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Still Waiting: An analysis of the permeation of racial stereotypes in top-grossing Black Romance films from the 1960s to the 2000s

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Still Waiting:
**An analysis on the permeation of racial stereotypes in top grossing Black Romance films
from the 1960's to the 2000's**

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Table of Contents

Introduction	p. 3
Methods	p. 10
Results	p. 13
Discussion	p. 33
References	p. 39
Appendix: Plot Summaries of each film	p. 40

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INTRODUCTION

Focus of this Study

In this study, I compare how films portray relationships involving Black people, over the course of 5 decades. I do this by analyzing the characters and relationships in the top-grossing film from each decade (1960's through 2000's), that have a focus on Black love. I started this journey curious about how the silver screen portrayed how Black people loved romantically. As a person who regularly frequents my local major movie theatre, I had become tired of only seeing Black actors in comedies, Black men in drag and buddy dramas. I also grew tired of the sappy love stories featuring White protagonists and the predictable nature of their films. I set out to analyze the life of the relationship, the common interests of the characters and how characters in the film external of the relationship viewed the relationship. Though I could have done research on independent films, where I might have found the prevalence of Black characters on a more regular basis, I thought it was crucial to analyze what major studios and theatres thought was digestible to the major public.

Film is a powerful medium and acts as a wide scale social model. By researching top grossing films, I am able to analyze films not only on popularity but also on social reach, which allows me to gain perspective on what the masses have seen. In this way, I can also analyze what they have come to visualize, and in some ways internalize, in terms of their thoughts on how Black people love, who they love, and how that love might be received by a general audience.

Film as a Social Model

Much of my investigation into these films centered around the stereotypes that were recycled over and over again, in the portrayal of Black love on screen. The recycling of stereotypes, especially those based in hateful thought, in film is problematic because film acts as a social model. On a mass scale, films, especially in the case of top grossing films, show a reality or standard that influences the viewer. Entman views "...the mainstream culture as the set of schemas most widely stored in the public's minds and the core thematic frames that pervade media messages. Lacking much opportunity for repeated close contact with a wide variety of Blacks, Whites depend heavily on cultural material, especially media images, for cataloging Blacks" (2010). Ultimately, people learn from modeling, and their agency is heavily dependent on society. This is not only important because it causes discrepancies in White minds, but also in Blacks' self image as well.

People both produce and are products of these social systems that exist simultaneously. People and their ability to self reflect allows them to test the adequacy of their thoughts and actions. Self verification exists in 4 different modes. The first "enactive" verification is when a person will engage in an action or thought and then, based on the results, decide the adequacy. The second is "vicarious;" this is where people decide the correctness of their thinking based on observing others, the outcomes of their thoughts and/or actions. This process decreases the time of having to continually engage in "enactive" reflection. "Social" verification does this as well. This is where a person evaluates the correctness of their views/actions based on what others think or believe. Finally there is "logical" verification and this is when people compare

their thoughts to fallacies that they know based on prior or general knowledge. Film exists as both a “vicarious” and “social” model. The problem with this is that, when the model, in this case film, portrays an image of society of an estranged group as even more “other”, it can foster false or bizarre views of reality based on a shared belief (Bandura 2001).

A History of Black Characters, Black Love, and Black Sexuality in Film

The first Black character to grace the silver screen was Tom in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903). Tom was played by a White man in Blackface and, due to racism at the time, he would not be the last Black character played by a White actor. (Bogle, 2016) The characterizations of Blacks in film were based on popular stereotypes at the time, and emphasized the “inferiority” of Black people for the entertainment of Whites. The stereotyping of Blacks in film happened years before the release of the first full-length film, *Birth of a Nation*, which is significant in my paper and in general because it is the first advanced full length film in history.

The 1920's led to Black characters having more comedic roles, and Black actors were finally able to have a part on the silver screen. The comedic short *Our Gang* had Black child actors and perpetuated the pickaninny stereotype of Black children getting up to antics and having distinct characteristics. Towards the end of the 1920's, a remake of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with a Black actor playing Tom, got rave reviews for “authenticity.” (Bogle, 2016)

The emergence of talkies in 1927, and a need for dynamic sound in film, led to the increase of Black roles. One prominent film of the 20's was *Hearts of Dixie*, which idealized slave days and once again portrayed Blacks as content and happy in their lives of servitude. Bogle comments on how, with Whites in so much control of the film process (the writing, directing, production, staging, costume creations -- essentially every aspect of the film), Blacks had essentially become Black but in Blackface (Bogle, 2016).

Meanwhile, upset with the negative portrayals of Blacks, there was an underground movement of Black filmmakers making films targeted at Black audiences, with the mission to give Blacks more dynamic and realistic roles. These films tended to have all Black casts and were played in theatres designated for Blacks. One of the most prominent Black independent filmmakers was Oscar Micheaux, who began his work in 1918. His company released one of the first full talking Black movies, and he continued to create films for thirty years. There were some White filmmakers who were prominent in the independent film scene, however, some portrayed Blacks in a manner just as racist as Hollywood did. (Bogle, 2016).

Films in the 30's portrayed Blacks primarily as servants. One of the most popular actors as the time was Stepin Fetchit who, in his roles, was an archetype for the Coon character. For years he played this role quintessentially. After him came Bill Bojangles, who looked after Shirley Temple and acted as her “Tom.” This decade also brought *Imitation of Life* and its portrayal of the tragic mulatta, and Hattie McDaniel playing the arch Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*. No matter how talented the actors were, at the time, there was still very little opportunity for Black actors to have leading roles in major films (Bogle, 2016).

The 40's brought entertainers and a desire for songs and musical numbers. Blacks were increasingly employed to fulfill these roles and produced great stars like Hazel Scott (a musical prodigy from Trinidad), Lena Horne (a well loved medium-skinned entertainer), and the talented Nicholas Brothers (who danced throughout films for the entirety of the 40's). Toward the later half of the decade, Black characters in film went from being entertainers to being sympathetic characters after World War Two (Bogle, 2016).

In the 50's, film audiences became increasingly involved in the lives of actors. They started to support the individuals and their personal lives as much as their character portrayals. Bogle comments on how Ethel Waters embodied this idea of the strong persevering Black woman. Dorothy Dandridge was loved by all audiences -- Black and White -- for her features, but she was typecast as the tragic mulatta. Her role in *Carmen Jones* was so well received that she was the first Black woman ever to be nominated for leading role at the Oscars. Her features and talent landed her in many roles where she was sexualized on film. She played many roles where she was the female lead with White male counterparts and, though she was put in position where her sexuality was present, she was never in a position to be the romantic lead in a mixed raced cast because of her race (Bogle 2016).

The third actor who gained prominence in the 50's was Sidney Poitier. Poitier acted as a new image of a Black man in some respects, but recycled old stereotypes in others. He was refined, poised, educated and gave depth to his characters and was well loved for that by both Black and White audiences. However, he in his roles was still self sacrificing on behalf of White characters. Bogle argues that, rather than having a servant-like mentality, Poitier's characters tended to take action on what they thought was right (Bogle, 2016).

In the 60's, Sidney Poitier became even more popular and continued to get numerous roles in films. *Raisin in the Sun* was adapted into a movie which portrayed the hardships of Black life in ghettos and how society affects the Black family unit. Sidney also starred in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, which portrays an interracial couple who decide to get married. In this same decade, *One Potato Two Potato* came out and showed the first interracial marriage on screen, between a White woman (played by Barbara Barrie) and a Black man (played by Bernie Hamilton). Sidney Poitier continued to play in roles throughout the 60's, and mainly portrayed characters who exhibit many of the characteristics found in the "Tom" stereotype: asexual, intelligent, and pleasant. In contrast was Jim Brown, who portrayed characters who were Bucks: aggressive, violent, and sexual. His films and roles tended to stand out, even though he starred primarily in B movies because he personified a non-conforming Black male. Sidney Poitier's characters generally supported integrationist political views at the time, whereas Jim Brown's characters were popular figures to those who wanted separation (Bogle, 2016).

In the 70's, there was a boom in Black films, not only in the content but also in film creators and new actors as well. One of the first movies of the 70's that was a major hit was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* by Melvin Van Peebles. This film tells the story of a Black hero who is violent, sexual, and prevails over White corruption. Themes of Blacks taking the lead, being cool, and solving problems arose all throughout this decade. Many of the films showed the lives and lifestyles of those living in urban neighborhoods that were decaying. On the downside, Black men were often portrayed as drug dealers, or pimps, or generally aggressive.

Multiple types of portrayals of Black women arose during the 1970's. In some films, such as *Coffy*, Black women were hypersexualized violent heroes. These characters had combinations of characteristics of stereotypes: mulatta, Mammy, and even Buck. At the same time, the 70's also brought the emergence of the Black romance and an attempt to show the Black woman as a more dynamic and vulnerable character. An example of such a film is *Lady Sings the Blues*, starring Diana Ross as Billie Holiday. Bogle calls this film "the screen's first full-fledged Black romantic melodrama" and writes: "*Lady Sings the Blues*, if it accomplished nothing else, presented audiences with some of the most romantic scenes thus far in the history of Blacks in films" (Bogle, 2016).

In the 80's, Black male actors were on the rise in blockbuster films. Their positions, however, were generally in supporting roles. In the early part of the decade, Louis Gossett Jr won supporting actor in *An Officer and a Gentleman* for his portrayal of Sergeant Foley. Throughout the decade, popular comedians Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy made their way on the silver screen. Later in the decade emerged the phenomenon of the Black buddy flick. This usually had a White and Black male duo in a professional based relationship who were friends but still the Black actors played support to the White star. A very popular film that fits into this category is *Lethal Weapon*, with Mel Gibson and Danny Glover. Of this era, Bogle writes: "Sadly, in the 1980s, Black women rarely had a chance for important roles. What with all the interracial male bonding, Black women seemed to have disappeared entirely." That being said, one significant role for a Black female protagonist is the lead in *She's Gotta Have It*, who is in relationships with three different men. Each of them pressures her to choose one, but she generally wants to stay sexually liberated. Notably, the 80's also brings the first time a Black woman directed a major studio production, namely the film *A Dry White Season* about apartheid in South Africa (Bogle 2016).

In the 90's, Black buddy films continued. Black actors were getting roles in blockbuster films, and they were often in stereotypical roles, but were also in roles that had not been seen before. Whoopi Goldberg plays a medium for a White couple in *Ghost*; though she is not in the romantic relationship, she aids the male protagonist to connect with his deceased wife. In this film Whoopi is the quintessential Magical Black. *House Party* incorporates hip-hop themes and culture into a film where the romantic interests of the two lead characters are categorized. The love interest of a higher social class was fairer in skin complexion and the darker love interest in the film was more sexually forward. Bogle comments on how "In many early 1990s films by young Black male filmmakers, dreamgirls were often lighter actresses" (Bogle, 2016). Black artistic films were on the rise in this decade. Over the decade, John Singleton wrote and directed *Boyz the Hood*, which depicts a coming of age tale in South Central. He continues to direct films featuring Black male leads, and similar themes relating to urban life for Blacks on the brink of a new millennium. Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* presents a married Black male protagonist in an affair with his White female secretary. It addressed their drastically different cultures and how those can collide and others' perceptions of the relationship, which is generally negative. *Waiting to Exhale* is the number one movie in the country on opening weekend. The success the film helped aid in the creation of more roles for Black women in leading and romantic roles (Bogle 2016).

In the 00's, there was a boost in roles for Black women. Black actors in general are having increased success in films, and some have continued success as mainstream film super stars. Though there is a boom in Black actors and their integration into mainstream films, stereotypes from the past are still

present in their depictions. *Monster's Ball*, starring Halle Berry and Billy Bob Thornton, emphasizes the female protagonist's sexuality as a means to escape her realities and find fulfillment in her White counterpart. Queen Latifah plays in comedic roles, and dramatic ones, but is almost never cast as a romantic lead. *I Think I Love My Wife* tells the tale of a husband (Chris Rock) who is frustrated with the lack of sex he receives from his wife. So he spends his afternoons at work with a younger woman from his past. Black women are portrayed as "hos" in the film *Hustle & Flow*, with Terrence Howard as a pimp who aspires to be a rapper (Bogle 2016).

Tyler Perry comes to the silver screen from the stage by producing films with characters who need to go on a spiritual journey. His first film, *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, has a lead protagonist who is kicked out and abused by her husband. She needs to take refuge at her grandmother's and, on her road to rebuild herself, encounters a lightskinned man who is kind and gentle and joins her on her journey. Perry's movies tend to focus on Black dramas, and depictions of love. They all generally lead to people needing to find themselves.

Class roles are switched in *Something New*, where Sanaa Lathan plays a Black protagonist hesitant to continue her relationship with a White man below her class because of family pressure. Sanaa Lathan also starred in the films *Love and Basketball* and *Brown Sugar*. These films were significant in that they were black romances, that show the slow development of black relationships over time, with a backdrop of black culture, without being strictly simple black romantic comedies.

In 2009 came the film *Precious*, which depicts the continued sexual abuse of a Black female by both of her parents, and she is ultimately trying to escape her circumstance and create a better life for herself (Bogle 2016). This movie was sexually aggressive, in that she was shown being raped repeatedly by her father and mother. She has two children from these experiences. The depictions of black sexuality involving parents and children in this film were aggressive and traumatic in ways that had not been seen before.

In the 00's, we therefore see both the continued propagation of traditional stereotypes, but also new types of roles of black characters, in films that include spiritual journeys, black romances, and depictions of black family abuse.

Birth of a Nation (1915)

Birth of a Nation is one of the most significant films in history. It was the first ever full length film and it used techniques that were never seen before and are still used to this day. Its popularity was so great that it was played in the White House and its methodologies changed the history of film. Its themes, which were founded in racism and pro-Confederate thought, lead to countless remakes and the production of films that followed similar themes (Bogle 2016).

Birth of a Nation, based on the novel *The Clansman*, tells the story of the Cameron family from the Confederate South and the Stoneman family from the Union North. The story follows their lives over several years, spanning from the Civil War to the reconstruction era. The families meet each other, and because of love interests across families, continue to stay involved, even though they are fighting on

opposite sides of the war. The North wins, and reconstruction causes great changes for the South. Men from the North come and cause havoc on the White people of the South.

Because *Birth of a Nation* is the first full length film, it is particularly relevant to examine how Black characters are portrayed in this film. Originally portrayed as servants, Black characters are given a whole new look over the course of reconstruction. The film focuses on Blacks as being buffoons, aggressive and sexually violent. It hits on the fears of Black men and their desire for White women, stating blatantly that one of the first things Blacks will do in power would be to legalize interracial marriage. Bogle speaks on how “Griffith played on the myth of the Negro’s high-powered sexuality, then articulated the great White fear that every Black man longs for a White woman. Underlying the fear was the assumption that the White woman was the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of White pride, power, and beauty” (Bogle 2016). *Birth of a Nation* and its blatant racism immortalized these stereotypes and ideas within film history (Bogle 2016, Entman 2010, Guerrero 2012, and Collins 2004). Unfortunately, the film’s popularity led to the recycling of these racist themes and tropes, which would be used in the films that succeeded it.

Early Stereotypes of Black Characters

Birth of a Nation is significant in this study because, in addition to being the first full length film, it immortalized racial stereotypes concerning Blacks. This film, in combination with several others spanning the first 20 years of the 20th century, introduced four classic tropes that would continue to be used for the rest of the century. These tropes were:

- Tom: A Black male character who above all has a desire to appease the White man and is servile to him above his own needs or culture. The Tom first appeared in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1903.
- Mammy: A Black female character who is in service to Whites; however, she is loud, sassy, cantankerous, headstrong and generally fat. She later evolves to the “Aunt Jemima” character who is generally pleasant, and good tempered and less aggressive. The Mammy first appeared in *Coontown Suffragettes* in 1914.
- Coon: A Black male character often portrayed as buffoons for the entertainment of Whites. They are also considered “unreliable, Crazy, lazy, subhuman.” Coons were first formalized in *Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* in 1905.
- Buck: A Black male character often portrayed as aggressive, violent, and sexual savages. The exact opposite of the Tom, the Buck was often used to stir fear in White culture. The Buck trope was introduced in *Birth of a Nation* in 1915 (Bogle 2016).

In film, these four stereotypes are portrayed in a wide variety of ways, as they relate to romance, love and sexuality. The Tom character, for instance, can be seen as being in a relationships, even romantic ones, however he is generally portrayed as being asexual. His asexuality is a direct response to the over sexualization of the Buck. When the Buck is in film, he is generally sexually aggressive and not interested in traditional romance; his main objective is to satisfy his innate lustful desire. Overall the Mammy

character is not sexualized either; she is usually meant to be the exact opposite of what desirability is. She is ultimately not feminine at all and therefore generally not considered to be a romantic lead, nor sexual or even loving, unless it relates to her master and their children. Collins writes, “White elites created controlling images of Uncle Tom and Mammy as prototypes of asexual, safe, assimilated, and subordinated Black people” (Collins 2004). Finally, the Coon character can be sexual or even in a romantic situation; however he still falls on the spectrum of socially divergent, so his relationship in this category tends to not be smooth or traditional.

Later Stereotypes of Black Characters

In addition to these early stereotypes, other stereotypes of Blacks evolved over time. Some of these stereotypes include the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Welfare Queen, and the Magical Black character.

The Jezebel stereotype is also grounded in racist thought. The idea that Black women are overly sexual was a misconception of the colonizers who did not understand African culture. Black women were considered “other” because of their customs’ lack of semblance to the White culture at the time. It was also a method to control perceptions of Black female slaves. Black women were objectified and abused for their otherness. The concept of Jezebel was a controlling image that enforced the innate sexual aggression of Black women, making it so that they could not be raped because they always desired sex (Collins 2004). This idea that hypersexuality is an essential characteristic of Black womanhood is key to the Jezebel trope, and countless movies have placed Black women in overtly sexual fashions and situations, reinforcing it.

The Sapphire trope also has roots in slavery. The trope was popularized in the *Amos n’ Andy Show*. In *Amos n’ Andy*, Black women are portrayed as emasculating. Sapphire is shrew, demanding, violent and unwanted by her male counterpart. At a time where women were expected to uphold specific ideals, Black female slaves were construed as instrumental to the dissolving of the Black family because of their participation in tasks considered “masculine,” such as working in the fields. However, it was not for lack of desire to engage in the feminine that women enacted such labor, but rather lack of opportunity because of their positions in society (hooks 1981). The Sapphire character later evolved into the Angry Black Woman. These two tropes are very similar with the exception that the Angry Black Woman generally is portrayed as having a reason to be angry which allows for more sympathy towards the character.

The Welfare Queen trope arose in the mid-century after the development of the American welfare system. Associating Black woman with this title was an easy stereotype to propagate at the time. This was because of the prejudices towards Blacks, which marked them as lazy, and towards Black women specifically, which marked them as hypersexual (Gilliam Jr. 1999, Collins 2004) Film would later capitalize on this wider societal stereotype, portraying Black women as mooching off the system with a plethora of children and no motivation to change.

Finally we have the Magical Black character. This trope comes up frequently in films. The idea behind the trope is that Black people are in some ways all knowing, magical or have some special insight, especial for, and concerning the lives of White characters. Their position is to then act as a guiding force

and provide guidance to White folks in need. I feel this trope in some respects is the evolution of the Tom. Though the focus is not generally on Blacks being subservient to the White counterparts (like the Tom), the magical Black dedicates himself to solving the White man's problem (Gonzales 2001).

These later four stereotypes also arise in film and affect the perception of Black love, romance and sexuality. Manatu comments on how “living in a climate of political correctness anti-Black stereotypes are rarely expressed verbally and in public. They tend instead to be vividly and overtly shown in living color ... in the form of visual images” (2003). These stereotyped images can be seen in the case of the Jezebel who is the female sexual counterpart to the Buck. Though she is not aggressive she is hyper sexual and this means she generally has no interest in romantic relationships. The Sapphire character can be sexual or even in a romantic relationship but she is disliked by her Black male counterpart, which makes it hard for her to have fulfilling or even healthy romantic relationships. The welfare queen is a sexual deviant in that she tends to not conform to traditional standards of family and has children out of wedlock. Though she is sexual, the men who she is sexual with do not stay around. Lastly the magical Black character can play any sexual role, however, being an extension of the Tom, he or she tends to be generally asexual, not in desire, but in the plot of the film.

Summary

The stereotypes listed above, old and new, have a direct effect on relationships of Black characters. This is because each trope has different expectations as it relates to how it expresses its engagement in romance, love or sex. I found all of these stereotypes to be present across the five decades I observed. The frequency of a specific stereotype was dependent on the decade I was observing, but the most prevalent stereotype I encountered was that of the Jezebel in the 80's, 90's and 00's. The stereotypes present in films I observed often directly affected the success of the relationship and sometimes overshadowed the relationship altogether.

METHODS

Film Selection

I first developed criteria in order to select my films. The first criterion was that the protagonist in the film had to be Black. The Black protagonist had to be in a romantic relationship or get into a romantic relationship. The relationship needed to be the main focus of the film. The relationship could be with a person of any racial background. I specifically selected the top grossing film because it was both a marker of film popularity and reach. This means the movie was marketed to mass audience so it provides information on what major markets believed to be relevant and realistic to the everyday American at the time; furthermore it represents the number of people who saw the film.

I searched through movie lists on IMDB for the top grossing film in each year that satisfied my criteria. To make sure the films satisfied the criteria when selected, I read general genre descriptions, and all are

listed as romance, romance drama or comedy romance. I watched the trailers to make sure the films had a focus specifically on the relationship and the life of the relationship of the Black protagonist. I made a note of how much money each film grossed. I also looked up the basic information and the race and gender of the director, head writer and lead producer of each film selected. Basic information about the films I selected is provided in the chart below, and a summary of the plot and characters of each film is provided in the Appendix.

Selected Films

Decade	Year	Film Title	Gross Revenue	Film Contributors	Contributor Names	Race	Gender
60's	1967	<i>Guess Who's Coming To dinner</i>	\$56.7 million	Director	Stanley Kramer	White	Male
				Writer	William Rose	White	Male
				Producer	Stanley Kramer	White	Male
70's	1974	<i>Claudine</i>	\$3 million	Director	John Berry	White	Male
				Writer	Lester Pine	Unknown, presumed White	Male
				Producer	Hannah Weinstein	White	Female
80's	1988	<i>Coming to America</i>	\$128.2 million	Director	John Landis	White	Male
				Writer	David Sheffield	White	Male
				Producer	George Folsey	White	Male
90's	1995	<i>Waiting to Exhale</i>	\$67.1 million	Director	Forest Whitaker	Black	Male
				Writer	Terry McMillan	Black	Female
				Producer	Terry McMillan	Black	Female
00's	2005	<i>Hitch</i>	\$179.5 million	Director	Andy Tennant	White	Male
				Writer	Kevin Bisch	White	Male
				Producer	Will Smith	Black	Male

Questions for Film Analysis

Films were viewed and analyzed using the following questions:

General information

- What is the title of the film?
- When did it come out?
- Who was the director (include race, gender)?
- Who was the screenwriter (include race, gender)?
- Who was the lead producer (include race, gender)?
- How much did it make in box office?
- What is the location of the film?

Character traits

- Who is the lead protagonist?
- What is their race?
- What is their socioeconomic status?
- What is their gender & age?
- What are five words you would use to describe the protagonist?
- Who are they in a relationship with?
- What is their race?
- What is their socioeconomic status?
- What is their gender & age?
- What are five words you would use to describe the romantic interest?

Relationship questions

- What is the status of the relationship at the start of the film?
- What circumstances lead to the relationship?
- Does the relationship change over time?
- What causes the change?
- What are common interests the characters have with each other?
- Is the relationship significant to the development of either character?
- What obstacles must the characters overcome in their relationship?

Plot based questions

- How do people external from the relationship view the relationship?
- What are internal conflicts the relationship faces?
- What are external conflicts the relationship faces?
- Are these conflicts resolved, and if so, how?
- What are themes that arise in the film?

Social questions

- Is the character's race significant to the plot of the film?
- Does the film make use of stereotypes?
- Is the film representative of the time (can you tell from watching the social climate)?
- What message do you think the film is designed to send to the audience about relationships?
- What does the film actually say to you about relationships?

RESULTS

In this section, I will describe and analyze each of 5 top-grossing films portraying Black love throughout the past 5 decades, namely:

- *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967)
- *Claudine* (1974)
- *Coming to America* (1988)
- *Waiting to Exhale* (1995)
- *Hitch* (2005)

I will then explore common themes among these movies, and apparent changes throughout films over the decades. For overall plot summaries of each film, see the Appendix.

The Relationship

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

The relationship of Joey (a White woman) and John (a Black man) is established in the opening credits of the film. Viewers are unable to see exactly how and what lead John and Joey to their relationship, but we know they are in one by the way they hold hands as they leave the airport and share a passionate kiss in the back of the cab. All romantic gestures after that point are mild at best. Throughout the film, neither character is seen engaging in any strong forms of physical intimacy. Occasionally they share an almost platonic touch but that is all. When Joey's mother questions the level of intimacy they have engaged in, Joey tells her mother they have not had sex but it was because John wanted to wait. Rather than focusing on the interaction between Joey and John, the focus of the film is on gaining the acceptance of their family members for their relationship. At the time of the film, interracial marriage is still illegal in some states and both sets of parents are fearful of what their children may face upon making this union. Over the course of the film, the relationship, by means of gestures, would have looked to be nothing more than a close friendship, had the discussion of marriage approval not raided the film.

Ultimately the relationship is in the background of the film and it is hard to know whether or not the relationship is successful. I do not envision this relationship as being successful because they knew each other for such a short amount of time, Joey's character did not consider what she was asking of John nor did she care, and John was too busy trying to be perfect to defend his love for Joey. Everyone spends the majority of the time talking to each other and being upset. As onlookers we do not get to see neither John nor Joey engaged in anything more than platonic outside of the opening scene. The film is instead littered with racist tropes that distract and suggest that Black characters are more aggressively against interracial marriage than the White characters. But then ultimately it's the White characters, specifically, the White male character, whose opinions matter more than anything else. In this film, tropes and stereotypes, even lack of, definitely overshadow the actual development and potential outcome of the relationship.

Furthermore, in the case of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the issue related to the problems they would face in an interracial relationship are practically null and void. They were first engaged in Hawaii, then they were in San Francisco, and they are going to have their relationship and get married outside of the country in Geneva. Their marriage will be in a bubble of acceptance, which allows them to avoid all areas of conflict they might otherwise encounter as an interracial couple living in the U.S. at the time.

Claudine (1974)

The relationship between Claudine (a Black woman, and a single mother of 6 children) and Roop (a Black man, who also has children) is not established at the start of the film, but is formed within the first few scenes. Roop, while on his route as a garbage man, shows that he has interest in Claudine, only for her to deny him. He then tries to coerce her into a date by suggesting he would report her working to the welfare office. After contemplating what other women said to her about her needing to find a man, Claudine accepts the offer to go out with Roop that night.

Roop and Claudine start to see each other on a more regular basis but it is clear that their relationship is primarily a physical one. They engage in discussions and she finds out that he has kids in other states who he has left behind. He comments on how it's typical (that a Black man would abandon his children) and both characters seem to play into the stereotypes placed on them but in a sarcastic manner. This shows the characters' awareness of their current socioeconomic circumstance.

As they continue to have these physical and intimate interactions, Roop brings Claudine gifts, one of which he found on his trash route, and starts to engage more with her children. He shows he cares for their well being and the relationship starts to turn into a more romantic one. Things seem to be going well when Roop receives mail from his previous partner claiming that he needs to provide more money for child support. Claudine tries to cheer him up by telling him the kids have prepared a party for him for Father's Day. He is too frustrated to care and does not show up, leaving everyone disappointed.

Claudine awaits to hear from him and when she doesn't, her son goes to his house -- only to find he moved out. When she goes by his job the next day, she learns that no one had heard from him. He is found drunk at a bar by her oldest son. Roop shows up to Claudine's house to apologize. She and all of the children sit in his car as he expresses himself and they make it clear that they want him to stay around. This leads to the following scene where Roop and Claudine are in the process of getting married in the living room of Claudine's house. However, the wedding is crashed by cops chasing Claudine's oldest son, who during the wedding is participating in a protest for more jobs. He tries to evade the cops by running into the wedding and acting as the member of the wedding that he is, however the cops recognize him and everyone in the family ends up in the back of a police truck. The scene then skips to the whole family walking hand and hand up the street as credits roll.

I left the film feeling confused and once again uncertain if this relationship will be successful. Throughout the film, you never actually see Roop take Claudine anywhere. All of their scenes together are either at her house, where Roop interacts with the kids, or his house where both characters have just had or are about to have sex. Ultimately they build intimacy through conversations regarding their positions in life.

Several logistical concerns seem to be likely to impact their new lives together. Claudine's daughter is pregnant and there doesn't seem to be a lot of space in the home. Roop still owes money to his previous partner for his children but has less work hours and had just married into a large family. Furthermore, Roop has a tendency to leave when things get hard and there is no certainty that he won't do it again.

Coming to America (1988)

This film follows the establishment of a relationship between Lisa (an African American woman) and Akeem (an African prince visiting the United States in search of a bride). Before Lisa and Akeem's relationship can be established there are two main conflicts, and one minor conflict which these characters must contend, the first being Lisa's pre-existing relationship with a man named Darryl. Darryl is portrayed as a dishonest character and a bully. He takes credit for Akeem's charitable donation, and insults Akeem's intelligence and background by making fun of his unfamiliarity with American basketball. Later this conflict is resolved when Darryl announces his supposed engagement to Lisa without actually having Lisa's approval, causing her to confront Darryl about his presumption that she would go along with this arrangement, and prompting her to reject his proposal.

The aftermath of this rejection leads to the first opening for Akeem and Lisa's romance, as Akeem listens and offers advice to Lisa as she expresses her anger with the situation. A connection is made between the two as Akeem connects to Lisa's frustration about her lack of choice in a romantic relationship, similar to Akeem's disappointment with his arranged wife back in Africa.

The second conflict emerges when Lisa's sister, Patrice, expresses obvious interest in Akeem and goes so far as to express this interest by engaging in manual stimulation through Akeem's pants at a basketball game. This conflict quickly dissipates as, not far into the action, Akeem excuses himself and does not proceed to show any further interest in Patrice.

Another major conflict is that which arises from Akeem's status as royalty, which he actively attempts to hide from Lisa on several occasions. On their first date, Akeem steers Lisa away from his richly decorated apartment, instead taking her on a romantic walk and out to dinner. On a following date to a museum, Akeem's picture is on display for an installment on his home country of Zamunda, which prompts him to passionately kiss Lisa to keep her from viewing the picture. Later Akeem again steers Lisa away when he is signaled that his father is in town, prompting Lisa to realize she is being deceived which results in her decision to break off the connection upon her realization that they are from completely different worlds.

Despite Akeem's deceptions, he and Lisa were able to connect during these first two dates, talking about life and philosophy and connecting on an intellectual level. They dance and it is clear that they are falling for each other.

After Lisa breaks it off, Akeem returns to Zamunda, heartbroken, but ready to perform his duty and be married to the woman he is arranged to marry. At the altar, as the woman approaches he is pleasantly surprised to find that Lisa is the veiled woman and they live happily ever after.

Lisa and Akeem build a foundation based on intimacy and though there was some deception, in the end, she forgives him. They both get what they want, someone who can satisfy them intellectually and someone who respects them based on their character not just their status or idealization. The film ends with them getting married, which leaves me on the fence. I think that their relationship is successful in that they are both interested, and genuine seeming characters who are physically interested in each other but technically they have only gone on two dates. So, though I think their relationship could be successful, I feel like a marriage so quickly after meeting someone is unrealistic.

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

This film tells the story of four Black women (Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria) and their lives over the course of one year.

Savannah

Savannah moves to Phoenix, where she attends a New Year's Eve party with a man she had been corresponding with. She dances with him at the party, but is then tapped on the shoulder mid-dance and leaves the party. Despite her internal monologue about the man being broke and unintelligent, she cannot overcome her physical desires for the man and has sex with him. The man is quite animalistic during sex and even growls, then finishes without any regard for her pleasure, leaving her unsatisfied. This is the last we see of him.

The next relationship Savannah has is with Kenneth, a fling from the past who is now married with a child. Savannah's mom knows this, but proceeds to push Savannah to meet with him, claiming she needs to get off her high horse and that every woman needs a man. Savannah meets with Kenneth, who tells her that she is the only woman he has ever loved, and that his current marriage is one of necessity. The meeting reminds Savannah of the things she loved about Kenneth, and ultimately leads to them having sex. Savannah questions her choices, and is further concerned when she overhears a phone call Kenneth has with his family during their second meeting, when she realizes that Kenneth is here with her instead of at home with his wife and sick child. Kenneth insists he'll leave his family for Savannah when the time is right, but Savannah realizes this would be tragic for the family and decides it's the wrong thing to do. After receiving a call from a crying Kenneth, Savannah's mom argues with Savannah and tells her she should give Kenneth a chance. In the end, Savannah's mom admits that she is afraid that Savannah will end up alone like her; Savannah responds that she is happy with her life now and tells her mom not to worry.

The relationship is ultimately unsuccessful, however Savannah seems happy with her choice to be content with work and her friends.

Bernadine

Bernadine is getting ready for a corporate New Year's event with her husband John, who enters and informs her he will be taking his mistress, a White secretary at his company. Bernie is outraged and sets

all of John's stuff, along with his car, on fire. We learn that Bernie has a Masters degree, and repeatedly put off her dreams of becoming a caterer to help her husband by being his secretary and taking care of the children. The two decide to file for divorce. The situation escalates to a confrontation between Bernie and the secretary, who tries to prevent Bernie from interrupting a meeting and ends up getting slapped by her. After John clears the room, he tells Bernie that all of their assets are under his name and she is left with virtually nothing.

Knowing Bernie and her children would not be able to afford the lifestyle they've grown accustomed to, John offers her the house and \$300,000 cash. Bernie refuses and decides to see him in court. In the lead up to the trial, Bernie sleeps with a man she met at bar who was married. Although she is ashamed of what happened, she justifies it by saying that men do it all the time. The first divorce trial ends with Bernie barely getting anything, due to all of the assets being under John's name. Later, John takes the kids for a weekend and the kids return with an understanding of the situation and recognize that John is at fault.

Later in the film, Bernie meets an attorney at a hotel bar, who compliments her and calls her a fighter. After a while, Bernie opens up to him about her divorce situation. In return, the man tells Bernie about his wife, who is dying of cancer. The two bond over the impending loss of their respective partners, and end up laying together, providing each other the comfort they need in the moment. In the end, both situations are resolved. In the final trial of the divorce, Bernie receives reasonable gains that will allow her to support their children. Also in a letter from James, he professes his love for her, which doesn't take away from the love he has for his wife. The settlement allows her to have closure, and the letter she receives from James provides her with a new intimate connection.

As for the success of her relationships, Bernadine's relationship between herself and John is broken in the first scene. Her relationship with James, the man she met at the bar, is ambiguous - James still has a wife and Bernadine is still in another state - so, ultimately I would say one was unsuccessful and the other is unclear and unestablished.

Robin

Robin is a firm executive who recently ended her relationship with Russell, a man she is really attracted to (who we later find out is married), who she breaks up with due to his habit of drug use. We later find her in sexy lingerie, getting ready for a date with Michael, a co-worker. Michael is incredibly nerdy and goofy in an unattractive way, but Robin sleeps with him because she sees him as a stable guy who is different from the men she has been engaging with. Robin is disappointed with Michael's skills in the bedroom; Michael notices this and asks her what she wants, stating that he will do whatever it is that she desires. She responds saying that she wants everything, including a family, a vacation house, going out to eat and something real. Michael says he can provide this, and the two have sex once again. However, the relationship begins to tumble when Michael points out a data discrepancy in Robin's presentation at work, and then walks by Robin with another woman at an outing. We learn that Robin fires Michael off screen without any remorse for him.

Next, Robin engages with Troy, a persistent pursuer who finally got Robin to date him. Robin is distraught when she attends a party with Troy and finds him buying drugs. She questions his intentions with her, and he assures her that he wants her to meet his family and sees something long term with her. He even hands Robin his phone so she can confirm this. Robin is a romantic and likes this idea, so she decides to stay with him. However, things take a turn for the worse when Troy shows up intoxicated to her house. After getting upset at Robin's insistence on leaving him, he asks her what he is supposed to tell his mom and son. Robin is appalled that Troy never mentioned his son to her and tells him to leave. Troy responds by screaming at her and claiming that this is the reason Black men leave Black women for White women.

Robin rekindles things with Russell and has sex with him. She convinces herself that people can change, but we only ever see the two interacting in the bedroom, unlike other times when we saw her interacting with friends and co-workers. Robin questions Russell's relationship with his wife and whether he will ever leave her. After realizing this will never happen, Robin finds out that she is pregnant. Russell comes to see her as usual, but this time Robin does not let him in and tells him he will be raising their child alone.

All of her relationships are unsuccessful in the end. Michael leaves because she fires him. She leaves Troy because he lies and is intoxicated. She leaves Russell because she is tired of waiting for him to leave his wife for her and she realizes that may never actually happen.

Gloria

Gloria is a single mother and her first scene opens with her talking to her son, Tarik, about not staying out too late on New Year's Eve. Gloria invites Tarik's father over and is hopeful about having another intimate interactions with her former partner. He is not interested and a little disappointed. She questions if it is because of her weight, but he informs him that it is not that, but rather because he is gay.

The next relationship she is involved with is Marvin. He is a new neighbor that she initially assumes is the mover rather than the person moving in. Being a good neighbor, she went over to welcome the new residents. Gloria is embarrassed for her assumption and asked the man, Marvin, if he has a wife. He informs her that she died some years ago. She then offers him over for dinner but he has to decline because he has a lot of work to do with the move. She believes she is not desirable because of her weight and comments on her weight during their conversation. However, Marvin tells her that he prefers women with meat on their bones. Bashful, she smiles and offers to send her son over with a plate of leftovers.

Later we see Gloria and Marvin engaging in domestic like interactions. He appears over her house in a comfortable fashion, doing handy work on her back porch while her son is in the background. She brings him out a sandwich.

Gloria's main concern however is her son and she goes to Marvin and asks him to talk to Tarik and dissuade him from traveling. She believes he will listen to Marvin because Marvin has given him attention, taken him fishing, and provided him with advice. Marvin doesn't agree and thinks it will be a

good opportunity for Tarik and thinks Gloria should let him go. This causes a conflict in the relationship and Gloria excuses herself. We do not see Marvin again until the very end of the film.

After a disagreement, the couple takes time to cool down and both parties end up apologizing to one another and in their final scene together they share a passionate kiss. This kiss is the first physical interaction either of these characters had on screen. I believe the relationship is and will be successful. A year of time has passed in the film and it is implied that he has been in the background involved in her life and helping her around the house. He shows affections towards her son and they are both attracted to each other. They have had life experiences, and relationships in the past, so they are not new to things. Furthermore they have had months of interaction and the film implies a reconnection, not a swift happily ever after marriage, but a relationship..

Hitch (2005)

The film *Hitch* follows the pursuit by Hitch (a Black man who works as a “date doctor”) of his love interest Sara (a Latina woman). The viewers get a flashback to his past, to see his first relationship, where Hitch introduces a Black woman named Cressida who was his college girlfriend. Hitch is young, dorkier, wears glasses and trips on his way into a university building where Cressida asks for directions. They end up dating and the scene following is of them making out in the library. Hitch expresses his love for her and she says she loves him too. He then proceeds to express that he is aware that he loves her more than she loves him. He says he is just happy that she loves him at all and continues to talk and the music drowns out what he is actually saying. In the next scene, Cressida is making out with another guy in the back of a car while it's raining.

Hitch’s relationship with the main female protagonist is not established at the start of the film. He sees Sara in a bar and saves her from another man persistently hitting on her. She is intrigued by Hitch because of their initial hypothetical conversation. The next day he uses a delivery service and walkie talkies to ask Sara out on a date because he did not get her number during their first interaction. She accepts the date and he takes her to Ellis Island, where all of his attempts to be smooth fail. He kicks her in the face accidentally at one point shows her that her past relative was a murderer. Sara then invites him out to dinner, with her and her boss. She is trying to get information out of Hitch regarding his recent client. During the date, they share an intimate moment when Sara feeds Hitch, hand to mouth. A few seconds later Hitch starts making throat noises, as it turns out he is having a severe allergic reaction. He ingests a lot of Benadryl, which makes him intoxicated and willing to open up about things in his past. They engage in conversation about events that define their lives (this is their second intimate moment), and later the two fall asleep together on Sara’s couch. After that the relationship continues until Sara finds out Hitch is a date doctor. Instead of asking him about it, she assumes that he has caused the heartaches of women around the city. He explains everything at a speed dating event and the conflict is cleared; however over the next few scenes they are unable to connect with each other. Sara apologizes and Hitch acts indifferently so Sara takes the hint. A few scenes later, however, Hitch realizes he loves Sara and in order to get her back, he engages in a series of grand romantic gestures that ultimately work.

In *Hitch* the characters built intimacy and bonded over time. Though there was a disconnect and Hitch had to go through unrealistic romantic gestures, those gestures provided Sara with the opportunity to

engage in the possibility of love. They have communication and trust issues because of their pasts. However, because they are choosing to continue to date, I think their dating will be successful in that, it seems healthy. That being said, I think had the relationship ended in marriage by the end of the film, it would have been unrealistic and much too quick.

Others' Perceptions of The Relationship

In several of the films, the theme of parental disapproval arises, often times alongside the theme of pressure regarding relationship decisions made by either one of the romantic couple's children. While this parental pressure exists across decades, the reasons for the disapproval change with time.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Joey's mother -- upon first realizing that John is Black -- is rendered speechless. She quickly changes from her shocked state to her polite self. Throughout the course of the film, she has conversations with Joey, learning the extent of her and John's intimacy, and with the father, discussing both of their concerns and later with John's mother. As the film progresses, the romantic in Joey's mother causes her to see what Joey sees in John and she in the end wants nothing more than for Joey to be happy. She even confronts the father about it, stating that she was on Joey's side, whether he was or not.

Joey's father at first approaches John completely in a cordial fashion. He has no problem with John as a person until he realizes that he is his daughter's fiancée. He is resigned at first, then concerned. He wants John's background to be checked and that is how the viewers of the film learn more about John's spotless record and his contribution to society at large. He becomes increasingly cantankerous as the mother becomes more open to the idea. In the end it is a conversation he has with John's mother that causes him to change his mind and give a monologue in the end that suggests that he, even in his age understands what real love is.

John's parents are equally surprised by the news. John's mother is soft spoken, kind and knowledgeable. She also seems incredibly delicate. She is taken aback but is reserved and almost mournful in her response to the situation. For the most part she is quiet. John's father on the other hand, is wide-eyed, boisterous and direct. He too disagrees with the marriage and even says to Joey's family, if they agree with it, they are crazy. He engages in a conversation with John later in the film where he discusses his disagreements in a loud fashion only to be met with hostility from John -- a side of John that we have not seen up until this point.

A final character worth mentioning who does not approve of the marriage is the maid Tilly. Upon first meeting John, she gives him attitude. She is loud and emphatic, and approaches Joey's family as if something terrible has happened when she see that John is Black. Throughout the movie she can be seen annoyed, and rolling her eyes. She threatens John, and calls him an "uppity nigger". She does not trust him and says that she will not let him encroach upon Joey after all of her work raising her.

Claudine (1974)

Initially the children are not in favor of the relationship. They seem skeptical of Roop and don't initially welcome him with open arms. Claudine's oldest son is the most outwardly aggressive. He threatens Roop and tells him that if his mother is sad that he will make Roop bleed for the offense. Over the course of the film the children seem to warm up to Roop. This correlates with him coming around, spending time and seeming interested in their lives. The oldest son is hesitant throughout the film and does not warm up to Roop until the final scene.

Coming to America (1988)

Lisa's dad Mr. McDowell does not approve of Lisa and Akeem's relationship. He wants Lisa to continue her relationship with Darryl because, in his opinion, Darryl is a good guy who cares about her and he is wealthy. Ultimately he wants Lisa to not have to worry or struggle as it relates to money and Darryl is financially secure. Though he has a preference for Darryl (since he has no idea that Akeem is wealthy), Mr. McDowell does not prevent her from going out with Akeem. He seems to take a neutral stance on Akeem. However, at the climax of the film when Mr. McDowell realizes Akeem is a wealthy prince, he is excited about his and Lisa's union.

On the other hand Akeem's father, the king, does not approve of their relationship at all. He was under the impression that Akeem was simply going to America to enjoy his youth and have sex before marriage. When he discovers that he is in a relationship with Lisa, he insults her character and forbids Akeem from marrying her because of her status and of the tradition of arranged marriages. The queen can see that Akeem loves the girl and comments on how the arranged marriage tradition can be changed by the king.

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

The women in the movie rarely give commentary on how they feel about the relationships their friends are involved in. There are a few exceptions to this. Robin briefly comments on John and Bernadine's divorce when she finds out. Gloria shows disappointment towards Bernadine's choice to sleep with a married man. None of the friends comment on Savannah's or Robin's affairs with married men. The one person who gives the most commentary on a relationship is Savannah's mother who is persistent about Savannah having a relationship with Kenneth.

Hitch (2005)

Others' perception of the relationship is not a major factor of this film. There is an occasional eyebrow lift, or surprised face from Sara's coworkers or friends but that is all.

Differences across the decades:

A theme that came up across the decades but manifested in different ways was the aspect of parental pressure on the relationships. In the case of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the focus of the parental

pressure on is on race. In *Coming to America* it's based on class, and finally in *Waiting to Exhale* it's based on loneliness. In regards to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, interracial marriage in the real world had just been legalized (though in the world of the film, it still was not federally legal), so it makes sense that each set of parents would be hesitant. I imagine both want what is best for their children, however, the structure of the film, and who makes the final decision, though progressive overall, still supports racialized and patriarchal ideals.

In *Coming to America*, Akeem tries to gain the approval of Lisa's father. In this situation, everyone around him in Queens is poor and the father, admitting that he struggled to make a successful business, just wants what's best for his daughter. Though he does pressure her to marry Darryl, he does not interfere with her choices. Akeem's father however does directly affect the relationship. His lack of approval causes conflict in Lisa's family and a conflict in Akeem and Lisa's relationship. Unexpectedly confronted with Akeem's status and wealth, Lisa becomes doubtful of their compatibility and wants to end things. However Akeem, certain about his affections towards Lisa, is willing to go against his father's wishes. This is very different from what one could infer would have happened, had the White patriarch in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* not blessed the marriage. Though they may have gotten married, the denial of the blessing would have broken up the White family unit. Here the parent has significantly less control over the choices of the the relationship of this daughter but still makes his opinion known.

Finally in *Waiting to Exhale* we have a mother who is trying to persuade her daughter to engage in an affair. Though incredibly unrealistic, if we consider the number of Black men in the film who actually choose to stay with Black women or be faithful to them, the mother's fear makes sense. Her caution and pressure seemed to be based on her own life experience and the world in which the film in created.

As time passes, the parental pressure, though still present, actually seems to have less of an affect on the outcome. In the 1960s, it seems like what occurred was solely dependent on the White male parent. As the decades progress, the adults seems to be more independent and though they want the approval of their families, they seem more willing to defy them.

Tropes and Stereotypes

In the introduction, I reviewed the earlier stereotypes of Black characters (Tom, Coon, Buck, Mammy) and later stereotypes (Jezebel, Sapphire, Welfare Queen, and Magical Black). Below I analyze which stereotypes are used in the films, across the decades.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

John is an educated "Tom" character who has a strong desire to gain the approval of the Whites who dictate his future. The maid Tilly is a traditional "Mammy" character. John's father and his bug eyes and crude language suggest he is uncultured. It is surprising to me that these stereotypes would arise in a film centered on the idea of suggesting to people that their thoughts on interracial marriage might be outdated.

Claudine (1974)

The main trope in this film is that of the “welfare queen”. Claudine’s character fits into this model, because she has an “untraditional family”, has need for government assistance and she’s Black. However, the writers make Claudine aware of her position and how she is viewed socially through her dialog in a conversation with Roop. In this conversation she talks about the assumptions of her character based on receiving welfare. She goes to explain that her inability to provide financially for her children causes society to view her as a bad mother. However, by enrolling in welfare, she is deemed by society as lazy. If she works, supplementing her financial needs not covered by welfare, then she is considered a crook. Together, this all hints at this interwoven system of perception that is stacked against her.

Collins comments on how the tactic to portray Black women in this trope was used to “to garner support for refusing state support for poor and working-class Black mothers and children. Poor Black women’s welfare eligibility meant that many chose to stay home and care for their children, thus emulating White middle-class mothers. But because these stay-at-home moms were African American and did not work for pay, they were deemed to be ‘lazy’ ” (Collins 2004).

We see Claudine work once in the beginning and it is to make up extra funds, however we do not see her working again until after Roop leaves. So it seems that when he is around she does work nor is she home to take care of the children. The scenes go from her being at Roop’s house, then to a conflict at home when she arrives.

Roop is basically a Coon mixed with generally undesirable characteristics. He is not lazy but he is incredibly unreliable. He leaves his previous family and leaves Claudine as well. He appears to only have one intention initially and even threatens to report Claudine to welfare for working in order to get her to go on a date with him. He ultimately decides to marry her, but prior to that, discusses with the children and her how he does not want to take on the responsibility of a family.

Coming to America (1988)

Akeem and Semmi do not fit into the traditional stereotypes shown throughout the film. I think it is very interesting that they don’t because in some ways, the film creators are making them “other” when in society in general Black Americans are considered “other.” They are in some ways set above the stereotypes and are portrayed as overall better people than the everyday Black American. Generally there are distinctions in who is meant to have value based on race, or color; in this situation we are meant to think more highly of Akeem because of his cultural background. He is cultured and an African prince whereas everyone else in the movie is a Black American so his position is outside of the realm of stereotype.

Queens NY is drastically different than Zamunda, not only in location but also in the behavior of the inhabitants. Akeem’s first interaction with Black Americans is having all of his stuff stolen by people in the neighborhood. Additionally people in his apartment building are crooks, loud and living in poor conditions due to their landlords’ indifference regarding the upkeep of the residence. I do not know if there is a name for this stereotype yet but the idea that Black people steal or lie/cheat comes up both in

film and in the media. At the barbershop the men are loud, obnoxious, have accentuated facial features and cackle. They argue with each other and cut each other off. Some members are just seen hanging out not actually doing anything productive and, when Akeem first enters the shop and he asks for something new, the barber simply cuts off his braid and charges him full price. These characters remind me of the traditional Coon stereotype in that they are fools and tricksters, and are primarily there for entertainment purposes.

In the case of the female character Patrice and Lisa stand on opposite ends of the spectrum. Where Lisa is generally portrayed as having favorable characteristics and not fitting in a traditional stereotype, her sister Patrice, does. Patrice is a pretty standard Jezebel character. She is hypersexual and is portrayed as the sexual aggressor in the case of Akeem, it is unclear who initiated the coupling between her and Akeem, and the interaction between her and Darryl, the filmmakers implied that she was coming on to him.

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

The majority of men in this film are Bucks. They are lazy, cause problems, are unreliable, but also aggressive. Many simply have the mission of acquiring sex and have no regard for the person they are with. All of them are disrespectful or abusive in some way.

Bernadine is a Sapphire like character. Upset about the pending divorce and the disrespect John shows her on New Year's Eve, Bernadine questions his racial authenticity. The next day she goes through the house in a fury and clears all of his items, only to burn them in his car on the lawn.

Robin is primarily seen as a Jezebel. She uses her body to get the attention and affections of men. She is hopeful but that rarely works out.

There was a real opportunity in this film, having four different women, for the writers and directors to make more dynamic characters. One character (Bernadine) clearly fits into the Sapphire trope, another (Robin) fits the characteristics of a Jezebel. The other (Savannah) is getting advice from her mother who is encouraging immoral behavior, but she doesn't fit into any of the standard tropes. Finally we have a sexy "Aunt Jemima" (Gloria) who though is desirous of a physical relationship, does not get one until the end, and throughout the course of the movie is primarily concerned with nurturing. (The "Aunt Jemima" trope is one that evolved out of the "Mammy" trope described earlier.) I think the film creators missed on an opportunity to make the characters more dynamic. They could have had a White male in a relationship with one of the characters, and/or they could have had a successful relationship that involved a sexual component seen on screen. There were so many opportunities that were missed in presenting these four women as recycled tropes.

Hitch (2005)

Hitch plays into the stereotype of the "Magical Black." The idea of the magical Black is that they are insightful, all knowing and connected to the earth. He uses his skill set to provide advice and citations for a primarily White clientele. He trains these men and gives them the guidance they need to succeed in their

pursuits of their love interests. Not unlike the “Tom,” the magical Black generally caters to White characters in the film.

Cressida is also portrayed as promiscuous and unable to engage in an intimate relationship. She is shown as having a preference to physical relationships only. This feeds into the Jezebel stereotype. It also promotes the idea that Black women do not want love, only something physical.

Differences across the decades

The evolution of tropes and stereotypes can be seen throughout the decades. In the 60’s we have a blatant Mammy and Tom character in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. John is the Tom, who was essentially asexual and trying to gain the approval of White families. Tilly, the maid, is the quintessential Mammy character in her loyalty to the White family and her headstrong sass. These two stereotypes are representative of how close in the century the creation of the film was to a more blatantly racist time.

When we get to the 70’s we come into some of the first appearances of the “welfare queen” trope. This correlates directly with the development of the new social system which aided families in need. The visual image of Claudine and her social situation acted as a as a perceptual mirror for what was happening at the time. This image by major media supported the idea that Black women were taking advantage of the system. Claudine in the film can be seen hiding gifts she receives from her male partner, when the welfare officers comes for her check-in.

Finally in the 80’s, 90’s, and 00’s we see the prevailing Jezebel character. There are other tropes that arise, however, I think it is interesting that the one trope of Jezebel was prevalent over three decades in romantic films. This suggest that Black women, or at least some, are unable to have traditional romances. Consider that in the 80’s we have Patrice whose relationships all fail, most of the women in *Waiting to Exhale* all have relationships that fail, and Cressida leaves Hitch because he is emotional. I find the general stagnancy of Black women’s portrayal and their sexuality unrealistic and somehow intentional, and will expand on this theme in the Discussion.

White & Black Power Discrepancies

In two of the films analyzed, namely *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *Claudine*, we see the theme of blatant discrepancies between the power positions held by White versus Black characters.

Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967)

The power in this film rests solely with the White patriarch, Joey’s father. The entirety of the film is dependent on whether or not he, and he alone, approves of the marriage. Though initially it seems like everyone has to be on board, by the end everyone is, with the exceptions of the two fathers. However in the end, the only Black character who says what he thinks (John’s dad) has his opinion trumped by that of the White patriarch (Joey’s dad). Once Joey’s dad approves of the marriage, John’s father’s opinion is rendered irrelevant. Joey’s dad’s decision is held at a ranking higher than all 5 other people.

Entman comments on how “Black-White conversations almost all involve hierarchical relationships with the White in charge of critical decisions and the direction of the plot” (Entman 2010), which aligns with how the entire crux of the film is for the main Black character John to gain approval of this White family. John’s entire purpose is to show that he is good enough. His characteristics are good enough, however, he still isn’t simply because of his skin. Though this film is marketed as being progressive, it still contains blatant racial tropes.

Given the film’s “liberal” intentions, I find it odd that they have no problem with having a Black maid and helpers and they have no problem with John as an individual. However they have clear problems with having Black people actually integrate in the family. Their idea of Black people seemed to be: I can appreciate you separately or use you to benefit from myself, but you cannot integrate into my family unit. The father even questions how a Black mailman (John’s father) could raise such a person (John) -- which does not sound like liberalism as I have come to know it. It simply sounds like prejudice. The only thing liberal about these parents is that they taught their kid not to be racist, which in my opinion isn’t enough.

Claudine (1974)

In the case of *Claudine*, all of the people in power in this film are White. Claudine leaves the city and goes to the suburbs to work for a White family, much like the other Black women on the bus with her. The social worker who checks her house to make sure she isn’t cheating the system is White. Roop’s boss is White and cuts his check, and the majority of police at the end of the film are also White. All of these characters have a great deal of power not just in general but also over the lives of the characters in the movie.

The internal factions in the film seemed to be created to reinforce a desired social idea, where White men and money rule. White characters tended to have control over the lives of Black characters and, external to the films, the White creators of these films dictate the lives of the Black characters within them.

Differences across the decades

I saw the theme of there being significant power discrepancies between groups of people in the films from the first three decades I analyzed, but not in *Waiting to Exhale* and *Hitch*.

In the 60s, the need for what I will refer to as “digestible” Black characters was still prevalent; this meant Black characters that catered to White desires and social status. Harris & Toplin comment on how “it is disconcerting that Kramer and Rose portrayed Poitier only in an accommodating mode and ignored the prevailing radicalism of Black America at the time, including the radicalism of Blacks close to San Francisco” (2007).

In the 70’s, we are forced to view clear racial disparities in that the only White characters in the film hold positions of power. Every White person directly controlled the life of a Black person in the film, which supports the fact that post Civil Rights life in the 70’s still presented struggles for the average Black person. Furthermore, the filmmakers wanted to keep these struggles in the public’s view.

When we reach the 80s with *Coming to America*, we encounter a different power dynamic. As time progresses, it becomes increasingly less acceptable to be blatantly racist, so instead the filmmakers set up a different type of power disparity between that of American Blacks and African Blacks (which I will expand upon in a later section). The 90s and 00's suggest no power struggle, which hints at this idea that we are now in a new society where power is equal, at least thematically. I think this is incredibly significant because the films' progression suggests that we are approaching this more implicit prejudice in film because it is no longer okay to be overt in the distribution of power in across races.

Skin Tone and Favorability

In the films from the three later decades, we see a recurring correlation between skin tone and favorability, namely, the lighter the skin tone, the more moral and/or desirable the character is.

Coming to America

In this section I will be addressing the correlation between the skin tones of Patrice and Lisa and how it relates to the allocation of socially favorable traits. Lisa is fair to medium skinned, with medium-long hair. She is never seen in the McDowell's restaurant uniform, though both her sister and her father are. Furthermore she is seen always doing something that that needs mental thought. When we first meet her, she is the spokesperson for the event and in a suit. She appears as other from her family, being of a different complexion and different hair texture and in some ways of a different status. Moving forward, when she is seen in the restaurant, she is seen in the back offices being productive and handling paperwork. When she is in the front of the office, she is engaging in conversation where she is shown to be poised, polite and interesting. She talks with Akeem and shows interests in his life and they talk about philosophy. Then even in down time, she is seen reading. When we she receives a gift from an admirer, her sister assumes that she has been sleeping around on the side but she comments that not everyone thinks like Patrice. After that, at the game, we see Lisa defending Akeem at a ball game from the rude comments of her boyfriend. She is also portrayed as having goals and a sense of self. Her rejection of Darryl's marriage was on the basis that she wanted more for herself than people deciding what was best for her. She was also aware that she wanted someone who could stimulate her mind more and valued connection. When she does engage Akeem, she offers to cook for him, and when they go for dinner she offers to pay for a meal, telling him not to worry about being broke. They even go to a museum, a cultured activity. Though she desires to be physical with him, they are not on screen and don't end up doing more than kissing. Overall she is portrayed in an incredibly positive light.

Whereas Lisa is portrayed as a thoughtful person, Patrice (Lisa's darker-skinned and short-haired sister) is portrayed primarily as a physical person. She first comes on the scene dressed in worker clothes, and working as a vendor for the Black awareness rally. We never see her working after that point. She does go into the restaurant but it is generally to engage in conversation with her sister. In her downtime she is seen dancing around the house in a very sexy fashion. And when her sister gets a gift, she makes the assumption that her sister is putting out and even states that men won't give gifts like that unless one does. She even swivels her head and snaps when she says it. The next scene involving her is where Lisa and she set up a double date, Lisa with Darryl and Patrice with Akeem. During the following scene, when they are at the game (which is Patrice's first real interaction with Akeem), she tells him to take off his jacket and

when he puts it on his lap, she puts her hand in his lap, though unsolicited. It is then implied by facial expressions that she is providing him with manual stimulation. After that, we find her snooping around. Confused about what's going on with Akeem, she goes to their apartment unannounced and is met with Semmi. While Lisa is on her date having conversation with Akeem, we find Patrice in the apartment having a physical interaction with Semmi, which she engages in because he expresses to her that he is a prince. So Patrice now seems like a gold digger. Akeem doesn't think it is worthwhile to inform her of this fallacy and in the climax of the film, when she does find out, she storms off, claiming that Lisa gets all the good ones. However, when Lisa's ex, Darryl (who over the course of the film is not portrayed with great characteristics) comes into her room wet, she has a flirtatious face and offers to take off his jacket. It is implied that they are going to engage in something physical. And Patrice's character is even more tarnished. It seems she doesn't care who she is with and is even willing to engage with her sister's recent ex. Furthermore in the closing scene when Lisa is marrying Akeem, we can see the father present, but Patrice is not even at the wedding.

The juxtaposition of these two characters is so extreme, and if they were friends maybe it would make sense but one would think coming from the same family there would be overlap in personality traits. However it seems the darker the character, the more sexual and unthoughtful they are. It is unfortunate that Patrice has no scenes where she has character development outside of providing her with negative attributes.

Waiting to Exhale

In this section I have chosen to highlight the two most moral characters: James, who has a dark complexion, and Marvin, who is medium to light skin tone. (The rest of the men in the movie are medium brown in skin tone.) James, who is of overall favorable characteristics, especially when compared to other men in the series, is a good guy. However it is odd to have drinks with a stranger at a bar especially if you're married. It is even more strange or divergent that he invited her up. Though he did not physically cheat, he did emotionally cheat.

Marvin, on the other hand, is the only character male in the film who ends up with a main protagonist. He has no negative qualities at all. When given the opportunity to come over for dinner he is focused on getting a task done but graciously still accepts Gloria's hospitality. He compliments her on her weight which she seems to have a problem with. We can later see him going over and helping her out with the house. During a conversation with Gloria she brings up the impact he has had on her son, Tarik. Marvin spends time with her son and values him, he even takes Tarik out. In their one conflict, he is even the voice of reason, pushing for the development of Tarik's character and Gloria's allowing her son to grow up. He is generally not sexual at all. Gloria instead is portrayed as doing the majority of the flirting. In the end, they do end up together when Gloria goes over to apologize; he even apologizes and ultimately they kiss. He of all the men is the only one who does not engage in sex. He is primarily focused on being useful and valuing of the family unit. He is the fairest skinned of all the characters and is the only one with completely, traditional wholesome characteristics.

Hitch

In this section I will be commenting on how after a bad experience, Hitch's character is no longer interested in Black women and what that implies to the viewer. In a flashback, we see Hitch with a Black woman named Cressida. Young Hitch who is nerdy, clumsy, insecure and overly forward. This overly forward romantic Hitch overwhelms Cressida and she ends up making out with someone else in the back of a car, where Hitch finds her. This is stated to be the relationship that changed him forever. This is the only time in the film we see Hitch pursuing a Black female.

After this he supposedly becomes the smooth and suave Hitch who can get any woman he wants, and the only women he is seen interested in after this experience is fair skinned Latinas. The first woman is only shown for a few seconds and has a large group of admirers around her in a club and, in order for Hitch to get her attention, he treats her like a waitress. The second woman is Sara, a Latina, and the female love interest of the film. Sara as mentioned earlier is clever, sarcastic, cynical and sensual without being overtly sexual. His lack of interests in Darker women did not go unnoticed. Bogle writes: "There was some discussion about the fact that Smith had not chosen an African American actress as his leading lady; he had the box office clout to do so. She wasn't a white one either. It was the stunning Latina actress Eva Mendes. Smith's African American following hoped he would show some sign of a cultural consciousness, whether subtle or not, in his mainstream hits." (Bogle, 2016)

Differences across decades

The three films that address the theme of skin tone and favorability were the films from the 1980s and 1990s and 2000s. The way they portrayed what was favorable was different across the decades (intelligence, morals, image). However who was attributed with the favorable characteristics was always the person with the fairer complexion. As mentioned earlier in the case of *Coming to America*, Lisa was just wholistically more socially acceptable than her sister. Lisa, was shown as poised overall, desirous of physicality without engaging in sex, and she was intellectual. In the case of *Waiting to Exhale*, the only purely good character is the only fair skinned male in the entire film; every other male is medium or darker toned. Marvin is devoted and focused on Gloria. His Buck-like costars are not portrayed as having the same qualities. Finally in the case of *Hitch*, once he becomes more suave and essentially gets rid of his culture, he no longer dates Black women. The case of *Hitch* seems to have to do with status and image more than anything else.

The idea that having light features is favorable is well documented in the literature. Wallace discusses how "stratification in the african american community based on skin color is a remnant of slavery, because the system of slavery in western society was based on race, those slaves who had White ancestry were allocated privileges that their darker counterparts were not" (2011). In the case of the three films, it's the privilege of being considered intellectual or moral or desirable. He goes on to discuss how the images of Blacks with "White" features being more favorable than their darker counterparts leads to having negative effects on Black girls developing views of themselves that are healthy (Wallace 2011) and I would argue it's because they do not fit into the standard of "goodness" or "favor" that these characters portray.

Additional Themes Unique to Individual Films

Below I describe themes that arose in individual films, that I did not see arising in multiple films across the decades.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Discrepancies in communication

One alarming aspect of this film is that the Black characters -- when engaging with each other -- are hostile, loud and judgmental, but when engaging with other White characters in the film, they are hospitable, polite or protecting. John is the clearest example of this. John understands the potential harmful nature of the situation. He understands the hardships that will come with the marriage because he has had hardships simply being Black. He informs the parents that unless they approve that there will be no marriage. When Joey's father disapproves of the marriage, John does not say or do anything about it and does not seem to fight for the love he has with Joey. He simply says that he will essentially obey their wish if they don't approve. However, when his father disapproves, John -- in a manner not seen before -- gets angry. He is no longer calm and collected and even disrespects his father by raising his voice at him and telling him that he will do what he pleases. This leaves me as a viewer to wonder where that side of John was when Joey's parents did not approve. Why is it that, to the White family, he is poised -- but to his own he is more aggressive? There is a clear power imbalance between the White and Black characters, which I mentioned earlier. I find it odd that when Black characters are engaging with one another, the filmmakers thought it necessary to give them completely more aggressive and hostile attitudes towards each other.

The same aspect is seen with Tilly. She is literally in service to this White family and it seems she has been for a long time. She has worked with them for possibly two decades so it can be assumed that there should be a great deal of comfort there that has been built over time, yet in their presence she is more reserved. She is still outwardly expressive but it is held in when in the presence of other White characters. In contrast, upon first meeting John she is incredibly rude, threatens him and even calls him a racial slur. This makes no sense because a maid in service, is generally expected to be polite to all guests that come into the home.

Claudine (1974)

Unrealistic Portrayals of "Poor Black" Reality

I initially watched the film, refreshed by how real it was. By real I mean, the characters in the film called out their issues and that almost made it seem palatable. When watching it a second time, I reminded myself that these are characters. The creators of the film, had the opportunity to show a love story, and yet chose to put every bad thing they could have into it. Claudine is in a hard place and left with 6

children and trying to stay above the system. As mentioned earlier, Collins discusses how the image of the welfare queen as a black single mother taking advantage of the system was used to influence the public's view of welfare (2004). This film furthered the negative portrayal of the "welfare queen" by suggesting that this welfare mother's desire to do something for herself only led to a greater decline in her family unit. It takes a lecherous man who left his own kids to provide her with others people's trash to make her feel good. He leaves, her daughter gets pregnant, and her oldest son gets a vasectomy. In the end Roop comes back, but even their wedding is disrupted by cops. I have never seen so much bad in a movie. The creators, all White, had the opportunity to create something dynamic and positive in this a fictional world and instead they created a fictional mess.

Coming to America (1988)

Black Americans and Black Africans

In *Coming to America*, Akeem is portrayed with primarily fine qualities and he is well groomed and has the status and power to choose poverty, even if it is only visual poverty. However he is surrounded by Black Americans who in the film are all portrayed with blatant racist characteristics. When he first enters the scene, all of his stuff gets stolen by his Black neighbors. Where he lives is run by a Black man who is seen smoking in the halls and clearly doesn't care about the upkeep of his property. One Black character is seen throwing himself down the stairs to escape paying rent. The men in the barbershop cackle and cheat Akeem in their first interaction. The one time we see Black people together and well dressed, not screaming at each other or out the window, is during the Black awareness rally which is set up like a church based situation with a stereotypical pastor preaching to the objectification of women. A Black guy tries to steal from McDowells, all of the Black Americans hide, and it is up to the Africans to save the day. Once again the filmmakers make Akeem an exception to the everyday Black Americans who are all cowering in fear on the ground at the time.

Collins comments on how "In the 1980s and 1990s, historical images of Black people as poor and working class Black became supplemented by and often contrasted with representations of Black respectability used to portray a growing Black middle class. Poor and working-class Black culture was routinely depicted as being "authentically" Black whereas middle and upper-middle class Black culture was seen as less so" (2004). In this case the creators of *Coming to America* set up a blatant distinction between American Black characters and Akeem, an African character who is both foreign and rich. In this situation distinction is not clear if it is because he is African or because he is rich or a combination of both aspects of his identity. However, he is definitely set apart from the other Black characters and is therefore above portrayed as above those around him.

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

Blackness and Fidelity

All of the main characters with the exception of Gloria have engaged in an infidelity. Thus this film does not shed a positive light on Black marriages and make them appear successful in general. In the film there are four instances of physical cheating and one instance of emotional cheating. Bernadine was cheated on

and then helped a man cheat while processing her divorce. Savannah helps a man cheat, with the blessing of her mother. Robin originally breaks things off with a married man, then after failed relationships, goes back to him.

The inability to remain physically faithful hits on the idea that Blacks are unable to control their own sexuality (Collin 2004) and portrays them as divergent from the norm, especially when paired together. I noticed that John, who cheated on his wife (Bernadine), decides to leave her so that he could be faithful to a White woman. Furthermore, James, who emotionally cheats, does not physically cheat and remains faithful to his White wife. I feel there are two ideas at play here, one being Whiteness as an the ideal form of beauty (Bogle 2016) and the need to tame wild unrestrained sexuality (Collins 2004). It seems to me this film is saying when two Blacks are together, they have nothing to reel in and balance their wantonness. However when coupled with a White character, they are able to show restraint. Which leaves me questioning is that because they are “tamed” just by association with their White counterparts or because they have no desire to taint the White ideal? Why is it more okay to cheat on Black women, than White women?

Hitch (2005)

Lack of Cultural Relevance

Hitch does not seem to have a cultural background outside of the start of the film. In a flashback you can see Hitch in urban clothes from the 90s which include a printed shirt and Nike sneakers. After a bad relationship, it is implied that he strips himself of his old persona and becomes this new Hitch. New Hitch, the protagonist of the film, is devoid of all cultural relevance on his person or in his environment. Collins discusses how there is this trend of “being physically Black so that racial integration can be seen (in media) but not culturally Black” (Collins 2004). Hitch fits into this category and is essentially a racially neutral character outside of his skin tone. He can be played by any actor of any race because there is such a lack of cultural reference outside of the flashback scene. One's culture is a crucial part of anyone's identity, even that of a character. I believe that having some cultural markers would have made him more realistic, instead of a character whose race is irrelevant. Bogle comments on this phenomenon on two of Will Smith's movies *Hitch* and *iRobot*; “These two films were clearly geared toward a large mainstream audience; to do so, the filmmakers assumed that the films had to be devoid of African American cultural markers and signs” (Bogle 2016).

Differences across the decades

From the individual themes that stand out in each movie, we see the progression of racialized portrayals over time. Initially in the 60s, we see clear disparities between Blacks and Whites. Then we see Blacks struggling and trying to get ahead, however, their White counterparts are still directly in control of the Black characters' lives. In the 80s, there is a different racial exchange, where Blacks were fractionated and separated by their authenticity. Portraying American Blacks as poor and Africans as rich, we have a double faction that leaves Black Americans still enveloped in stereotypes even when there is a fully Black cast. By doing this, the filmmaker maintains this order where Black Americans were still at the bottom rung of the social ladder. In the 90s, we see views of Blacks in affluence; everyone in *Waiting to Exhale*

is of at least middle class, with no racial or class differences among them. And yet the filmmakers decided to revamp old Black stereotypes of sexual savagery. Finally in the 00's, race is irrelevant, the viewer is supposed to believe that race and culture no longer matter -- even though just in the 80s there were portrayals of Black people stealing. Furthermore, over the span of my film analysis as a society we go from a film where the only thing that mattered in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* was Sidney Poitier's race to a place where Will Smith's race in *Hitch* does not matter at all.

Filmmakers know their power in influencing society and put in films what they can to sell at the time. Over the decades in my films, it is evident that it was becoming less acceptable, decade by decade, to be overtly racist -- but that does not mean the racism and the stereotypes aren't still there. Bogle comments on how in earlier days of film: "If a Black appeared as a butler, audiences thought of him as merely a servant. What they failed to note was the variety of servants. There were Tom servants (faithful and submissive), Coon servants (lazy and unreliable), and Mammy servants, just to name a few. What has to be remembered is that the servant's uniform was the guise certain types wore during a given period. That way Hollywood would give its audience the same product (the types themselves) but with new packaging (the guise)" (Bogle, 2016). I feel that this idea is reflected in the films I analyzed. The tropes are still present throughout these decades, though how they are represented changes (the guise). Filmmakers still tell the same narrative through images of who has power, who is desirable, and who is good.

DISCUSSION

Through my analysis of these five films, I found two themes that arose in all films across every decade: Blackness and sexuality (specifically, the notion that each relationship that involved sexual relationships were doomed to failure), and deceptive Black men (specifically, the notion that each main Black male character was deceptive to his counterpart in the relationship).

Blackness, Sexuality, and Relationship Success

One theme that reoccurred throughout the films was the correlation between sexuality and the success of the relationship. In almost all cases, if the relationship had a sexual component, it failed or was not clearly sustainable.

In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Sidney Poitier's character John is essentially asexual. Their only and most intimate interaction is a kiss they shared in the back of a taxi within the first five minutes of the film. After that all of their interactions seem relatively platonic. They can be seen holding hands once or twice. They sit near each other and sometimes touch but never in a sexual or even really intimate fashion. They talk and look intently at each other and that is all. If they had not shared the kiss, and if the whole movie was not based on their relationship, then I wouldn't know they were in a stage in their relationship where marriage was an option. Furthermore, the question of whether or not they have been sexual directly comes up when Joey's mother asks her. And Joey says no, that John didn't want to -- which implied that she clearly did but he wanted to wait. Their relationship ends with them gaining blessing for marriage and it is assumed that they live happily ever after, even with the social climate at the time, which doesn't come up outside of conversation.

In the case of *Claudine*, their situation is chaotic neutral. Claudine is in a situation where it is implied that her sexuality got her in the situation she is in now. She has six children and none of their fathers are around. When questioned about the fathers, she claims she's had a few marriages and a few almost marriages, but does not say why they left -- just that the men did. Then comes Roop, who wants to engage in a physical relationship with her and she wants a physical relationship as well. She engages in one with Roop but is realistic about her circumstance. It is also revealed that Roop has children and another family and he abandoned them. They engaged in this sexual relationship that after time develops into a more intimate one. However, Roop ends up abandoning her and moving away without tell her. Though he comes back in the end and they decide to get married, their wedding is broken up by a cop riot and it ends on a neutral note in that we don't know whether or not Roop will actually stay. He has left women before and she has been abandoned in the past as well. Neither of their problems have been solved.

In *Coming to America*, Patrice is the most overtly sexual character in the film; however her sexuality lands her with three different men, two of which end up poorly and one is not necessarily a good one. With Akeem, she is sexually forward and instead of being clear with her, he continues to simply pursue her sister. Then when she goes to find answers, she is tricked by Semmi, who used her essentially to have a physical interaction. She is also upset with his lie and some would argue that she seems to be a gold digger. Finally we have her and Darryl. Though their sexual interaction is implied, it is still there; furthermore, it isn't clear that this relationship would be a success because he is her sister's ex boyfriend and he is an unsavory character. In contrast, her sister Lisa doesn't do more than kiss any character in the film and ends up married to a prince. Though she seems willing at some point (much like Joey in *Coming to America*), Akeem (much like Sidney Poitier) also rejects Lisa's desire to become physical.

Waiting to Exhale is one sexual interaction after another that ends in failure. In the case of Bernadine, her marriage fails because her husband decides to cheat on her with a White woman. Then she decides to spend a night with a married man, which probably caused issues in that marriage. In the final relationship, which was a night at a hotel bar with a character named James, who only has one scene, they did not engage in sex. However they did engage in intimate conversation. They go to sleep holding each other and later he comes up in a voice over. He sends her a letter telling her how that night changed his life and that he also loves her. Though he is married, it is in some ways a successful relationship. Though not sexual, it is one based on closeness and intimacy that is implied, after the film, to possibly come up again.

Savannah has sex with two characters in the film. The first man leaves her unsatisfied and is incredibly animalist so she lets him go. The second is with her ex and with him, though they are sexually compatible, he is married and her morals do not allow her to engage in that relationship for long. So in addition to not getting a relationship herself, their interaction causes a betrayal in his personal marriage, which he doesn't seem to have regard for.

Robin starts the film having ended a sexual relationship with a guy named Russell who we later find out is married. She ends things because of drugs. She moves on to a guy from her job, who she isn't attracted to physically but is attracted to intellectually and is left unsatisfied sexually. Their relationship ends because she has to fire him. The next man who comes into her life is incredibly aggressive in general, and, though they are not seen on screen having sex, it is clear that they have from a conversation. He tries for intimacy by inviting her to meet his family but that never happens because he shows up late, so that is

another relationship that fails. In the end Russell comes back and they start having sex again. She is waiting for him to leave his wife and it is unclear whether or not he actually will. She finds out she is pregnant and leaves him to raise her child alone.

The only character who does not have sex during the film is Gloria. She is seen trying to engage in intimacy and being flirty, however she never actually has sex during the film. In the first situation, it's with her son's father, but when she tries to seduce him, we find out that he is gay. Then with Marvin the neighbor, they are mainly seen flirting and engaging in domestic tasks. In the very last scene they end up kissing passionately. This relationship is implied to work in the end.

In the case of *Hitch*, he falls in a similar boat as John and Joey, and Gloria and Marvin. He and Sara are not sexual but are intimate. He even stays the night at her house but they both fall asleep and at most they share a kiss. Like with those two other relationships, it is implied that Hitch and Sara have a successful relationship at the end of the film.

I find this running theme to be highly problematic, not because I don't think intimacy building is a crucial aspect of relationship building, but because there are so many films where White women or men are allowed to engage in relationships that have a start in sex and yet their characters are able to form intimacy over time. If we consider *Pretty Women* with Julia Roberts, her character is literally a prostitute. A businessman picks her up and pays her to spend time with him. They end up having sex and then ultimately end up together. Another instance is *Friends with Benefits* or even *No Strings Attached* where two White characters go into the relationships specifically looking to only have sex. In each of these situations, the characters end up together and live happily ever after. This is not how sex is portrayed in films where Black characters are having sex. In all of the films I analyzed, the Black characters who have sex have relationships that end poorly, or neutrally. There has not been a "happily ever after" for the Black characters who are sexual in any of these films. I find it frustrating that film creators think it's more realistic that a prostitute and a businessman live romantically ever after, yet a Black woman simply looking to date a normal guy cannot have happiness if she has sex.

Collins comments on the history of Black sexuality and states "For both women and men, Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as 'freaks' of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent" (Collins, 2004). This concept of Blackness and untamed sexuality permeated society and continued in stereotypes that helped perpetuate others.

Norma Manatu noticed in her research that "When presented as involved in male-female relationships, Black women have sex; they do not make love. They are shown as women who do not value romance and so are coded as far from being romantic figures" (Manatu, 2003). I would disagree with this assertion, because the women in the films I analyzed had a desire for romance, however they were never given the opportunity to have it. In general, to engage in the benefits of a societal norm, one must generally adhere to the expectations of said norm. That means in order to gain a functioning relationship, Black characters had to be stripped of their "untamed" sexuality. In the films I have analysed, it appears we are not at a place yet in film or society where black sexuality can be accepted as a social norm. Without that

acceptance, black characters are forced to remain practically asexual in order to gain a successful romantic relationship.

Deceptive Black Men

A key attribute that was consistent throughout all of these films is that they all contain Black men as either the protagonist or key members of the film. (Although some films, such as *Hitch* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* have White or Latina female leads, none of the films have White or Latino male leads.) Having watched each film over time, a theme that stood out among all of them is that these Black men were all deceptive in ways relating to their romantic relationships. In *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, this can be seen in get when Sidney Poitier's character does not want to tell his family about the race of his fiancé. Whereas Joey is incredibly straightforward, he is very avoidant and not upfront. Though that is a slight deception, he is certainly perceived as deceptive by the maid Tilly.

In the case of *Claudine*, Roop isn't upfront about his other life, namely that he has children in another state. Claudine discovers this during a heated discussion. Then he assures Claudine that he will show up to the Father's Day event and instead skips town in order to avoid paying child support.

In *Coming to America*, Akeem's deception is that he is not forthright about his status in Zamunda. He claims to be a goat herder, lies about what school he goes to, and even when he builds closeness with Lisa, he still is not upfront with her. Semmi blatantly lies about being a prince to get into Patrice's pants. Darryl lies about putting money in the Black awareness basket. Even Lisa's father is deceptive, as his whole business is based on ideas from McDonald's. He can even be seen in a scene looking at a McDonald's menu.

In the case of *Hitch*, his entire job is based on secrecy. He helps men get the attention of women they are after. He does this by studying the women, then creating for them the illusion of what they are after. He isn't even upfront about his emotional disposition until he is intoxicated from Benadryl.

In *Waiting to Exhale*, Black men and their deceptive nature goes rampant, which I think is interesting considering this is the only movie out of all of them created by Black people. John (Savannah's ex), Russell, and Hubert are all cheating on their wives. The first man Savannah has sex with is supposed to be dancing with her but brings another woman to the party and, through a voice over, we learn that he steals money from her and claims to be vegan but eats hotdogs. In the case of Robin's lover Michael, he promises to provide for her but because she fired him he leaves her for another woman. In the case of Troy, he does drugs even though it makes Robin uncomfortable, and he shows up intoxicated and hours late to an event that he says he will take her to. During this scene, she finds out that he has a kid that she never informed him of, and then he verbally abuses her.

No matter the socio economic status, or the attractiveness of Black males, throughout the films all of them engaged in some form of falsehood. John, Hitch and Akeem are secretive about their personal lives to those who care about them. John does not want to inform his family of his nuptials. In the case of Hitch, his job requires secrecy. So in some ways it makes sense that he is not upfront about everything, however, it isn't necessary for him to directly lie in order to evade question. Akeem is attempting to connect with

women and avoid status recognition. However this lie continues to build over months of interacting with the Lisa. One would think, after having built intimacy with her, that he could have been direct. It left me wondering, if his father did not show up, how long would he have maintained this facade. Roop and many of the men from *Waiting to Exhale* are generally unpleasant characters. Roop is not forthcoming about his child and relationship and I do not believe he would have informed Claudine, had they not got into a heated discussion about welfare. In *Waiting to Exhale*, half of the Black men in the movie are engaging in affairs. Black men cheat on their Black female counterparts throughout this film, and this hints back at the idea of Black sexuality and lack of restraint. However that theme, paired with marriage, suggests that cheating as a Black male could only be presumed to be the norm.

There is not much literature on the topic of Black males in film being portrayed specifically as deceptive. But Reed comments on how in general Black men take the blame for various negative aspects associated with masculinity, which means that negative traits like lying, cheating or being deceptive in general are more likely to be attributed to Black characters. He then goes on to say that “As long as White-males control the media, the media will be used as a weapon against Black men” (Reed, 1999). I agree, and find it notable that over in 5 decades of film each Black man had something to hide. According to the films, I would assume that Black men are untrustworthy in general.

A review was done by The Opportunity Agenda in 2011 on the linkage between media’s negative portrayals of Black males and their internalization of those portrayals. The review states that “For various reasons, media of all types collectively offer a distorted representation of the lives and reality of Black males. In turn, media consumption negatively affects the public’s understandings and attitudes related to Black males (sometimes including the understandings and attitudes of Black males themselves). Finally, these distorted understandings and attitudes towards Black males lead to negative real world consequences for them” (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Although this literature does not explicitly state that Black men are deceptive, the repetitive depictions of them having these negative traits over others leads to an overall negative perception of Black men in film and thus in reality.

Conclusion

As a Black woman having watched these films, I am left feeling discouraged about my place in the social context of America. I went into this expecting to simply be able to look at how Black people love, but instead was bombarded with the situations that surround that love -- how people view it, but most importantly, how the creators of the films decided to show it.

In each movie, one can see how Whiteness comes up in a favorable light, even though each movie has a Black main character or even a predominantly Black cast. I think this is important to discuss because, when watching these films, even when I relate to certain aspects, I can’t help but remind myself that these are Black characters based on the perceptions White people have of Black people. I think this is a problem because the image of Blackness that is widely available and socially pushed to the masses is created by White minds. All of the people who wrote these movies are also White, with the exception of *Waiting to Exhale*, and the fact that Will Smith was one of the producers in *Hitch*. All other writers, producers and directors were White.

The majority of my experience on learning Blackness and what that means, outside of the context of my family and personal culture, come from these films. The images of Blackness I am receiving as real are coming from the minds of White men. These White men continue to propagate stereotypes of a racist past. In my current body, from these films, I've learned that my only place in a romantic encounter is that of a Mammy. The message I receive is that a plus sized Black woman is somehow desexualized and that in order for me to ever gain a romance that will last, I have to stay that way.

I see people of my culture portrayed as angry, as undesirable, or oversexed. They are in films pinned against each other morally for being light or dark, for being American Black or African, for being Black at all. Throughout these films, there wasn't a single situation where a Black character was considered overwhelmingly wholesome without having altered themselves, appeased the White man, or simply being the fairest skinned person in the cast.

The repeated notion of an image of Blackness from the past retells the same story over. Film makers have an obligation, with the power that they have, to create roles that are diverse. When I say diverse, I do not mean adding a Black character to make a film more diverse, but rather I mean increasing the diversity of Black characters overall. There is not one Black narrative. Black people are just as dynamic and complicated as people of any other race. The problem is that there are so few films with Black characters that, when we do see a film where Black people are portrayed in a positive light, it is always in a time frame during or before the Civil Rights Movement. That means external from the films, Black people in everyday light who do not fit into the tropes are treated like the exception. Entman comments on how:

“Images of Black males and females receive criticism not merely for calling upon stereotypes of irresponsible and irrepressible Black sexuality and criminality, but for presenting one-dimensional characters who lack the rounded complexity of real people... these critics are charging that by applying distinctive, stereotyped traits, movies make Blacks appear less individuated, more homogeneous. Whites already know that the members of their group come in all moral and intellectual shapes and sizes. They know much less about Blacks, and the critics suggest that film reinforces Whites' ignorance of Blacks' variety and humanity” (Entman, 2010).

If Black actors were given more diverse roles and they were allowed to be witches, lawyers, and leading romantic interests, then the possibilities for Black actors could become unlimited and therefore unlimit the social imagination of what a Black person can be. We, through film, can teach society that Black people can love and be sexual, and love and be intimate, can love and be dark, or fat, can be accepted by White families. The more diverse narratives of Blackness we have, the more culture gets influenced.

White children grow up thinking they can be anything, and the media has shown them this, in almost every imaginable situation. It's time for us to stop teaching Black people that they can only be how they were perceived in the past. It's time to make more dynamic and diverse films that contain accurate representations of Blackness, and remove the limits on who we can become.

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APPENDIX: Plot Summaries of each film

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967)

Film Summary

Written, directed and produced by White men, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* claims to test the mindset of liberals during the end of the civil rights era. The film features Sidney Poitier, Katharine Hepburn, Spencer Tracy and Katharine Houghton as the lead actors. It was written by William Rose and directed by Stanley Kramer.

While on vacation in Hawaii Joanna "Joey" Drayton, the daughter of an affluent liberal couple in San Francisco, gets engaged to a highly esteemed Black widower Dr. John Prentice. The new couple are pressed for time because John has to fly to Geneva for work that night, but they must first fly to San Francisco to inform Joey's parents of their pending nuptials. Naively Joey believes that her parents will accept John with open and welcome arms, while John is a bit cynical of the thought. Ever polite, John is poised and confident throughout the film even when faced with the expected hesitance. Both Joey's parents, though liberal in their theories, have a hard time accepting John as a potential partner for their daughter. Meanwhile the maid, a Black female character named Tilly, is skeptical of John and believes he is up to something. John's parents, aware of the engagement, are also unaware of the fact Joey is White. The film progresses and John's parents decide to fly to San Francisco to meet the woman who has caught their son's interest. Upon learning about her race, they are shocked and do not initially approve of the arrangement either. The respective mothers warm up to the idea and approve of the marriage, wanting their children to be happy. In the end, it is the approval of Joey's father, the White patriarch, that is needed to resolve the conflict, and everyone is finally able to sit and have dinner.

The Characters in the Relationship

Dr. John Prentice is one of the most upstanding characters I have ever witnessed on film. He is 37, and was in Hawaii teaching. He is intelligent, has a stunning record in providing aid across the globe, has received numerous awards, and is well off, attractive, polite, poised and gentlemanly. That anyone would disapprove of a marriage to him seems absurd. To be frank, it seems to me that the creators of the film made him the most ideal character to show that the conflict literally only had to do with his race. In some respects it is effective to the point they are trying to make, but also seems forced.

Joey seems incredibly naive and inconsiderate. She comes onto the scene, presenting John to her parents with no pretense and does not internalize the stress that is being placed anyone else in the film. She is young, excitable and privileged in such a way that it seems she does not actually understand, or care to understand, the depth of the conflict. She is also defiant and headstrong, and she seems certain of her desires.

Claudine (1974)

Film Summary

Claudine was a comedy/romantic drama released in 1974 which had all White writers, producers, and director. This Film featured Diahann Carroll, James Earl Jones, Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs, Tamu, David Kruger, Yvette Curtis, Socorro Stephens, Eric Jones, Adam Wade, Roxie Roker and Elisa Loti as the lead actors. This film was written by Lester & Tina Pine, produced by Hannah Weinstein and directed by John Berry.

Busy mother of six, Claudine, struggles with providing for her family financially. She receives welfare and works as a maid in a suburb. Upon her arrival to work she is encouraged by other women on her route to pursue an intimate relationship with someone. That day she is approached by a garbage man named Roop, whose route is on the street where she works; he admires her form and asks her out on a date. At first refusing, Claudine later accepts the date and thus their intimate affair begin. The film covers the history of their relationship and the conflicts that arise.

Characters in the Relationship

Claudine is hardworking, independent, direct, witty, sharp, contemplative and realistic. She is generally positive but also tired and understandably frustrated with her living situation which makes sense. She is a single mother left with six children from multiple relationships that did not work out.

Roop is lecherous, he does not understand “no” and coerces Claudine on a date. Through the beginning of the film, Roop is not a favorable character. He seems primarily interested in getting into her pants and initially is not upfront about his children. Later you see Roop take something from the trash on his route

that he gives Claudine at a later time. After some time, he becomes more invested in Claudine's children and appears to be kind and in the end well intentioned.

Coming to America (1988)

Film Summary

Coming to America is a blockbuster that was written by Eddie Murphy but was adapted to the big screen by David Sheffield. The film features Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, James Earl Jones, John Amos, Madge Sinclair and Shari Headley as the lead actors. This film was written by David Sheffield, produced by George Folsey and directed by John Landis.

Coming to America tells the story of Akeem, a prince from the fictional country in Africa, Zamunda. On his 21st birthday he meets his arranged wife, who was raised to serve him, and he is disappointed. He is after a woman who has a strong sense of self and someone he could actually fall in love with. So in the hopes of finding a wife, he goes to Queens, New York with right hand man Semmi. Generally optimistic, Akeem attends a Black awareness rally and is entranced by Lisa, the daughter of a fast food restaurant owner in the area. Akeem and Semmi get jobs at the restaurant so that Akeem may have the opportunity to woo Lisa. There is a love triangle, then a love square, involving Lisa's sister Patrice. There are a few obstacles, one being that Akeem is lying about his status in his country, and another being that Lisa is in a relationship with her current boyfriend Darryl. In the end everything works out and he ends up marrying Lisa, with his father's blessing.

Characters in the Relationship

Akeem is headstrong, curious, fit, optimistic, carefree, and intellectual. He is also deceptive, in that he is not upfront about his status or why he is in the USA until the end of the film. Akeem is African and dark in skin complexion.

Lisa is well spoken, intelligent, head strong, self aware, hardworking and interested, as in she seems to actually listen when people talk. She works at her father's restaurant, reads and seems incredibly upfront and open. Lisa is fair to medium skinned, with medium-long hair.

Patrice is outspoken, she is sassy, nosey and promiscuous, funny, jealous and gold digging. She is Lisa's sister and she also works at the father's restaurant. She seems young and jovial, outside of going to the game you do not really see her engaging in any social activities or even working aside from her first appearance in the film. She is dark skinned with short hair.

Darryl lies, and is a coward, presumptive, entitled, ignorant and vain. He is also affectionate towards Lisa. He does seem apologetic in the end but does not end up with Lisa. He is fair/medium skin tone, with wavy hair.

Semmi, is bored, frustrated with America, funny, ambivalent and a deceptive trickster.

Waiting to Exhale (1995)

Film Summary

Waiting to Exhale is an American romance written, directed and produced by African Americans. The film features Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine and Lela Rochon as the lead actors. This film was written and produced by Terry McMillan and directed by Forest Whitaker.

The film starts with Savannah moving to Phoenix for a new start, at the suggestion of her friend Bernadine. There she meets Bernadine's friends, Robin and Gloria, and the four women become a support system for each other. Each woman faces her own dilemma but uses her friends as a support system. All struggle with various relationship pursuits. All of these characters are in their 30's, and all are of middle class or higher. Notably, this is the only movie on the list with all Black creators.

Characters in the Relationship

Savannah

Savannah is very professional. She is focused on her career and seems hopeful about her life in general. She is cynical about men because of her experiences in the previous city and in Phoenix. She also comes off as realistic and overall self aware.

Kenneth is determined. He wants to rekindle an old flame so badly that he reaches out to Savannah's mother to get her contact info. He is also unfaithful and selfish. He allows his own desires to over-shadow his responsibilities as a husband and wants to continue the relationship indefinitely. He lies about where he is to his wife when visiting Phoenix and simply says that he is on a business trip.

Bernadine

Bernadine is portrayed as being aggressive, sharp, angry and occasionally vulnerable. Over all she just seems fed up and upset with the situation she is in and how much she sacrificed to make it work. She is also selfish in that she engaged in a one time affair with a married man.

John is completely indifferent. He comes off as cold and uncaring. He does not seem to have any regard for the woman he was married to and is also selfish. He is unfaithful and was engaging in an affair with the secretary at the office. Overall, he seems to be a cruel character, not in that he does actively aggressive things, but that he does not care about the pain he is causing.

Robin

Robin, is successful and driven, however she uses her body to gain the attention of men. She is naive and a romantic. She believes people change and is forgiving. This causes her to engage in relationships with men who have negative character traits.

Each man she is involved with (Michael, Troy and Russell) are all unsavory characters but for different reasons. Michael is petty. Troy does drugs, lies and is verbally abusive. Russell is married and engages in this affair with Robin.

Gloria

Gloria is kind, nurturing, flirtatious and overly protective. She is primarily seen worried about her son and her friends. She is also concerned about everyone and keeps people fed. She is flirtatious and is not asexual, however, she is the only character who does not have sex.

Marvin is also kind, knowledgeable and gentlemanly. He helps gloria out and participates in her son's life. He is funny and seems to genuinely care about Gloria.

Hitch (2005)

Film Summary

Hitch is a modern American romantic comedy. The film features Will Smith, Eva Mendes, Kevin James and Amber Valletta as the lead actors. This film was written by Kevin Bisch and directed by Andy Tennant.

Hitch tells the story of Alex Hitchens, a date doctor who helps men woo the women of their dreams. His current client Albert is interested in a New York socialite name Alexa. Hitch helps Albert woo the girl; all the while he is pursuing a girl of his own. He uses his entire well thought out plans in order to get her interested however none of those tactics work. They end up instead connecting over the mishaps. After a misunderstanding, Hitch and his love interest Sara split up only for the relationship to be saved after Hitch engages in over the top romantic gestures.

Characters in the Relationship

Hitch is confident, smooth, suave, clever and doesn't seem to be interested in anything long term. He has built himself from his college days and the facade he lives by now acts as a barrier between himself and other people. He is also cynical and does not believe in love.

Sara is also confident, she is sassy and clever. She is only involved with Hitch throughout course of the film. She is cynical about whether or not relationships work or are sustainable.