

SEMANTICS OF THE RACED BODY IN ROMANTIC COMEDIES

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Низька оцінка з боку критиків жанру романтичної комедії сучасного кіно зумовлена низкою типізованих факторів і не в змозі адекватно визнати кількість значущих якостей у рамках питань цього жанру. Афро-американський склад акторів порушує конвенції романтичної комедії, і, безумовно, романтичні комедії з афро-американською трупною істотою і фундаментально відрізняються в семантичному аспекті від тих, у яких зайняті білошкірі актори. Ідеологія гіпер-сексуальності та візуальних історій комедії не спонукають творців романтичної комедії створювати ролі, де афро-американські символи бажають, знаходять і прагнуть ідеалізованої любові.

Ключові слова: романтична комедія, жанр, чорношкірі актори, фільми, в яких заняті тільки білошкірі актори, стереотипи, популярна культура, режисер, візуальні засоби інформації, популярні коміки.

Низкая оценка со стороны критиков жанра романтической комедии современного кино обусловлена рядом типизированных факторов и не в состоянии адекватно признать число значимых качеств в рамках вопросов этого жанра. Афро-американский состав актеров нарушает конвенции романтической комедии, и, очевидно, что романтические комедии с афро-американской труппой существенно и фундаментально отличаются в семантическом аспекте от тех, в которых заняты белокожие актеры. Идеология гипер-сексуальности и визуальных историй комедии не побуждают создателей романтической комедии создавать роли, где афро-американские символы желают, находят и стремятся к идеализированной любви.

Ключевые слова: романтическая комедия, жанр, чернокожие актеры, фильмы, в которых заняты только белокожие актеры, стереотипы, популярная культура, режиссёр, визуальные средства информации, популярные комики.

The low critical esteem that typically meets the rom-com in contemporary cinema derives from a number of arenas which might itself be described as “well-worn”, fails to recognise adequately a number of significant qualities within the issues raised by the genre. Black bodies disrupt romantic comedy conventions and it is evident that rom-coms with African-American casts consistently differ semantically in fundamental and significant ways from those with Caucasian casts. Ideologies of hyper-sexuality and visual histories of comedy continue to curtail the producers of romantic comedies from creating roles where African-American characters desire, find and pursue idealised love.

Keywords: rom-com, genre, black bodies, white cast films, stereotype, popular culture, filmmaker, visual media, established comedians.

While rom-coms in recent years have often struggled to be taken seriously – to win awards or critical enthusiasm or academic attention – they have remained beloved of fans and a virtually constant presence in popular cinema in some shape or form since the 1930s.

The low critical esteem that typically meets the rom-com in contemporary cinema derives from a number of arenas.

First, its audience is enduringly presumed to be predominantly female and ‘chick flicks’ in all their incarnations are frequently critically constructed as inherently trite or lightweight.

Second, romantic fiction generally is thought to be essentially calculating in its execution, cynically manipulating an emotional and sentimental response from the viewer [witness the merciless teasing that Suzy (Rita Wilson) endures in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) from Sam (Tom Hanks) and Greg (Victor Garber) when she tearfully describes her affection for *An Affair To Remember* (1957)].

Furthermore, the genre is widely depicted as slavishly formulaic, adhering to well-worn and obvious conventions (boy meets girl; boy and girl face obstacles to their romantic union; boy and girl conquer obstacles to find true love).

Finally, the perception of comedy per se as inherently frivolous and anti-intellectual has resulted in its critical and cultural marginalisation, where it is presumed that eliciting laughs from the audience is antithetical to 'serious' reflection.

This popular account of the rom-com, which, like the critique it formulates, might itself be described as "well-worn", fails to recognise adequately a number of significant qualities within the issues raised by the genre. First, it is important both to acknowledge and seek to understand how the genre facilitates the kind of powerful emotional and personal investment often described by viewers such as "suze 12". Second, the presumption that rom-coms constitute a self-evident category belies the fact that this is an often contested and somewhat elusive "genre", marked by numerous different inflections rather than clearly defined generic boundaries. Third, and linked to this, while the rom-com frequently maintains certain of its traditions and conventions it is nevertheless a *living* genre. While many other genres, such as the Western and horror, have been widely explored with a recognition of their capacity to evolve, the contemporary rom-com has less often been understood as one that continues to negotiate and respond dynamically to the issues and preoccupations of its time.

Hollywood rom-coms in particular have enjoyed a massive revival since the 1990s, with *When Harry Met Sally* in 1989 marking a pivotal moment in the renewed visibility of the genre. The rom-com has enjoyed such momentous box-office success of late that it has become a parody-able commodity, demonstrating the manner in which its conventions are part of a shared cultural landscape.

From the emergence of rom-coms "for boys" such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), to different national inflections beyond Hollywood, to the growing prominence of queer or gay romances in both popular and independent cinema and the figure of the older woman as a viable romantic heroine in *Something's Gotta Give* (2003), the romantic comedy continues to regenerate.

In his 2002 book *Romantic vs Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, Wes Gehring examines the "seriousness" of romance in romantic comedies. He argues that while rom-coms have comedic moments, these films are nevertheless serious about the idea of love and finding one's soul-mate [7, p. 67]. As an example of a serious romantic moment, one might look to the exchange in *You've Got Mail* (1998) when Nelson Fox (Dabney Coleman) is talking with his son Joe (Tom Hanks) about relationships. Nelson has just ended one relationship and is calculating how quickly he can get into another. He tells his son: "I just have to meet someone new, that's all. That's the easy part." Joe sarcastically replies: "Oh right, yeah, it's a snap to find the one single person in the world who fills your heart with joy." Nelson laughs as he says: "Well, don't be ridiculous. Have I ever been with anybody who fit that description? Have you'", underlining how despite the genre's reputation for lightness, the search for a soul-mate can be heart breaking, frustrating, and sometimes elusive. In the next scene, Joe is going to see Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) with a bouquet of daisies, her favourite flower. It is evident that he has finally come to the realisation that Kathleen is the one single person in the world who fills his heart with joy. Interestingly, these serious romantic moments are missing in most Black romantic comedy films, demonstrating how Gehring's account does not recognise how inconsistencies exist across the genre on this matter.

Black bodies disrupt romantic comedy conventions and since the mid-1980s it is evident that rom-coms with African-American casts consistently differ in fundamental and significant ways from those with Caucasian casts. Analysis of recent Black cast rom-coms reveals that the highly sexualised and comical meanings placed on African-American bodies in the context of the United States, and their historical representation in Hollywood cinema, inhibit filmmakers from creating

roles where Black characters are romantic and take romance seriously. Black cast films do not adhere to many of the conventions that audiences have come to expect of the genre, such as the “meet-cute” and the overcoming of a series of obstacles that enables the couple to unite at the end [14, p. 287]. Even a cursory look at reviews from sources such as the *New York Times*, *Variety*, studio websites and the Internet Movie Database [www.imdb.com], reveals variance regarding how African-American films are defined and positioned within the category of romantic comedy.

One of the reasons why it is difficult to label these films is that when most films with Black casts are distributed the industry and critics alike typically focus on the race of the characters, and perhaps the location if they are situated in urban environments, as a means of defining them. Films with African Americans that are not gangster or “hood films” are difficult to categorise because Black films are often viewed as a genre unto themselves [4]. For example, *The Best Man* (1999) is labelled as a rom-com by film critics such as Janet Maslin and Wesley Morris, a comedy / drama on IMDb, and a romance by the film’s distributors on the Universal Studios website. Meanwhile in a DVD commentary its director, Malcolm D. Lee, describes the film as being an “ensemble film” that was inspired by movies like *The Big Chill* (1983), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), and *Diner* (1982).

Though genre categorisation can be a problem for African-American rom-coms, it is sometimes a problem for white cast films as well. *Jerry Maguire* (1996), which might be considered a dramatic film that contains a romance narrative, is often described by critics and theorists as a rom-com. Interestingly, for white cast films, categories arguably become more obscured when the protagonist is male. When the protagonist is a woman and is played by a female star typically associated with the genre (such as Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, Sandra Bullock or Drew Barrymore), the category is in less flux. We will take the term “Black romantic comedy” to mean films with predominantly African-American casts. Though this definition can be contested because the writers and directors of these “Black” films may not be of African descent, using this criterion is consistent with scholars such as Bogle [1], Cripps [4], and Guerrero [8].

At present there has been relatively little theoretical or academic work performed on contemporary rom-coms. Theorists such as Cavell [3], Harvey [9], Byrge [2], Gehring [7] and Lent [13] focus on films produced in the 1930s and 1940s. Additionally, as scholar Mark Reid notes, most genre studies do not engage with the topic of race [15, p. 472]. Yet African-American bodies are understood in very specific ways in the USA both culturally and in film and television. Longstanding stereotypes of Blacks in visual culture depict them as having diminished intellectual capacity and being natural musicians and comedians. Thus the strong historical emphasis on comedy in Black representation is consistent with images still circulating in popular culture. Some of the most popular African-American actors in early film were Stepin Fetchit and Willie Best, both of whom usually portrayed Black men as mentally challenged, lazy and constantly frightened. Typically Fetchit and Best were objects of derision and side-kicks to white male stars like Will Rogers [5]. Even today, many popular and noted African-American male actors started in comedy – for example, Eddie Murphy, Will Smith, Martin Lawrence and Jamie Foxx. While these comedians are stars in their own right and not side-kicks, many of their roles have been in comedies. This limited view of Black actors and actresses as comic relief has its history in pre-filmic venues such as minstrelsy and vaudeville. Unfortunately, understanding African-American performers in this fashion circumscribes what roles they play and how they are perceived by wider culture. Consequently, it also makes it difficult for filmmakers, both Black and white, to conceive and portray African Americans in romantic situations.

In addition to being comedically overdetermined, Blacks are also perceived as being hypersexual [10, p. 51-6; 12]. This belief in African-American exaggerated sexuality has its roots in the racist ideologies that justified slavery. Though slavery officially ended in the United States

in 1863, the racial ideologies that perceived Black men as physically and sexually threatening and Black women as sexual temptresses continues to circulate and maintain racial hierarchies. Hollywood, which to some degree reflects the USA culturally, has continued this mythology in its portrayals of Blacks from the inception of cinema to the present day, while other visual media, including television and video games, also continue to circulate sexual and violent images of African Americans. These visual and cultural histories of Black bodies naturalise comedic or sexual representations of African-American characters, with the result that they are not permitted to exercise the full range of humanity that is available to their white counterparts. Since Blacks generally play static stereotypes, their characters are typically denied narrative arcs where they could be seen to be learning from previous mistakes or making sacrifices for individual or collective good.

Let's critically compare the content of Black and white romantic comedies and analyse two films, *Booby Call* (1997) and *Two Can Play That Game* (2001) to this end. *Two Can Play That Game* is a battle of the sexes rom-com that is reminiscent of screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s. *Booby Call* is representative of comedian comedy films such as *The Wedding Singer* (1998), *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and *Wedding Crashers* (2005), in which the protagonists are played by established comedians, or what some scholars refer to as "romantic comedies for boys" [11, p. 108]. With a dearth of theoretical frameworks examining either contemporary rom-coms or the impact of race on the genre, it is necessary to turn to texts that examine issues of race and representation. Using Richard Dyer [6] and Ed Guerrero [8], we will elucidate how race disrupts the rom-com structure. Dyer notes that, power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted in commonsense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. [6, p. 45]

This normalcy manifests itself in the area of representation in that "being white is coterminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity" [6, p. 47]. For example, films with white actors are thought to be universal narratives whereas films with people of African or Asian descent or Latinos/as are read as "Black", "Asian" or "Latino" films. Further complicating the notion that whiteness has an "infinite variety" is the fact that stereotypes of ethnic others are malleable; they "are seldom found in a pure form and this is part of the process by which they are naturalised, kept alive" [6, p. 47]. Hence, the racial ideology of white supremacy as described by Dyer is used as a particular strategy to maintain racial hierarchies in entertainment and other visual venues.

Examining how racial ideologies operate in popular culture is essential in seeking to address or eradicate stereotypes that limit opportunities for actors and actresses of colour and to eliminate racial falsehoods that circulate in broader society. Guerrero's work is significant to our analysis because he deconstructs how the ideology of white supremacy affects African Americans on macro and micro levels in film. The subtlety of the hegemonic power of whiteness not only affects who plays what role in a film but also how different racial groups view one another and themselves onscreen and in the real world. Hegemonic whiteness also regulates how roles are played when bodies are not the perceived white norm. In rom-coms specifically, racial bias closes off the possibility of most African-American characters being able to take romance seriously.

One example of how characters function according to the race of the actor is the "rake" male lead in romantic comedies. Recurrently, in white rom-coms, this male lead is an incorrigible and lecherous individual, who is initially the antithesis of the male ideal in this genre. However, the rake eventually comes to the realisation that he has met his soul-mate and changes character. Moreover, this character usually makes sacrifices to demonstrate his love to the heroine. However, in African-American rom-coms the male lead is rarely put in a situation where he has to make a noble sacrifice or change his behaviour in order to win the love of his life, thus proving his integrity and winning classical heroic status.

The narrative structure of the rom-com is broadly: boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. This modality has been a staple of Hollywood film from the time the genre first made its mark in the mid-1930s in the form of screwball films. Though the genre has altered over time with various cycles or sub-genres [screwball, sex comedy, nervous comedy and new romance], Jeffers McDonald argues that since the late 1980s the neo-traditional romantic comedy has been the most dominant cycle produced in Hollywood [11, p. 86]. In these neo-traditional rom-coms, the romance and struggle (the “boy meets, loses, [and] regains [the] girl”) of the heterosexual couple has returned as the focus. Typically these rom-coms close with the hero and heroine in an embrace and kissing, often with the implication that they will legitimise this relationship with marriage. These romantic norms are so intrinsic to these comedies that it is assumed they operate consistently, regardless of the cast. Surprisingly, though, this “boy meets, loses and regains girl” structure is often not in operation in films with Black casts. In rom-coms with African Americans since the late 1980s, the leads usually either already know one another as a romantic couple - thus, there is no meet-cute or romantic longing or wooing that is an important element of this genre - or the comedic aspects of the film are so strong that the romance is marginalised.

Mark Brown’s *Two Can Play That Game* is the story of Shante Smith (Vivica Fox), a successful senior advertising executive and self-appointed relationship expert. Shante is constantly giving advice to her girlfriends about how to control their undisciplined and sometimes philandering boyfriends. While having dinner with her girlfriends, Shante discovers her boyfriend, Keith Fenton (Morris Chestnut), has violated one of her relationship rules. Keith and Shante were supposed to have dinner that evening but he had to cancel because he was working late, which according to Shante is the number one excuse for a cheating boyfriend. Keith actually was working late with an attractive female colleague and they went to dinner at a place where Keith and Shante often frequent. Discovering Keith on the dance floor with another woman drives Shante to get Keith back in line by punishing him for his error.

The film’s leads, Fox and Chestnut, play straight woman and man to their best friends, who are played by well-established comedians. Wendy Raquel Robinson, who plays Karen, is known to audiences for her comedic turns as a series regular on *The Steve Harvey Show*, a situation comedy that ran on the WB from 1997 to 2002. Tamala Jones, who plays Tracey, is known for her comic skills on television shows like *For Your Love*, a situation comedy that ran on the WB from 1998 to 2002 and films such as *Booty Call* and *The Wood* (1999). Mo’Nique, who plays Diedre, is a stand-up comedian also known for her role as Nikki Parker on the UPN situation comedy *The Parkers* (1999-2004). And Chestnut’s Keith Fenton has one buddy, Tony, portrayed by Anthony Anderson, who is known for his comedic work in films such as *Big Momma’s House* (2000) and *Romeo Must Die* (2000). Thus it is not surprising that the comedic interactions between the leads and their friends constitute some of the film’s most memorable moments. However, the film does not provide much romance between the leads.

When the audience first sees Keith and Shante together, she has come by his office for a visit. In the previous scenes, Shante has explained the man problems of her girlfriends. As she goes to greet Keith, she tells the audience: “*I don’t have a problem with my man. He behaves very well.*” It soon becomes apparent that the two are aroused by one another as they quickly retreat to his office for sex. These scenes of Shante and Keith’s interaction with one another are played farcically and this incident continues the outlandish tone of the film. Unlike most couples in recent romantic comedies, particularly neo-traditional rom-coms, the pair have an active sex life and it appears in this film that sex is used as a substitution for romance and love. For example, after their afternoon tryst, Tony comes into Keith’s office to tease him about what just happened. Keith is gentlemanly enough not to state what actually occurred in the office but simply states that “*I will say this, there is nothing that you or anybody can ever say to make me leave that woman, man.*” It is difficult

at this point in the film to discern whether this post-coital declaration is indicative of Keith's true feelings for Shante or merely a reaction to the moment. His friend Tony further undermines any romantic implications in his declaration. When Tony enters Keith's office he starts sniffing the air as if he can smell the sex. He continues to ask Keith if he and Shante had sex using the vernacular, "Did you hit it?" and ends his banter by asking his friend if he smacked Shante's bottom. These remarks add to the heightened sense of comedy and help erase the potential for romance in the scene.

A brief romantic moment does occur when Shante recalls how she met Keith. She explains through a flashback sequence that she was out at a nightclub with her girlfriends; "There were lots of good-looking men in the place. Then he looked at me and for a second everyone else in the place disappeared. He was fine but there was something else about him, you know, that something that makes your head light and your stomach tight." Thus in their first meeting, Shante and Keith do experience an attraction at first sight and such moments are a cornerstone of the genre. After their good-natured banter, the scene returns to the present. For the remainder of the film, the focus is on Shante's manipulating and punishing Keith, and romantic moments or the subject of love are not addressed again until the film's conclusion.

Though the film does have a battle of the sexes element that is common in screwball comedies, it is difficult to place the film in this category. Keith and Shante are an established couple but they are not married. If they had been, and had they harboured deep resentment for one another, the film might perhaps have borne comparison to classic "comedies of remarriage" [3] such as *The Awful Truth* (1937) or *The Philadelphia Story* [1940]. While Keith and Shante are together at the close of the film, their not being married distinguishes them from these past screwball films. Moreover, Keith and Shante's reconciliation to mere couple status even falls short of more recent films considered screwball or having screwball elements such as *Runaway Bride* (1999) where the lead couple marry or become a committed unmarried couple as in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*. There is the possibility that Keith and Shante's relationship at the close of the film may be similar to Charles (Hugh Grant) and Carrie's (Andie MacDowell), but neither Keith nor Shante make the kind of grand romantic gesture that we see in *Four Weddings*. Though Keith does profess his love for Shante and forgives her for her antics, this claim is slightly jarring because love has not been discussed in the rest of the film. The audience does not really know what it is that make Keith and Shante a special couple. In contrast, at the close of *Four Weddings* Charles asks Carrie "[do] you think not being married to me might maybe be something you could consider doing for the rest of your life?", to which Carrie responds, "I do." Hence, though the two will not marry, he has proposed, she has accepted and they will live "happily ever after" as most rom-com couples do.

Booty Call shares a structural similarity with *Two Can Play That Game*, in that there is an over-emphasis on the comedy at the expense of romance. The film follows a date with two friends, Bunz (Jamie Foxx) and Rushon (Tommy Davidson), and their companions, Lysterine (Vivica Fox) and Nikki (Tamala Jones). Rushon and Nikki, the best friends of Bunz and Lysterine respectively, have been dating for seven weeks. As we meet the characters, Rushon is looking forward to consummating his relationship with Nikki later that evening. Though Rushon does get his wish at the close of the film, there are several obstacles to fulfilling his desire. For example, Nikki is very conscious of sexually transmitted diseases and insists on using condoms. When Rushon gets one, it slips from his hands and Nikki's dog gets it. Rushon and Bunz, who is about to have sex with Lysterine, then have to go to the store to get condoms and saran wrap (cling film). Neither Bunz nor Rushon know how to apply it properly, instigating a lengthy and farcical sequence in which Rushon starts wrapping his head with the saran wrap. The physical and visual humour of this scene is similar to other over-the-top scenes throughout the film. Based on their earlier conversations, the audience is aware that Bunz and Rushon are not the most intelligent men, though they believe themselves to be hip and cool. This scene is similar to other slapstick performances in comedian romantic

comedies, such as Ben Stiller as Ted Stroehmann in *There's Something About Mary*. However, unlike Ted, who throughout the film states his wish to marry and be in love, neither Bunz nor Rushon demonstrate a serious desire for love and marriage and seem merely to be looking for sex, with Rushon willing to maintain but not progress to a deeper commitment in his relationship with Nikki. As is the case with Keith and Shante in *Two Can Play That Game*, Rushon and Nikki seldom have memorable tender moments. Most of their behaviour is comedic or provocative in order to reach their mutual goal of seduction. Though the film ends with Rushon and Nikki finally having sex, it is not clear whether either have intentions or desires for one another beyond sex. The stability of their relationship also seems uncertain, given that their best friends are serial monogamists, constantly looking for new partners.

Just as Black comic stereotypes prevent Black male characters from gaining heroic status, African-American female characters are denied being the heroine. In rom-coms, Black female protagonists are rarely shown thinking about or articulating the qualities of their ideal mate. Furthermore, it is uncommon to see Black women being emotionally moved by the realisation of being in love. Even the manipulating Andie Anderson (Kate Hudson) from *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003) has moments in that film where she realises she is falling in love with her 'pawn', Ben Berry (Matthew McConaughey). In this film both Andie and Ben have bet others that they can either lose a man, or make a woman fall in love, in ten days. Nevertheless, despite her hidden agenda, Andie is genuinely touched when Ben brings her to meet his family and she finds out she is the only woman he has introduced to them. Moreover, after their idyllic day together, Andie and Ben have sex for the first time thus signifying sex as the climactic culmination of romance.

In contrast, in Black rom-coms attraction between men and women is almost always immediately acted upon in a physical manner. Shante and Keith sleep together on their first date, as do Bunz and Lysterine. While this inability to portray African-American characters as romantic is consistent with the Black stereotypes outlined here, it also perpetuates perceived differences between African Americans and Caucasian Americans. One of the problematic ramifications of these (and indeed of any) representations is how they might be understood as being not merely portrayals but as constituting 'reality'. Though many US audiences consider themselves sophisticated media viewers and consumers, many still nevertheless learn about ethnic and racial communities beyond their own from the media.

While white rom-coms do, of course, have comedic elements, their romance nevertheless stays central to the plot. For example, in *Never Been Kissed* (1999), the protagonist, Josie Geller (Drew Barrymore) is on her first assignment as an undercover reporter in a Chicago area high school. Unfortunately, going back to high school causes Josie to relive the humiliations of her past. However, her interactions with teacher Sam Coulson (Michael Vartan) cue the audience that despite the obstacles created by these other storylines the couple will end up together. In these films, comic misunderstandings abound but the romantic narrative line always stays prominent. Dyer's concept of whiteness and its invisibility or naturalness [6] accounts for why the romantic elements are not lost in white rom-coms. Since white bodies do not carry the racial meaning that other "raced" bodies do, Caucasian bodies do not disrupt the genre format and the narrative focus remains on romance. In contrast, Black characters are denied the kind of "mature" relationship that the culture reveres and thus the access such relationships bring to achieving heroic or "human" status.

Though the characters in white films exhibit sexual desire too, for them this longing is synonymous with wanting a committed relationship, one that often leads to marriage but is at the very least signalled as monogamous. Some of these white films cast the lead male as so desiring of a real relationship that he is willing to make great sacrifices, demonstrating that this must truly be love. For example, Tad Hamilton (Josh Duhamel), the famous and popular movie star in *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton!* (2004) leaves Los Angeles in order to pursue a relationship with Rosalee

Futch (Kate Bosworth), the woman from West Virginia who won the date with him. Prior to his date with Rosalee, Tad dated and slept with many women and embodied the lifestyle of a handsome single male movie star. Being exposed to a pretty woman with values, quite at odds with the shallow people in Tad's world, causes Tad to re-evaluate his life as a famous celebrity. He wants some of Rosalee's "goodness to rub off on him" and even buys a farm in her small rural town in West Virginia so he can get to know her better. When the movie role he covets is given to him, Tad is willing to refuse the job to remain with Rosalee. These gestures – leaving Hollywood, coming to West Virginia and buying a home there – along with his wooing Rosalee, have made Tad's manager and agent alarmed at his seemingly irrational behaviour. While Tad may not have completely reformed from his womanising ways, his actions (and the reactions of those close to him) are cues to the audience that this may be true love for him; and, by extension, that he has the capacity to grow, mature and be transformed by love.

Similarly, in *Two Weeks Notice* (2002) for most of the film spoiled millionaire George Wade (Hugh Grant) is self-centred as well as morally questionable in his dealings with women. As the film closes, he finally comes to the epiphany that he is in love with long-time associate and lawyer, Lucy Kelson (Sandra Bullock). In order to pursue this relationship, George goes to Lucy's office, admits his mistakes and professes his love for her. Realising that Lucy is his soul-mate means George must relinquish his position in his family's company and stand up to the unethical business tactics of his mercenary brother. Since George has been a womaniser before, acknowledging his errors and seeking Lucy out in order to state his love for her are all demonstrations of the authenticity of his love; and of how this newfound capacity to love selflessly has transformed him, like Tad Hamilton, into a "better" man.

Crucially, then, the "seriousness" eventually reached by these white male protagonists stands in contrast to the actions of their Black male counterparts. Ironically, Tad and George are not stellar examples of men. Both have been serious serial monogamists or players like Bunz. In spite of this flaw, they are nevertheless allowed to reform and win the affection of the heroine (even if only temporarily in Tad's case). However, this should not be surprising considering the operation of whiteness and the consistency of Black stereotypes detailed above. Whiteness enables rogue white males to always have the potential to change and grow, and thus, to take up the mantle of classical hero. In contrast, the shadow of the tropes of Black foolishness and sexual excess are so powerful that the African-American male protagonist is not given the opportunity to evolve or be reflective; to re-evaluate his life, realise he has found his match and selflessly pursue her regardless of the consequences.

Black female characters are also not given the humanity and depth of the roles played by their white counterparts. In rom-coms this manifests itself as Black women not being given the opportunity to idealise love and romance. Hence, though they may be financially successful like Shante and her friend Karen, they are usually not permitted to be vulnerable in ways that define white femininity. As Keith and Shante reconcile at the close of the film, she does not overtly apologise for her behaviour.

Throughout the film, Shante has shown she can be and is an independent woman. Hence, the audience did not see Shante as vulnerable; she did not even confide in her girlfriends regarding her concerns about Keith. We do not mean to suggest here that representations of Black femininity need to imitate those of white femininity, which has its own set of representational problems. Rather, what we are stating is that hegemonic notions of African-American women normally portray them as over-sexualised and "strong" to the point of isolation. Just as Black men need to be given the chance to be fully human and demonstrate a range of emotion, Black women need similar opportunities.

What this series of representations demonstrates is that the stereotypical straitjackets of racial hegemony continue to inhibit how African-American characters are portrayed in film and television. This analysis has shown how Black bodies in rom-coms disrupt genre conventions. Ideologies

of hyper-sexuality and visual histories of comedy continue to curtail the producers of romantic comedies from creating roles where African-American characters desire, find and pursue idealised love. While it can be argued that the love presented in neo-traditional rom-coms of the past two decades is a fairytale that is not realistic, it is also culturally revered, an aspiration many hope to achieve. If this dream is only offered onscreen to those who are white - and most of the world's population is not white - this dream evidently needs to be expanded.

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