fucking script." By shifting the attention away from Flav's performance of negativity and onto the industrial factors that govern his performance, Williams brings issues of labor to the forefront, an emphasis that he reinforces when he explicitly addresses the economic motivation underpinning both his and Flav's acquiescence: "And the whole goddamned show I was mad, but I was mad at me that I was still fucking doing it the way I felt, but they had already told me how much they was gonna pay me, and, I had already spent it in my head, so I was in a fucked-up position."[16] Yet, rather than simply suggest that black performers are helpless victims caught up in the industrial and economic chokeholds of the media industry, Williams closes the routine by suggesting that there can, in fact, be a certain degree of agency in one's seeming adherence to stereotypes and other troublesome forms of representation. As Williams puts it, "If them motherfuckers was going to call you a crispity, crackly, crunchity coon *anyway*, you might as well get them motherfuckers for everything. Everything? Everything."

We may be tempted to read Williams's final statement as a nihilistic acceptance of racist perceptions of blackness. Yet what he is getting at, I believe, is the possibility of using the trope of negativity in ways that demonstrate self-awareness, agency, and even subversion. If one were to eschew the politics of respectability altogether and disregard the notion that media representations directly support or challenge racism, where would that leave categories of positivity and negativity? And if we were to refocus

our attention away from just issues of representation and onto industrial practices and matters of labor, what new questions might we begin to ask, and what possibilities might we reveal in the process?

Positive/Negative

As the examples of Flavor Flav, Barack Obama, Chris Rock, and Katt Williams demonstrate, the categories of positive and negative are modes that individuals perform, sometimes deliberately, but more often unconsciously, which resonate with larger discourses of identity, race, politics, and norms of behavior in our society. These modes possess markers that are culturally legible and carry with them connotations about their bearers as well as a host of other related associations. They are not static but, rather, shift across time. And if the categories themselves are not static, then their bearers' hold on them is even less stable.

Designations of positive versus negative with regard to representations of blackness and black people can be frustrating. Taken as straightforward descriptors, they are limiting categories that do not allow us to access the full, complex range of images that circulate in the media, nor do they allow for the possibility of nuanced engagement with these images by the people that consume them. Conventional uses of "positive" and "negative" support politics of respectability and close off possibilities for multilayered conceptions of and performances of identity. At their worst, to invoke these categories uncritically reinforces racist ideologies that use discourses of black exceptionalism to further marginalize black behaviors and people that deviate from white, middle-class, heterosexual norms.

As a fan of various types of media, including "ratchet" images, I often feel frustrated when I hear people say things like "we need more positive/progressive representations of black people on television" or "that depiction does nothing to advance black people in society." While on the surface, such declarations lay claim to the need for social change and the power of media to achieve it, these types of statements are based on several problematic assumptions. These include the notion that media representations have a direct and straightforward impact on people's ideologies, that media images matter more than histories of institutional oppression, and that audiences always interpret images in predictable and knowable ways. These suppositions are rarely questioned in the public sphere, but, instead, are taken at face value as objective truth.

Even those of us who try to escape the positive/negative dichotomy inevitably end up replicating it in other ways, such as discourses of "quality," which simply recast "positivity" in different terms. Auteurist-focused analyses run the same risk, with primacy being given to black filmmakers working outside of the Hollywood system, the assumption being that black filmmakers unencumbered by Hollywood's history of racism will inevitably produce the "right" kinds of images. And even when we explicitly state our desire to talk about representation in a way that eschews the positive/negative categories, as Melissa Harris-Perry did in her reality TV roundtable discussion in a July 2013 broadcast of *The Melissa Harris-Perry Show*, it seems hard to, even temporarily, leave aside the matter of whether these images *do* something to those who consume them.

The problem is that, try as we might, we cannot seem to shake the assumption that representations do the work by themselves. In other words, there is an unshakable belief that images do work outside of the histories and contexts in which they circulate. For instance, in 2015, Mattel released a limited-edition doll in the likeness of the African American director Ava DuVernay. The doll sold out in fifteen minutes, a sign of its immense desirability among DuVernay's fans. But what explains the excitement around the doll's release? A quick scan of tweets with the hashtag #AvaBarbie shows two presumptions about the doll: first, that the likeness of Ava DuVernay will encourage self-love among the little black girls who receive it, and, second, that owning a model of the director will inspire these girls to pursue a career in filmmaking. Yet the doll's only accessory is a director's chair. Unlike other professionally oriented dolls that Mattel produces, the Ava Barbie does not come with any accessories that would signal her career or allow her profession to function meaningfully in children's play.[17] It would be one thing, for instance, if the doll came with a camera and a clapboard, or if purchase of the doll provided access to an online app that allowed girls to create their own mini movies, something that the independent toy company GoldieBlox has in its lineup of toys targeted at young girls.[18] Instead, the Ava Barbie is simply a doll in DuVernay's likeness, and while it makes sense that fans of the director would want one as a collector's item, it is unclear exactly *how* the doll is supposed to inspire self-esteem or career ambition in young girls. It is as if the doll is assumed to magically achieve these goals simply by *being*, as if its actual function—how little girls will take it up and play with it—is irrelevant.

FIGURE I.6. The Ava DuVernay Barbie doll by Mattel.

However, representations do not do the work by themselves, and, to take it a step further, they may not even do the work that we presume them to do. When we refer to media as either positive or negative, we imply that the images push perceptions of blackness in one of two directions: either forward or backward. But is that their only function? What about resistant reading? And irony? And pleasure? Where do those factor into the equation?

For those of us who disagree with this assessment of black images, the temptation is to find a way to get outside of the binary, to smash the positive/negative labels once and for all. This is valuable work, and I look forward to the day when these categories cease to govern our discussions of popular media. Yet we should not think that we have reached that point just yet. As I have already mentioned, the specter of these typifications lingers on in our analyses, whether or not we actually use the terms "positive" and "negative." And to be frank, I remain doubtful that, given the ongoing

existence of structural and cultural racism, we will ever fully dismantle or escape the positive/negative binary, despite claims to the contrary. And if our strategy is simply to replace alleged negative images with positive ones, then we are merely adding more definitions of what it means to be black into circulation, without necessarily contesting the racist assumptions under which the negative ones were formed in the first place.[19] Though we may not always use such crude terms as "positive" or "negative" anymore, that does not mean that they do not hover over our work, in terms of which texts we privilege in our writing and which ones we do not. Moreover, if we eradicate the terms themselves, we risk losing the language to interrogate them and how they function, much like how operating in a climate of "color-muteness," to borrow Linda Williams's term, prevents us from naming racial oppression even as we continue to suffer its effects.[20]

While frustrations with the positive/negative binary have led many scholars invested in the study of black media to seek out ways to sidestep the binary altogether, I am reminded of Stuart Hall's warning that the power of cultural hegemony is that, while we may change the "dispositions and the configurations of cultural power," we do not necessarily escape them altogether.[21] At the same time, however, Hall likewise encourages us to avoid the overly cynical approach, the "zero sum game" as he puts it, that assumes that the structures of cultural hegemony effectively absorb and then stamp out any glimmers of significant change or diversity. We should take this part of Hall's statement seriously, in that it suggests that there is value in studying those texts previously deemed to be without value, damaging, or regressive.

Limiting though they may be, I advocate that we actually retain categories of positive and negative, not in a qualitative sense, but from the standpoint of strategic essentialism (as theorized by Gayatri Spivak). I am interested in using the categories to analyze how they come to be, but with the understanding that they are not connected to the intrinsic value that the texts possess. To use an analogy, I propose that we think of these designations categorically, similar to geographic neighborhoods. For, like the categories of positive and negative, neighborhoods are also delineated by artificial and often arbitrary boundaries, formed by specific sets of social and political developments, and defined by both those who willingly choose to inhabit them and those who are relegated there.

In the end, I am suggesting that it is not necessary to eradicate these categories as much as to deconstruct them: understand how they develop, where they are applied, how, and when. And further, by using these terms

strategically, as critical race scholars have already done with strategic essentialism, we gain much in the way of developing a lens of analysis and language with which to understand and talk about what these texts are actually doing. Therefore, taking up Herman Gray's call to analytically shift discussions of identity and media "from signification and representation to resonance and experience," I propose that we actually embrace the designation of "negative" that has long been assigned to certain types of images. To activate the dictionary definition of "negative" as "expressing or containing negation or denial" reveals the ways that disreputable images such as those found in reality television, for instance, disrupt hegemonic norms regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality.[22] My understanding of these texts as *negative* is closely related to Kristen Warner's repurposing of the term "ratchet" to describe reality television shows such as *Basketball Wives* and *Love & Hip Hop*. In her analysis, the term encompasses the excessiveness and hypervisibility of the shows' depictions, their performative nature, their engagement with identity politics, and finally, their quality of being understood only through mediation. I embrace the term "negative" because of its historical use in defining certain types of black texts and because it implies a direct, tangential relationship to "positive" representations. If the current postracial, color-blind moment truly is a moment of color-muteness, then perhaps the negative image functions as the repository for those identities, experiences, and feelings that have been discarded by respectable media.

Negativity

This book focuses on the productive use of negativity as a paradigm for the analysis of black popular culture. The concept of negativity attends to the racially specific nature of the production, consumption, and circulation of black texts, while simultaneously emphasizing the mutually constituting nature of the positive and negative labels that these texts come to bear. Rather than view black texts as discrete objects of study (even when placed within larger contexts such as industry practices, circulation of stereotypes, genre specificity, etc.), the concept of negativity postulates that meaning in certain types of disreputable texts is primarily construed via their relations to other texts that occupy privileged positions as far as cultural capital, critical regard, and scholarly discourse. It should come as little surprise, then, that the dynamic relationship between positive and negative texts mirrors the fluid and mutually constituting nature of racial

categories, as I have already hinted at in my discussion of Chris Rock, Katt Williams, and their respective understandings of how Barack Obama and Flavor Flav function within racially charged media environments. To highlight this dynamic, *Double Negative* uses examples that address issues of racial identity explicitly. If negativity, then, like race, is less an essential part of one's identity and more a social construction, what does this tell us about the categories of "positive" and "negative" as they pertain to blackness?

Negativity as Concept

This book offers two, interrelated definitions of a "negative" text. The first type of negative text is a qualitative one that is defined by its distance from normative, white hegemonic standards of quality. Flavor Flav's television show *The Flavor of Love*, because it showcased "unladylike" women of color competing for a nontraditionally desirable bachelor, is a good example of this form of negativity.[23] The second definition of a negative text is a formal category that functions as an inversion of another media text. In this second sense of the term, the film or television show in question may not be thought of as stereotypical or demeaning, but has simply been erased from critical discourse because its salient formal and ideological components are not recognized as bearing significant meaning. This is the case with a film like Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America* (John Landis, 1988). Though it does not indulge in the kinds of stereotypes that characterize *Flavor of Love*, its comedic genre and white director may have led to its dismissal as frivolous "entertainment," in contrast with more serious dramatic fare like *Do the Right Thing*, which the African American director Spike Lee released just a year later.

The concept of negativity derives first from the idea of a photonegative. In fact, my approach in this book is based heavily on the metaphor of a photographic negative, in which a positive image is considered normal (or, in the case of the media, normative) and a negative is the complete inversion of that image. I argue that these negative images engage in explorations of identity in a manner that is inversely proportionate to contemplations of identity in respectable media texts.[24] Just as a negative is necessary for the production of a photograph, this book argues that the negative image is a necessary component for the production of the "positive" images that circulate throughout popular culture and scholarship. In other words, returning to my initial example, without Flavor Flav (and other negative representations of black masculinity), there could be no Barack Obama, to the extent that Obama's racial

performance of black respectability is legible only because it contrasts with an equally recognizable trope of disreputable black masculinity.

The metaphor of a photonegative helps to elucidate the way that negativity functions in respect to black media texts. Yet this dynamic is not exclusive to black representation. Other discussions of alternative reading strategies, such as camp, for instance, likewise rely on an understanding of the relation between dominant and contested meanings. What further delineates negativity, then, is that it highlights the specifically racialized nature of these dynamics. To explicate, I incorporate two other metaphors—the linguistic and mathematical negatives. Linguistically, in nonwhite dialects, negatives often contradict standard rules of language. Indeed, the use of negatives, particularly a double negative, is a telltale sign of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a variety of American English that is often misheard as simply "incorrect" or "broken" English. As Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram note, "One of the most noticed characteristics of AAVE and many other varieties of English is the optional use of *negative concord*, also referred to as *multiple negation* and *pleonastic negation.*"[25] By contrast, African Americans who speak standard American English—"proper" English, as many commonly refer to it—may sometimes be accused of "talking white," highlighting the racialized nature of language usage. Similarly, in media representation, texts determined to be "positive" are more likely to be those that bear resemblance to "proper" (e.g., white) films and television shows as far as the scenarios, characters, and behaviors that they portray, while "negative" texts are identifiable as such via their distance from those standards. And, finally, in mathematics, a negative integer has the power of rendering a positive integer negative when the two are multiplied. By extension, negative media representations are often accused of "setting blacks back" (sometimes all the way back to slavery), suggesting, even if hyperbolically, that a single negative image is powerful enough to undo decades and centuries of social and political gains.

As a framework, negativity helps to elucidate how tastes, politics, and modes of performance develop and change, and it reveals the ways that time forms our perceptions. Take, for instance, blackface minstrelsy in theater and early film, a type of black image that most people would undoubtedly decry as racist and regressive. While the practice has always faced strong criticism, some African American performers, such as the famed stage comedian Bert Williams, regularly appeared in blackface, finding that the

makeup created a separation between his performative and real selves and allowed him to try on various comic personae.[26] As Louis Chude-Sokei argues, Williams's "blackface masquerade was as much a means of negotiating relationships between and among diaspora blacks in Harlem as it was an attempt to erase the intentionally projected racist fiction of the 'stage Negro' (or 'darky') from within the conventions of popular performance, from behind a mask produced and maintained by competitive projections and denials of black subjectivity."[27] Once blackface fell out of favor completely with modern society, however, those writing about Williams have revised the history of his performance, suggesting that Williams put on blackface against his will or because of the dearth of professional opportunities provided to him as a black man.[28] There is little evidence to support these revisionist claims; thus, these accounts reveal more about the changed perceptions of blackface than they do anything about Williams's actual sentiments. Shifting our attention to the contemporary moment, the example of Williams and blackface serves as an important caution against dismissing the complexity of alleged negative images and against ignoring the reasons behind why we do so.

What the idea of negativity offers, then, is a mode of analysis for *seeing* the work that these texts are doing in the first place. For, rather than cut off the analysis at the first sign of a stereotype or politically regressive construct, negativity seeks to move the discussion past this first level of scrutiny and on to the question of what meanings these texts hold relative to the culture that produces both them and their positive complements. For, as Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, these matters of taste, or, in my case, the matters of taste as they relate to the construction of negative texts, are given value in direct relation to socioeconomic and educational status and, by extension, racial status, too. Our ability to "read" or decipher a text, therefore, is based on our possession of the proper codes and language of appreciation or interpretation. As Bourdieu puts it, "The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education."[29] How, then, are we to "see" the meaning created in and by negative texts, when society—whether mainstream white culture or black respectability culture—has repeatedly obfuscated or dismissed it? Indeed, how are we supposed to see that which is constantly in danger of disappearing from the sphere of critical discourse? To complicate matters even further, how might we see the work that negative texts are doing in service of race, gender, sexuality, and class, when, as Matthew

Tinkcom argues about camp, the work is disguised as something else, such as stereotypes? How do we recuperate the work that these images do when they are packaged as objects that we would rather not see at all?[30]

To borrow again from Bourdieu, I am interested in providing a framework, a language, that would allow us to shift from "the 'primary stratum of the meaning we can grasp on the basis of our ordinary experience' to the 'stratum of secondary meanings,' i.e., the 'level of the meaning of what is signified.'"[31] Unlike Bourdieu, however, I am asserting a "bottom-up" approach to culture, whereby I focus my attention on developing an "eye" that would allow us to (1) understand the relationship between positivity and negativity, (2) comprehend the shifting nature of these categories, and (3) better read negative representations. To this end, "signification" takes on a dual meaning in this project, capturing both Bourdieu's basic semiotic definition and the racially and culturally specific "signifyin(g)" that Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers to describe a "meta discourse," expressed in black vernacular language, that allows for a criticism of aspects of white hegemonic structures outside the controlling gaze of whites, while also encouraging an intertextual dialogue that privileges the recognition and theorization of black cultural texts.[32] Riffing on Gates, I offer that when negative texts signify on white hegemonic as well as black hegemonic norms, they do so in a mode that is markedly different from their positive counterparts, one that is often embedded with troublesome performances and politics that obscure the more subversive work in which they are engaged. It is in these spaces, I contend, that *Love & Hip Hop* (VH1, 2011–) offers a glimpse of queer sexuality that is not often visible in white LGBT or black civil rights movements. Or we might note the ways that *The Associate* (Donald Petrie, 1996) troubles normative aesthetics of whiteness in cinema, a task that we do not expect from Hollywood films, particularly those heralded by white directors.

The Intervention

I want to be clear that I do not view positive images as inherently conservative or negative images as essentially subversive. Negative images encompass a wide range of politics and values: some challenge hegemony while others reinforce it. Yet what I find intriguing are the possibilities for queer, feminist, and otherwise nonnormative subjectivities in these negative texts, and the degree to which they are present without requiring "reading against the grain." What I am suggesting, then, is not an abandon-

ment of emphases on genre and medium, but, rather, a means to enrich understandings of how they are deployed in the service of interrogations of racial identity.

I argue that reclaiming these overlooked images from black popular culture and offering an alternative history of their meanings and possibilities also provides a strong intervention in present-day debates about proper black behavior and the role of popular culture in the current sociopolitical moment. Moreover, as the veritable gutter of black media, negative representations serve as the repository for all of the feelings that positive images cast aside. I address this idea in more detail in chapter 4, where I discuss the function of reality television through the lens of affect and Frantz Fanon's concept of a "collective catharsis."

This is particularly important in the current historical and political moment, where the politics of respectability—an adherence to white middle-class ideals as a means of racial uplift—continues to operate within popular black thought. Even within the younger generation of media consumers who have grown up with distinctly postmodern musings on race, gender, and sexuality, the lure of the "positive representation" continues to factor into how they perceive and engage with images and representations. As Brittney Cooper writes, "Hip Hop Generation Black folks still have a deep love affair with respectability politics, or this notion that obtaining/creating a traditional nuclear family makes us grown up, middle class, and 'fit' to participate in the larger body politic, American dream and all."[33] Cooper's statement points to a growing trend of black cultural producers from the hip hop generation espousing neoconservative values and articulating an ideological and generational split through an adherence to a postracial identity and a rejection of black activist politics. This certainly seemed to be what the musician Pharrell Williams was gesturing toward when he defined his idea of "the new black" as a self-conscious "mentality" that one can be limited by or can overcome.[34] To those versed in neoliberal discourses about individual responsibility and "bootstraps," Williams's "new black" statements might sound disturbingly familiar. And though I do not suggest that Williams is consciously parroting the implicitly racist statements of the political right, I find that his statements, with their effortless intersection with postracial takes on race (which posit that the election of the first African American president signals that racism is a thing of the past), operate on the same principles.

Fredrick C. Harris traces the politics of respectability back as far as the post-Reconstruction era, where African Americans saw hard-won rights

quickly stripped away and new racist laws implemented to keep them in positions of social and political inferiority. Harris summarizes the history of respectability in the following passage, which I quote here at length:

> For more than half of the twentieth century, the concept of the "Talented Tenth" commanded black elites to "lift as we climb," or to prove to white America that blacks were worthy of full citizenship rights by getting the untalented nine-tenths to rid themselves of bad customs and habits. Today's politics of respectability, however, commands blacks left behind in post–civil rights America to "lift up thyself." Moreover, the ideology of respectability, like most other strategies for black progress articulated within the spaces where blacks discussed the best courses of action for black freedom, once lurked for the most part beneath the gaze of white America.[35]

Harris's emphasis on the "gaze of white America" is important, because it suggests that Du Boisian double consciousness, the feeling of seeing oneself through the eyes of others, animates much intraracial policing of black images. These politics of respectability extend to the realm of television representation, where battles between respectability on the one side and authenticity on the other have provided a backdrop for nearly every black show that has entered primetime. Perhaps one of the most salient features of negative texts is the relatively scant critical discourse surrounding them in spite of the thoughtful or even provocative questions that they raise about representation and identity. Interestingly, many of the negative texts that I examine are quite popular as far as their reverberations throughout popular culture, making the absence of scholarly discussion of these texts unfortunate. Negative texts are often absent from serious analytics of black media, and yet, like ghostly apparitions, they materialize in discussions about their positive counterparts. Take the Bravo network's reality television show, *The Real Housewives*, for example. References to the show magically appear in Shonda Rhimes's discussion of *Scandal* as a "guilty pleasure" (a term that she uses pejoratively) and in Barack Obama's imperative to America's young people that they need to work harder at school rather than sitting at home and "watching *The Real Housewives*."[36] In both cases, the subjects of Rhimes's and Obama's speeches were not *The Real Housewives*, but each used the unquestioned "trashiness" of the show as a point of comparison for the questions at hand: the quality of *Scandal* and the merits of hard work, respectively.

Contrary to the dismissive tone of Rhimes and Obama, I am invested in exploring the merits of these texts. However, I am not at all interested in salvaging them from the metaphorical gutter. Indeed, some of the texts that I examine in this book may not necessarily offer much in the way of aesthetic or political contributions, but they are still "great artifacts," to quote Jeffrey Sconce, because of the ways that they crystallize particular debates around black representation at a given moment.[37] For instance, I would be hard pressed to argue that the often-sexist and misogynistic comedy *Strictly Business* (Kevin Hooks, 1991) rivals the emotional complexity or aesthetic beauty of John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), but, as *Business* captures certain anxieties around masculinity, racial identity, and professional success—anxieties that were reflected in numerous magazines and newspapers at the time—an analysis of the film offers insight into the media's representation of these anxieties, something that is not the project of Singleton's *Boyz*.

Relation between Positive and Negative Texts

Indeed, the mutually constitutive nature of positive and negative texts is part of a longer history of debates over representation in the media, debates that typically come down to issues of cultural authenticity, power, and media effects. Extending this positive/negative framework beyond media and into the realm of culture more broadly, many of the texts canonized in the study of black popular culture have also had a symbiotic "other." Throughout history, these comparative pairings concern themselves with matters of cultural authenticity, politics, and audience. For example, I am thinking here of how Richard Wright criticized Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, accusing her of essentially "selling out" before the term was popular: "Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh."[38] Hurston, however, was not interested in Wright's politics or in his criticism of her work. As she wrote to a friend, "I tried to be natural and not pander to the folks who expect a clown and a villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those 'race' people among us who see nothing but perfection in all of us."[39]

Shifting gears to film, we might also consider how Melvin Van Peebles's independent 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* is often compared (partly by the filmmaker himself) to the big-budget MGM blaxploitation

classic *Shaft*, of the same year, with Van Peebles claiming cultural authenticity in contrast to the Hollywood studio's mainstream offering.[40] Or, more recently, filmmaker Tyler Perry referenced the Hurston and Wright debate in reference to his own fight with Spike Lee, who referred to Perry's work as "coonery and buffoonery" that harkened back to *Amos 'n' Andy*. In defense of his film and TV work, Perry argued that he was offering his black audiences characters and story lines taken from his own experiences in black communities, citing cultural authenticity as his defense against Lee's accusations.[41]

Finally, similar dynamics have operated in the world of network television. For example, while the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) petitioned to have *Amos 'n' Andy* (CBS, 1951–1953) taken off the air because they claimed that it represented African Americans negatively, African American viewers constituted part of the show's avid fan base.[42] The NAACP also took issue with ABC's *Beulah*, which starred a variety of black actresses playing the mammy-like titular character who works as a domestic in the home of a white family.[43] By contrast, Diahann Carroll's beautiful, sophisticated nurse in NBC's *Julia* (1968–1971) could not have been more different from the *Beulah* trope, leading *Ebony* magazine to cite the show as "another step in TV's evolution."[44] *Julia* creator Hal Kanter's decision to keep the show lighthearted and avoid delving too deeply into topics of race or racism struck some viewers and critics as overly saccharine and unreal. Thus, when *Good Times* premiered on CBS in 1974, *Ebony* magazine opened its advance review by claiming that "television viewers who protested that *Julia* was not a true reflection of black life can't say the same about the new CBS-TV series *Good Times*. The show is a slice of ghetto life as thick and juicy as a slab of salt pork simmering in a pot of collard greens."[45] Yet the "realistic" portrayals of *Good Times* set the stage for Bill Cosby's "positive" intervention into the television landscape with the premiere of *The Cosby Show* in 1984. When buzz about *Cosby* began to hit the press shortly before its premiere, it was against the backdrop of previous black television families that Bill Cosby discussed his new show. As Herman Gray points out, *Cosby* "quite intentionally presented itself as a corrective to previous generations of television representations of black life."[46] From the outset, the black press (aided by Cosby's own statements about the show's politics of representation) framed the new sitcom in comparison to its predecessors: "When Bill Cosby returns to NBC-TV this fall as star of a new half-hour situation comedy series, he will headline the

only prime time show on television with an all-Black cast. There will be no token Whites and there will be no Blacks rapping in rhyme and break dancing in rhythm. There will be no Black stereotypes in characters that have been associated with some previous sitcoms with Blacks cast as co-stars."[47] As this brief survey demonstrates, black images in popular culture have always been evaluated to a large extent in direct relation to those that came before them, and always in the context of whether the images improve the perception of African Americans in society, as well as the supposed authenticity of the characters and experiences that they depict.

With this context in mind, cultural texts that do not meet the standards of respectability at the given cultural moment have often been labeled negative and positioned as the polar opposite of respectable programming and respectable viewers. When the attorney and media figure Star Jones called for a boycott of *Basketball Wives* in 2012, she expressed this dichotomy by taking to Twitter and calling on a nouveau Talented Tenth: "I'm asking all my high profile, platform having conscientious sisters who STAND FOR SOMETHING to just say #ENOUGHISENOUGH & call folk out! Be mad. But think about what I said. WE ARE BETTER than that. You're either part of the problem or part of the solution."[48] The cultural activist Michaela Angela Davis noted that the goal of her Bury the Ratchet campaign was to "get the spotlight off the ratchetness and on the successful women in Atlanta."[49] The problem with Jones's and Davis's arguments, however, is that they reinforce the notion that one type of representation must come at the cost of the other. It is always an either/or proposition in thinking such as this, rather than allowing for a both/and scenario. Or, more radically, might it be possible for the "successful women in Atlanta" to *also* be ratchet?

The Work That Negative Texts Do

Negative spaces can exist as havens for topics deemed outside of the boundaries of respectable texts, particularly when those topics have to do with matters of identity. Joshua Gamson makes this point about tabloid talk shows, arguing that they serve as spaces for the representation of, and engagement with, sexual nonconformity as well as a site where the contradictions of American society and values are put on display, debated, and consumed by audiences.[50] Similarly, reality television functions as the metaphorical gutter for the rejects of respectable black media representation. Interestingly enough, these individuals, groups, and topics that I refer

to here as rejects happen to intersect and overlap with the same individuals, groups, and topics that are typically marginalized by mainstream and black uplift narratives in society. For instance, the shows that I discuss in chapter 4 include explorations of the sexuality of queer black women, a group chronically (and perhaps purposefully) ignored in scripted media as well as in real-life politics in favor of white, middle-class men.[51] This was made painfully clear when *The Advocate* ran its December 16, 2008, cover story, which declared "Gay Is the New Black," ignoring the intersectional identity that queers of color have lived with and expressed for quite some time. Interestingly, however, the reality show *Love & Hip Hop* features several queer men and women of color who occupy prominent places in the cast and associated story lines.

In my close readings of certain negative texts—*Coming to America*, 1990s Hollywood sellout comedies, Halle Berry's star image, and "ratchet" reality television—I find a potpourri of complicated explorations and anxieties about sex, gender, and class. Many of these negative texts open up possibilities for nonnormative feelings, experiences, and allegiances that, I argue, are simply not possible in the image-policed spaces of positive texts. The messy and shifting construction of Halle Berry's changing racial identity, for instance, is a process that most often occurs invisibly and "naturally." Watching Berry's persona transform from a positive to a negative text over the span of a decade, then, provides a rare glimpse into the inner workings of that process.

Negativity in Relation to Trash

In both popular and scholarly spaces, "trash" has always conveyed the notion of the antirespectable, anticanonical text. I obviously draw from existing discussions around trash in the ways that I think through the politics of negativity. Joshua Gamson's and Laura Grindstaff's books on TV talk shows, Eric Schaeffer's work on exploitation films, and Jeffrey Sconce's writings on trash all resonate with my understanding of negativity.[52] For instance, I draw on Sconce's work on "sleaze" as a way of thinking through my concept of negativity, which he describes in the following way: "Often, sleaziness implies a circuit of inappropriate exchange involving suspect authorial intentions and/or displaced perversities in the audience."[53] Like Sconce's description of sleaze, which he explains is less a historical category and more "an ineffable quality" or a "feeling one has about a film," I argue that negativity is primarily known via the "evidence of felt intuition," to quote

Phillip Brian Harper, rather than by any alleged "objective" criteria, the language of which is intractably coded in dominant norms anyway.[54]

As a cousin of trash, negativity includes some of the same liberatory pleasures associated with it. Writing about film art and trash, Pauline Kael argues, "Perhaps the single most intense pleasure of movie going is this non-aesthetic one of escaping from the responsibilities of having the proper responses required of us in our official (school) culture."[55] It is easy to see, then, the pleasures that the negative text offers in place of its positive counterpart. Free from the politics of respectability—in fact, often constructed in antithesis to the politics of respectability—negative texts offer a respite from the all-too-real responsibilities of racial uplift and image management.

To be specific, what many commonly refer to as trash is actually a reference to mass or low culture. Mass/low culture exists conceptually in direct contrast to high culture, as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, and others have theorized.[56] And while more contemporary scholars such as Jeffrey Sconce have productively argued that this divide is much fuzzier, with mass/low culture being embraced by ostensibly high art cultures such as avant-garde movements, these analyses do not fully account for the complications that race brings into discussions of taste and culture.[57] For, if this book aims to highlight the way that whiteness functions invisibly in media, it must also point out that whiteness occupies a similar default position in *scholarship* on the media. In other words, we should productively trouble these existing discussions of taste and culture by first acknowledging that whether we use adjectives such as high, low, mass, or trash in front of the word "culture," all of these descriptors are still referring to *white* culture, in that the producers, texts, and fan communities that constitute the foundations of this scholarship do not typically include people of color.[58] Therefore, though my analysis of negative texts borrows heavily from discourses on trash, it diverts from this body of literature in important ways. Unlike Eric Schaeffer's definition of classical exploitation films, for instance, the negative texts that I examine may be produced and distributed by Hollywood studios, can employ high production values, engage A- or B-list stars, and may continue to circulate in popular culture long after their initial release.

Hence, an analysis of black mass culture necessitates both a different framework and a different category than those mainstream cultural texts associated with "trash." This discussion of taste and race must take into

account the historical debates over the politics of representation. Whether it is the NAACP-organized boycott of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the promotion of *The Cosby Show* by black news outlets in the mid-1980s, or the online petition that prevented the airing of rapper Shawty Lo's *All My Babies' Mamas* (Oxygen), the politics of black representation have always involved ongoing, frequently tense relationships among community groups, activists, cultural producers, and viewers.[59] And while conversations about taste in white culture have sometimes involved similar debates (the controversy over the MTV reality show *Jersey Shore* comes to mind), black images in film and television have been embroiled in political debates since the earliest days of film and television. Though seldom explicitly acknowledged, blackness has been an indelible component of media imagery since the birth of cinema, predating continuity editing, sound, and color, as scholars such as Jacqueline Stewart and Linda Williams have pointed out.[60] And where blackness has appeared onscreen—typically in racist and stereotypical ways—controversy and political action have followed. The accolades lavished on the narrative and technical superiority of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) by President Woodrow Wilson at the time of the film's release were quickly countered by the recently formed NAACP's picketing of the film across the nation, and the film prompted African American filmmakers such as Emmett J. Scott, Noble and George Johnson, and Oscar Micheaux to create their own films and film companies as correctives to Griffith's heinous misrepresentations.[61]

Agency

Though much of my discussion emphasizes the active ways in which negative representations push back against hegemonic norms, this project does not concern itself with agency in the more traditional senses of the term. Rather than focusing on African American–produced media, I am interested in the idea of "black" as it comes to be defined in the process of circulation throughout pop culture. Without this flexibility, black cult classics such as *Coming to America* would not be considered "black" films, thus causing us to miss a valuable opportunity to examine the ways that Eddie Murphy managed to transform a standard Hollywood offering into a uniquely and identifiably black text, in spite of the intentions and efforts of the film's white director. Stuart Hall addresses this messy definition of

"black" in his important essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," which I quote here at length:

> It is this mark of difference *inside* forms of popular culture—which are by definition contradictory and which therefore appear as impure, threatened by incorporation or exclusion—that is carried by the signifier "black" in the term "black popular culture." It has come to signify the black community, where these traditions were kept, and whose struggles survive in the persistence of the black experience (the historical experiences of black people in the diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives we have struggled to voice.[62]

Hall's emphasis on the hybridity within popular culture, a system that is always in flux and constantly responding to its own elements, offers a more inclusive concept of black popular culture than a strict adherence to the race of the filmmaker or the film's political focus. For example, even though John Landis directed *Coming to America*, the film not only has become firmly associated with Murphy but also has turned into an iconic film of black popular culture.[63] In this way, *Coming to America* represents the cultural hybridity that Hall rightly notes is a feature of many texts of "black" popular culture. Directed by a white director, starring an African American superstar, distributed by a mainstream Hollywood studio (Paramount), and featuring a large number of well-known African American actors in supporting roles (James Earl Jones, Madge Sinclair, John Amos, Calvin Lockhart), the film shows "black popular culture" to be an interracial collaborative effort. Building on Hall's assertion that hybridity need not undermine the specific blackness of a cultural product, I attribute the film's cultural resonance within black communities to the "black" aspects of the film revealed in its cultural in-jokes and created through its constant recirculation through other black cultural texts. In other words, the film takes its place in the black cultural pantheon primarily in hindsight and via intertextuality, rather than through some initial adherence to an arbitrary and rigid definition of a "black film." Thus, I reject the idea that a black director is what makes a film "black," choosing instead to focus on the ways that the text's reverberations in black communities and spaces confer its blackness.

While I acknowledge that negative representations sometimes fall prey to the same limiting constructions of race as their positive counterparts, I believe that the power of the negative image rests in its ability to shift the dynamics in popular culture. We see negative texts actively influencing mainstream popular culture and pulling *it* into the gutter in certain ways, such as the influence of the reality show *Love & Hip Hop* on the current television darling *Empire*, a subject that I explore in the conclusion. And, unlike the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, these are not shifts that simply bubble up temporarily only to be ultimately reabsorbed by dominant culture and robbed of their subversiveness. Nor are these subcultures that exist as a sort of parallel, underground universe to that of mainstream culture. Rather, the reverberations of negative texts function as tremors that irrevocably weaken the foundation on which their positive counterparts are constructed. These are, in fact, performances that matter in spite of the fact that they have traditionally been understood as inconsequential as far as articulating ideas about black identity. To this end, I examine the ways that they privilege disreputable behavior, characters, genres, and media as the means to negotiate the dynamics of culture, race, and power.

I connect these aspects of negativity to a long-standing tradition of black cultural practices that date back to the era of slavery, and which are often found in the seemingly frivolous spaces of comedy, historically, and, more recently, in genres such as melodrama and reality television. Lawrence Levine has convincingly argued that black humor, in particular, is a coping mechanism "essential to black survival and the maintenance of group sanity and integrity" in the face of American racism as well as a strategic mode of delivery that allows African Americans to discuss topics considered too taboo to tackle directly.[64] As an inverted image of a positive, the negative image likewise stands in defiant juxtaposition against the tenuous mores of racial uplift that so-called positive images create. Thus, I am less interested in creating a category into which black media texts can be lumped together than I am in thinking through the ways that negativity-as-framework helps us see the work that these texts do on their own, as well as in their reverberations in larger black culture. Moreover, negativity reclaims black texts that may have been excluded from more traditional black film and television canons, and it emphasizes the significance of black audiences and intertextuality to confer meaning, rather than the limited purview of critics and scholars.

Negativity as Meta Discourse

Because negative texts are not often canonized in scholarship or cited on media critics' "best" lists, it is difficult to identify them. This marks yet another of the difficulties in analyzing negative images, as they are at risk of disappearing from critical discourse altogether if not preserved in some fashion of scholarly attention. *Double Negative* argues that we can recognize negative texts via their positive inversion, or by finding evidence of them at the secondary form or level, such as in the ways that they are taken up in other popular culture texts. Because negative texts, by definition, do not receive primary attention, this secondary recirculation is an important space for the preservation of negative texts' cultural meanings and legacies.

Take, for instance, *Coming to America.* Though the film fared well at the box office, it has not garnered much in the way of scholarly analysis. Yet the film is as close to a black cult classic as one can get, with references to the film's plot, characters, costumes, and music continuing to circulate throughout black popular culture even today. The problem, however, is that the secondary spaces in which this negative text functions are *themselves* negative spaces and thus do not serve as evidence of the film's validity, but, rather, as evidence of its location in the figurative gutter. For example, in *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* spinoff *Kandi's Wedding*, Kandi Burruss, a songwriter and *Housewives* cast member, designs her upcoming African-themed nuptials to her fiancé, Todd Tucker, based on *Coming to America.* Interestingly, Burruss modeled her own wedding style after the arranged bride that Murphy's character rejects in the film, not the woman whom he eventually falls in love with and marries. Burruss's choices speak to the scenes and imagery from the film that captured popular imagination, precisely those that were not mentioned in the newspaper and magazine reviews of the film at the time of its premiere. Burruss's engagement with the film, however, sheds light on how it functions as a negative text. Interestingly, the characters and plot elements that she chooses to incorporate into her wedding are not those from the film's fairly conventional Hollywood A-plot. Instead, the parts of the film that appear to be the most memorable are those that constitute the B-plot, which I will later argue are the specifically "black" and "negative" moments in the film. Burruss's use of these suggests that the real meaning of *Coming to America* is located in these moments, in the "negative" register that the trained critics of the time did not pick up on.

Categories of Negativity

Though I offer negativity as a broader concept for the study of certain types of black media texts, I also categorize different forms of negativity in order to better understand how negativity functions. Therefore, each chapter of this book examines a variation of negativity, using specific media texts as case studies. The case studies provide an explanation for how these texts become negative, the implications of that designation, and an exploration of what texts offer us as far as an understanding of how the media and racial identity intersect. Unsurprisingly, many of the negative texts that I identify and discuss in this book occupy multiple categories at once.

Formal Negativity

Formal negativity involves a text that becomes a "negative" because one or more of its formal qualities—aesthetics, mise-en-scène, narrative, and so on—can function as an inversion of those of typical positive texts. Although this type of negative text may not have a direct corollary in the positive realm, it gestures toward practices and genres either in mainstream media representation or in black media. Chapter 1 examines *Coming to America*. Though produced by a mainstream Hollywood studio, Paramount, the lighthearted romantic comedy has become a favorite among black audiences. While it lacks any explicitly political themes (and, in fact, contains many stereotypes of Africans and African Americans), I am interested in the way that the film reverses the standard formula for conventional romantic comedies by emphasizing its comedic B-plots rather than its main romantic story line. The film also contains, after the closing credits, a sly inversion of Al Jolson's famous blackface performance in *The Jazz Singer*.

Relational or Comparative Negativity

In relational or comparative negativity, the positive counterpart directly overshadows the negative text. For instance, another explanation for *Coming to America* becoming a negative text is because of its chronological location between Robert Townsend's independent satire of Hollywood's racism, *Hollywood Shuffle* (1987), and Spike Lee's brilliant portrayal of race relations in the critically acclaimed *Do the Right Thing*. *Shuffle* directly criticized the racial tokenism that Townsend saw Murphy embodying within Hollywood, while *Do the Right Thing* announced a bold syn-

thesis of independent and Hollywood sensibilities and an unapologetic stance on racial representation. Chapter 2 focuses on a group of black comedies produced in the early to mid-1990s, which I refer to as the "sellout films." These include *Strictly Business* (Kevin Hooks, 1991), *Livin' Large* (Michael Schultz, 1991), *True Identity* (Charles Lane, 1991), and *The Associate* (Donald Petrie, 1996). In contrast to the so-called hood films, or the social realism films most often associated with the period (*Boyz n the Hood*, 1991; *South Central*, 1992; *Menace II Society*, 1993), I argue that these comedies form a countercanon and are concerned with addressing questions of assimilation and upward mobility. Situated historically amid changes to network programming and the resurgence of black-themed films in Hollywood, these films ask different questions about blackness than their counterparts, address different anxieties, and examine different social phenomena.

Circumstantial Negativity

In circumstantial negativity, a media text is categorized due to the issues and debates surrounding it, rather than because of a direct relation to its positive counterpart. As I have argued elsewhere, Eddie Murphy's star image as a "crossover" star impacted the way that people understood, and potentially misread, the politics of his films and television appearances.[65] In chapter 3, I examine the star text of Halle Berry, whose persona shifts from "black girl next door" to "the white man's whore" over a period of ten years, the turning point coming with her appearance in the television miniseries *Alex Haley's Queen*. I consider the ways that intertextuality and publicity materials around Berry's film and television roles shaped the way that her racial identity was presented to and read by the public. I discuss, for example, how black magazines consciously attempted to rewrite Berry's celebrity persona in order to make believable her role as a woman passing for white. Prior to *Queen*, Berry's film roles and celebrity persona marked her as unquestionably black. In the 1991 film *Strictly Business*, Berry had functioned as a symbol of authentic blackness in contrast to the film's "sellout" protagonist. This built on her existing characterization as an "around-the-way girl" in films such as *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Boomerang* (1992). With Berry's casting in *Queen*, however, African American publications such as *Jet* and *Ebony* attempted to merge Berry with the character she played, despite Berry's own vehement objections.

Strategic Negativity

Chapter 4 examines media texts that make full use of their location in the metaphorical "gutter" of media that is negativity, taking advantage of their distance from the politics of respectability to explore topics that their positive counterparts do not typically address. Here I focus on the genre of reality television, and more specifically, on the shows that Kristen Warner has labeled "ratchet": *Basketball Wives*, *Love & Hip Hop*, and *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. These are the shows that routinely serve as examples of negative representations, with the activist Michaela Angela Davis launching a campaign to get them taken off the air, *Grey's Anatomy*'s and *Scandal*'s executive producer, Shonda Rhimes, referring to them as "guilty pleasures," and President Barack Obama using them as examples of what responsible, hardworking young people should *not* spend their time watching. I argue that, as a genre, reality television escapes critical attention because of its negative status and because the genre itself masks the real labor of cast and crew as "reality." I then do close readings of some of the shows' more interesting moments in order to examine how they address issues such as black versus white motherhood, black queer sexuality, and female empowerment.

False Negatives

I conclude *Double Negative* with a discussion of the FOX network television drama *Empire*. The show's critical and popular success would seem to indicate a shift in taste cultures and the dismantling of respectability politics on network television. However, I argue that while *Empire* liberally borrows from key elements that comprise the melodramatic black-cast reality programs discussed in chapter 4, the show simply repackages positive representation under a different guise, creating what I refer to as a "false negative." Specifically, the conclusion examines how *Empire*'s A-list cast, powerful network, and acclaimed executive producer effectively buffer the negative aspects of the show.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

Epigraphs: Chris Rock, *Chris Rock: Kill the Messenger—London, New York, Johannesburg*, stand-up special, HBO, September 27, 2008. Public Enemy, "Fight the Power (Flavor Flav Meets Spike Lee)," on *Do the Right Thing: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack* (Motown, 1989). Katt Williams, *It's Pimpin' Pimpin'*, Comedy Central, November 11, 2008.

A portion of this chapter appeared in an earlier form in "Activating the Negative Image," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 7 (2015): 616–630.

1 Within R&B and hip hop music traditions, a hype man usually functions to get the crowd excited for the lead performer, often serving as an entertaining foil to the lead. For example, a regular routine for the funk group the Time involved a backup singer and dancer, Jerome Benton, producing and holding a large mirror for the lead singer Morris Day while onstage. Similarly, James Brown's famous "cape act," in which a band member draped a cape over the exhausted singer's shoulders, only for Brown to triumphantly cast it off and continue performing, could work only with the assistance of the band member as pseudo-hype man. In the case of Public Enemy, Flavor Flav's comical antics operated as a counterpoint to the explicitly political material of the lead rapper, Chuck D, thus using "buffoonery" as a way to prime the audience for the upcoming critical message.

2 Racquel Gates, "Keeping It Real(ity) Television," in *Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, ed. Beretta Smith-Shomade (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 141–156.

3 Throughout this book, I generally use the term "African American" when referring to specific individuals and people. I use "black" when describing more abstract concepts such as those pertaining to images and culture.

4 Lewis Gordon draws on Alfred Schutz's idea of "anonymity" and Jean-Paul Sartre's and Frantz Fanon's concepts of "overdetermination" to contextualize society's complex relationship to blackness. Lewis Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 75.

5 I do not mean that stereotypical behaviors are synonymous with blackness; rather, I want to acknowledge that certain tropes have long been associated with

blackness. Problematic and inaccurate though this may be, this connection would certainly be comprehensible to Williams's audience.

6 Comedians Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele played on this concept with their character Luther, "Obama's Anger Translator," in their comedy show, *Key & Peele* (VH1, 2012–2015).

7 Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati, *Acting White? Rethinking Race in Post-racial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8 Many thanks to Jane Gaines for giving me the opportunity to present a portion of this chapter at Columbia University's Sites of Cinema seminar.

9 Rock's persona captures the "homeboy cosmopolitanism," a concept that Manthia Diawara describes and that Mark Anthony Neal utilizes to describe the rapper/mogul Jay-Z as a figure of both racial authenticity and global consumer appeal. See Manthia Diawara, "Homeboy Cosmopolitan," in *In Search of Africa* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 238.

10 The leather ensemble visually connects Rock to other well-known black comedians' concert-film attire, most notably Eddie Murphy's leather jumpsuits in *Delirious* and *Raw*. I am especially grateful to Michael Gillespie for his helpful feedback on the comparison between Rock and Williams and for framing the meaning of Rock's wardrobe changes.

11 Williams carries the pimp motif throughout his specials, always entering wearing a floor-length fur coat, another reference to the pimp attire from the blaxploitation era.

12 Here I draw on Kara Keeling's use of black common sense (drawn from Wahneema Lubiano's use of the term), which posits common sense as something that can both uphold and challenge hegemony: "Common sense contains elements that consent to dominant hegemonies, as well as to aspects that are antagonistic to them. It can be understood as a record of a group's survival, incorporating compromises to dominating and exploitative forces while retaining challenges to those forces." Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

13 Williams's recorded comedy specials typically take place in cities with significant African American populations and significance in African American history, such as Williams's hometown of Cincinnati, just after the police shooting of a nineteen-year-old unarmed African American man (*Katt Williams Live*, 2006); Atlanta (*The Pimp Chronicles*, *Pt. 1*, 2006); Chicago (*American Hustle*, 2007); and Los Angeles (*Kattpacalypse*, 2012).

14 Coincidentally, the song prominently features a sample from Willie Hutch's "I Choose You," which appears on the soundtrack for *The Mack*.

15 Williams's use of the word "nigga" implies black fellowship and functions differently from the pejorative "nigger."

16 Later, he relays that he asked Flav whether or not he cares about what the racist jokes indicate about how people perceive Flav, to which Flav responds (according to Williams), "I don't give a fuck what they think. They got to pay me, boyyyy!"

17 See, for example, the listing for the doll on Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/dp/B018DWZ6AU.

18 Many thanks to Kyra Hunting for alerting me to the existence of GoldieBlox's Movie Machine app.

19 Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other,'" in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 2003), 274.

20 Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 276.

21 Hall, "Spectacle of the 'Other,'" 274.

22 Here, I use the dictionary definition of the word "negative" taken from http://dictionary.reference.com.

23 Most of this "unladylike" behavior comes in the form of physical aggression and sexual promiscuity, a topic that I explore in depth in chapter 4.

24 Kristen J. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood," *Camera Obscura* 30, no. 1 (2015): 129–153.

25 Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram, "The Sentence in African American Vernacular English," in *African-American English: Structure, History, and Use*, ed. Salikoko S. Mufwene, John R. Rickford, Guy Bailey, and John Baugh (New York: Routledge, 1998), 17.

26 Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 128–131.

27 Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 8–9.

28 Chude-Sokei, *Last "Darky."*

29 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 3.

30 Here, I mobilize Matthew Tinkcom's argument that camp is queer labor whose work is disguised as play. Matthew Tinkcom, *Working Like a Homosexual: Camp, Capital, Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), Kindle edition.

31 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 3.

32 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxi.

33 Crunk Feminist Collective, "Disrespectability Politics: On Jay-Z's Bitch, Beyonce's 'Fly' Ass, and Black Girl Blue," *Crunk Feminist Collective*, January 19, 2012, http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2012/01/19/disrespectability-politics-on-jay-zs-bitch-beyonces-fly-ass-and-black-girl-blue/.

34 "Pharrell Williams," *Oprah Prime*, OWN, April 13, 2014.

35 Fredrick C. Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," *Dissent* (Winter 2014), http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-rise-of-respectability-politics.

36 Willa Paskin, "Shonda Rhimes: 'Calling a Show a "Guilty Pleasure"—It's Like Saying It's a Piece of Crap,'" *Salon*, February 10, 2013, http://www.salon.com/2013/02/10/shonda_rhimes_calling_a_show_a_guilty_pleasure_%E2%80%94_it%E2%80%99s_like_saying_its_a_piece_of_crap/; "Remarks by the President at the National Urban League Convention," White House, July 25, 2012, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/07/25/remarks-president-national-urban-league-convention.

37 Jeffrey Sconce, "Introduction," in *Sleaze Artists: Cinema at the Margins of Taste, Style, and Politics*, ed. Jeffrey Sconce (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.
38 Richard Wright, "Between Laughter and Tears," *New Masses*, October 5, 1937, 25.
39 Carla Kaplan, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 6.
40 Van Peebles has claimed in various publications that *Shaft* was a remake of his own *Sweetback*, with the more radical elements removed in favor of making the film marketable to white audiences. Given the amount of time that it took to shoot, cut, and distribute *Shaft*, it is unclear whether Van Peebles's claims are entirely accurate. However, as Jon Hartmann argues, "Sweetback's success at splitting off a Black and youth audience from the proto-typical cinematic spectator likely accelerated the marketing of American movies to Americans of African descent and gave indirect impetus to the movies' targeting of other minority groups." Jon Hartmann, "The Trope of Blaxploitation in Critical Responses to 'Sweetback,'" *Film History* 6, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 391.
41 "Tyler Perry to Spike Lee: 'Go Straight to Hell,'" *Huffington Post*, April 20, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/04/20/tyler-perry-spike-lee-go-to-hell_n_851344.html.
42 Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos 'n' Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991).
43 Ethel Waters, Louise Beavers, and Hattie McDaniel played Beulah over the course of the series.
44 "'Julia': Television Network Introduces First Black Family Series," *Ebony*, November 1968, 56.
45 Bob Lucas, "A 'Salt Pork and Collard Greens' TV Show," *Ebony*, June 1974, 50.
46 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 80.
47 "Bill Cosby Returns to TV in Family Series," *Jet*, August 13, 1984, 57.
48 Sergio Mims, "Star Jones Calls for Boycott of 'Basketball Wives' and Other Reality Shows," *Shadow and Act*, April 27, 2012, http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/star-jones-calls-for-boycott-of-basketball-wives-and-other-reality-shows.
49 Liane Membis, "It's Time to Bury the Ratchet," *Clutch Magazine*, December 2012, http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/12/its-time-to-bury-the-ratchet/.
50 Joshua Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
51 Alex Abad-Santos, "The Only Gay Story Hollywood Is Telling Is One That Belongs to White Men," *Vox*, November 1, 2014, http://www.vox.com/2014/7/7/5860980/the-only-gay-story-hollywood-is-telling-is-one-that-belongs-to-white.
52 Gamson, *Freaks Talk Back*; Laura Grindstaff, *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Eric Schaeffer, *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).
53 Sconce, "Introduction," 4.
54 Phillip Brian Harper, "The Evidence of Felt Intuition: Minority Evidence, Everyday Life, and Critical Speculative Knowledge," in *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 106–123.

55 Pauline Kael, "Trash, Art, and the Movies," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1969.

56 Bourdieu, *Distinction*; Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (New York: Classic Books America, 2009); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

57 Jeffrey Sconce, "'Trashing' the Academy: Taste, Excess, and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 371–393.

58 I am indebted to Kristen Warner for the very enlightening Facebook discussion that she prompted on the subject of what constitutes a black cult film. As posters offered their suggestions, it became clear that we were simply listing every black film that we could think of that had gained some modicum of fame since its release. This led to the natural question "How do we define a black cult film?" We determined that cult status can only exist in relation to a widely accepted definition of high/low culture, which itself implies an area where "high" culture receives widespread validation from the society at large. The casual conclusion that we reached is that barely any black films have achieved this status, thus rendering the distinction, and hence the designation of "cult" status, effectively moot.

59 Gene Demby, "*All My Babies' Mamas* Won't Be Happening, But What If It Had?," NPR, January 17, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2013/01/16/169535025/all-my-babies-mamas-wont-be-happening-but-what-if-it-had.

60 Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); L. Williams, *Playing the Race Card*.

61 Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of African Americans in American Films*, 4th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2001), 15, 102–103.

62 Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Gina Dent and Michele Wallace (New York: New Press, 1998), 28.

63 There are several examples of how the film continues to circulate in black popular culture. For instance, in 1998, a decade after the release of *Coming to America*, the rapper Busta Rhymes re-created the film in the music video for his song "Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See." In 2010, a black cultural website called "The Hillman Alumni Association" (for the fictitious historically black college on the television programs *The Cosby Show* and *A Different World*) ranked *Coming to America* #2 on its list of "Movies Every Bougie Black Person Should Have Seen."

64 Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 338.

65 Racquel Gates, "Bringing the Black: Eddie Murphy and African American Humor on *Saturday Night Live*," in *Saturday Night Live and American TV*, ed. Ron Becker, Nick Marx, and Matt Sienkiewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 151–172.