

Review of Racquel Gates' *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture*

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Disparaging portrayals of African Americans in American media outlets have long been a site of much critique and protest. In *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (2018), Racquel Gates critically analyzes the ways in which African Americans potentially benefit in terms of economic, political, and social gains as a result of these negative images. In exploring the negative African-American images that proliferate contemporary media representations, Gates establishes a theoretical framework to approach and study such images, and calls for a critical analysis of their use. She references films like *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *Coming to America* (1988), and *New Jack City* (1991); stars like Flavor Flav, Halle Berry, and Katt Williams; and, current reality television shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2012–present), *Basketball Wives* (2010–present), and *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta* (2012–present). Gates proposes that negative images are able to be used to confront issues that impact the black community and American society in ways that more positive images cannot.

Gates insists that shows like *Real Housewives of Atlanta* – though considered by many as problematic for their depiction of black women – utilize negative images to challenge the limits of black respectability politics. These black respectability politics encompass what we typically deem as acceptable representations, especially in the context of uplifting African Americans within the larger society of the United States. This reviewer found Gates' *Double Negative* to be a useful intervention that successfully explores the positive impacts of negative images, particularly those used in reality television.

In establishing her theoretical framework, Gates categorizes negativity into five distinct types: formal, relational or comparative, circumstantial, strategic, and false. By grouping negative images this way, Gates can explore each in great detail. Subsequently, she offers suggestions regarding how such negatively perceived images may, unexpectedly, result in positive outcomes. For example, in her work on strategic negativity, Gates theorizes that the black women on the reality television show *Real Housewives of Atlanta* embrace the negativity associated with “ghetto” or “ratchet” characteristics to achieve personal and professional agency. Gates highlights how these women often use negative behaviors to brand themselves and even market products, in order to further their own career and personal objectives. In fact, Gates asserts, “Beyond the coded forms of labor that occur on the show, reality television also offers an excellent platform for cast members to launch and promote their own products and business ventures” (156). She reports that the women on *The Real Housewives*, *Basketball Wives*, *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta*, and many other reality television shows, “pitch a wide variety of merchandise including T-shirts, lingerie, lip gloss, hair extensions, and even specialty cognac” (156). She goes on to highlight how stars without products instead brand themselves for financial and employment gain:

Leakes has managed to translate her larger-than-life persona and penchant for coming up with memorable catchphrases into a legitimate career beyond Housewives....Beyond the

world of reality television, Leakes caught the attention of the television producer Ryan Murphy, who first cast her as the recurring character Roz Washington on his popular musical dramedy *Glee* (FOX), and then later as Rocky Rhoades on his sitcom *The New Normal* (NBC). When *Normal* was canceled after only a season, Leakes appeared on Broadway as the wicked stepmother in a production of *Cinderella* and then as Mama Morton in *Chicago*. In addition, Leakes has cohosted entertainment programs like *The View*, *Live with Kelly and Michael*, and *Fashion Police*, has made guest appearances on a variety of sitcoms, talk shows, and other TV programs, including *The Real Husbands of Hollywood*, *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, and the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*; and toured the country in a one-woman standup show (157–58).

Accordingly, Gates proposes, the women deliberately perpetuate attitudes, behaviors, and expressions that many consider to be negative, in order to negotiate economic and political advancement within the constrained system of reality television. For example, while many criticized women like Nene Leakes for the considerable degree to which she perpetuated these types of negative images, by neck-rolling and speaking African-American Vernacular English, among other behaviors, she was able to successfully set herself apart from other cast members, thereby positioning herself for a greater degree of financial success.

As Gates emphasizes, reality television has largely been excluded from academic journals, which limits critical scholarship on the genre and its potential benefits. When important discussions do arise in the public sphere, scholarly critiques often focus on deconstructing the negative imagery that reality television promotes. This rhetoric encompasses sexism, homophobia, and racism. Such rhetoric also dismisses the fact that this genre is capable of tackling germane social issues. She goes on to argue that such dismissals are, in part, what fuels the women's ability to strategically highlight topics that those deemed as decorous individuals fail to address, because reality television is "a genre that truly occupies the 'gutter' within qualitative assessments of the media landscape" (145). She points out that, "Beginning in roughly 2004, Bravo and VH1, in particular, have enjoyed a ratings bonanza when they began producing content aimed at African American women audiences" (147). An additional positive outcome is that this content reaches certain demographics, and allows those who otherwise may not have a voice to engage in social discussions that are articulated in a familiar vernacular.

Double Negative skillfully investigates these and many other negative images portrayed in the modern context, making it a significant critique on contemporary black representation. This book challenges pre-existing views that consume the public discourse regarding the magnitude of negative images, and provides an alternative perspective. Gates' book is therefore a critical intervention on the proliferation of negative images, and the ways that such images can be used to make a lasting, and even positive, impact.

References

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