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Roses, Representation, and Respectability: The Inner Workings of Reality TV Romance

Growing up, I rarely saw people like me in pop culture. Vanessa Hudgens and Brenda Song were my Disney Channel heroes because of their respective half and quarter Asian descent. For a period of time, half-Filipino Bruno Mars was the only artist I listened to. Seeing Filipinas Cherice Pempengco (now, Jake Zyrus) and Jessica Sanchez praised for their godly vocals on *American Idol* served as the gateway for my reality television addiction. I started watching reality dating television in elementary school; my aunt was visiting and started watching reruns of the tenth season of *The Bachelor* in our living room. That season culminated with Chinese American Tessa Horst engaged to Andy Baldwin. Not only did Horst serve as the first time I watched someone of Asian descent win, but as the first time I saw more to an Asian American on television than crazy talent or technical ability as well. From then on, whenever my aunt was in town, I would watch the early seasons of *The Bachelor* to the hum of my dad's faint murmurs about "that bullshit TV show." From the lavish dates to the catfights, the glitz to the drama—I loved it all (still do). As I started to watch *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Bachelor in Paradise* on my own, what I failed to realize was how the blinding whiteness of *The Bachelor* franchise influenced my ideas of race, beauty, and relationships. Every season I hope for at least one contestant with some degree of Asian descent to claim as my favorite, but for the handful of Asian contestants that have graced the 23 seasons of *The Bachelor*, even less would have the same outcome as Horst. Despite the implications of their portrayal, I turned to reality dating TV

for the presence of people of color because even though it seemed like it was barely there, at least it existed. Reality dating television fails to accurately reflect the population—but for contestants of color, the greater issue with their depiction lies in what we deem worthy of respect.

Reality TV is classified as “television programs in which real people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative” and more specifically, “television programmes focusing on members of the public living in conditions created especially by the programme makers” (Lexico; Dictionary). In other words, reality TV is unscripted reactions from the cast of nonactors to scenarios created by producers that are meant to be absurd and dramatic. The subgenre of dating-competition shows include some variation of contestants competing to find “love” and prize money. The first dating reality show aired in 1965 with the release of *The Dating Game* where a man or woman chose out of the pool of potential partners solely off of their answers and voices. Up until the 2000s, *The Dating Game* was aired on the world’s most watched TV channels. *The Dating Game* paved the way for the reality dating show genre and its growing popularity. Since then, “[i]n 2001, beginning with *The Bachelor*, continuing with *The Bachelorette*, and culminating with *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?* the romance reality series dominated, in number and popularity, every other reality series broadcast during that period” (Essany 11). Even a few years after dating reality TV’s “white-hot popularity,” there have been many variations on the classic dating show, or shows “feature[ing] an attractive “catch” selecting a potential mate from a group of equally attractive suitors,” and producers are still finding new ideas to format romance reality (Essany 12). The reality dating genre already constitutes a sizeable portion of reality television and only continues to grow in prevalence and viewership.

My experience with reality dating television can be attributed to the phenomenon known as symbolic annihilation: when groups of people are underrepresented in audience's thoughts and consequently "dismissed as unimportant to the larger culture" due to being underrepresented in pop culture (Bunton 33). Pop culture is capable of carrying out symbolic annihilation because media functions as a socialization tool that teaches what is acceptable and expected (Johnson). By nature of its name, *reality* television implies a reflection of *real* life, making the occurrence of symbolic annihilation in the genre more damaging. As I faithfully rooted for each Asian contestant, their minute presence, limited screen time, and infrequent success to make the last few episodes led me to subconsciously perceive white people as more attractive and desirable. Watching the rare success of the already rare contestants of color to compete for the attention of a white man led me to see white men as the only suitable partners and white women as the standard for beauty—a mindset that damaged how I viewed myself for a most of my life. As one of the many underrepresented viewers of reality dating shows, I am just one example of someone who has been affected by symbolic annihilation. In an episode of John Johnson's podcast, *IA*, about reality dating show, *Are You the One?* and its first fully sexually fluid cast, a listener writes:

I can't express how much it would've helped me in navigating my sexual and gender identities to have seen this show at twelve, which is how old I was when I came out. Is this season of AYTQ less destructive? I don't know, but young people can look to this show and see a future outside of struggle.

Johnson easily relates, saying, "when I was in my teens, all I had were the men on film from *In Living Color* to show me what a black gay man looked like—which is why it took me so god damn long to figure out who I am." As a gay, Latino man from Columbia, guest Pier Dominguez

has a similar sentiment. Dominguez also asserts that there is an element of fun that comes from all the flirting that characterizes reality dating tv and seeing people who fail to be represented as desirable in mainstream media partaking in the joy that comes from these shows is important. Contrary to my dad’s mutterings, reality dating shows are not to be written off as meaningless or insignificant. For better or for worse, these shows have the power to mold viewers’ perceptions of society and self. As reality dating shows continue to expand their place in media, the significance of their representation of the population continues to bear more and more weight.

Representation is defined as “the action of speaking or acting on behalf of someone or the state of being so represented” (Lexico). In the context of reality television, representation is the inclusion of various minorities as to reflect their presence in the real world. *The Bachelor* franchise is notorious for its failure to include people of color in exchange for a very white portrayal of society (Swanson). Consequently, the franchise has been on the receiving end of public outrage in the form of discrimination lawsuits (Holmes) and boycotts and has become the butt of the joke for countless tweets. The following image is a screenshot of my personal favorite tweet (@DanaSchwartzzz).



From their analysis of contestants of competitive reality television in their article, “How ‘Real’ is Reality Television? Marginalized Group Representativeness in Competitive Reality Television Programming,” Kelly P. Dillon and Elizabeth B. Jones found Caucasians constituted a much higher proportion of competitive reality television (74.9%) than they do in the U.S (63%) while Hispanics and multiethnic individuals were significantly underrepresented. However, even with its shortcomings, reality television “reflect[s] a more diverse America than its more highbrow cousins in scripted prime-time shows” (Braxton). In fact, Dillon and Jones found that the presence of African Americans and Asians in competitive reality television came to about 12.6% and 3.2% which pretty closely mirrored their presence in the general U.S. population at 13.1% and 5.3% respectively (324). It is important to note that Dillon and Jones chose to exclude shows where the majority of the cast was not white. Their findings are a good indicator of inclusion in mainstream reality television but if they were to include shows like *Flavor of Love* and *I Love New York*, they may have found that white people are not nearly as overrepresented. In fact, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People reports that in nearly every aspect of the television industry, people of color are underrepresented—except for when it comes to reality TV (qtd. in Braxton). Competitive reality shows undeniably fail to sufficiently include minorities, but contrary to popular belief, they are ahead of the game in the greater world of television.

Inclusion is not the only facet of representation—representation is also defined as “the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way,” which is where reality dating shows garner the most controversy (Lexico). The progressive casting of competitive reality shows (and inherently, dating reality shows) is overshadowed by how the contestants of these marginalized groups are depicted. In her essay, “Stereotypes: Reality TV as Both Creator

and Confronter,” Kristie Bunton quotes Jennifer Pozner who claims that when people of color *are* featured on dating reality shows, they are only done so in stereotypical ways. Pozner makes an example out of VH1’s *Flavor of Love*, asserting that the show “revived damaging racist stereotypes of African Americans nearly 100 years after minstrel shows perpetrated them.” She criticizes the show’s perpetuation of the “crazy black woman” stereotype and she criticizes Flavor Flav for objectifying each woman and having them cook fried chicken and clean, all while “lack[ing] any obvious qualities that would make him a *Bachelor*-like prize” (33).

Pozner’s claims are widely shared among viewers of dating reality shows—and directly adhere to the beliefs of respectability politics. According to respectability politics, by abiding to the behavior of the White middle class, marginalized groups are more likely to be heard and “respected.” The use of “respectability” traces back to 20th century Black women adopting a “polite, sexually pure, and thrifty” image to counteract their association with being “immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect and protection” (Pitcan et al. 164). Respectability politics has followed the African American community and has spread to Latinx, Asian, and LGBTQ+ communities as well (Pitcan et al. 166). The mechanism of respectability politics is described as functioning off three aspects: condemnation of “unworthy” behavior within marginalized groups, encouragement of values just because they go against stereotypes, and alignment with characteristics of the White middle-class. While these strategies are thought to allow for oppressed groups to gain the “respect” of those that look down on them, they only work to strengthen the cultural norms that are in place (Pitcan et al. 165). So yes, Pozner was right when she said *Flavor of Love* employed African American stereotypes. However, by looking down on the hypersexualized, brash personalities of the show for damaging the reputation of the groups

they represent, we take away their voice and reinforce the direction towards a whitewashed world instead.

The effects of respectability politics have become blatantly clear in mainstream dating reality shows—compounding to the already minimal amount of screen time people of color are given. In her book, *The Surveillance of Women on Reality Television: Watching The Bachelor and The Bachelorette*, Rachel Dubrofsky analyzes the role of the rare women of color in *The Bachelor*. She concludes:

While women of color do not signify within the romantic paradigms of the series (as potential suitors), they must nonetheless play along, pretending to be oblivious to the ways in which they are used to inspire white people to find love... The ideal white women, on the other hand, learns that the “foreign,” the “exotic,” is not only sexy and romantic but that overcoming its potential dangers can be one of the surest ways to test true love (Dubrofsky 130).

Not only are women of color few and far between on *The Bachelor*, they are merely a symbol of temptation meant to test, then strengthen, the relationship a white contestant has with the primary bachelor. Take for example, Jubilee from Ben’s season of *The Bachelor*. From the get-go, Jubilee was marked as different. There was a handful of other black contestants but as a Haitian-born, hot dog loving, war veteran, Jubilee overshadowed all of them and become *the* black woman of the season. While the other girls are presented as Ben’s “type”—bubbly, happy, pretty, and white—Jubilee, with her tragic backstory and war experience, is portrayed as “strong,” “complicated,” and well, not white (Biakolo). Throughout the season, Jubilee has her moments of vulnerability, but she never feigns peppiness or softens her personality to fit in with her (white) competition. Other women took notice of Jubilee’s difference, one even going as far

to say that Jubilee is not a good fit for Ben because he “wants a wife that will be friends with all the other soccer moms” (Zadrozny). Jubilee’s early success in catching Ben’s attention gave hope to those rooting for contestants of color, but her failure to take on a “white” personality became her downfall—resulting in Ben concluding their relationship was fruitless and Jubilee becoming another colored obstacle for another white winner.

The only time a black woman has been given a chance by *The Bachelor* franchise was in season 21 with the introduction of Rachel Lindsey. Smart, successful, and *very* respectable, Rachel excited advocates for diversity when she received the first impression rose, a historical indicator of the season’s winner (Denninger). Introduced as a judge’s daughter and an accomplished lawyer in her own right, Rachel was an image of wealth and intelligence. Throughout the season, she never employed African American vernacular, exuded confidence, and was always very eloquent. Rachel was all things prim, proper, and professional—the perfect model of “respectability” With Rachel, *The Bachelor* franchise was able to appease those that criticized their lack of diversity while maintaining white respectability. Prior to Rachel, no black contestant had lasted more than five weeks on the show (Fitzpatrick). Not only did she exceed the five-episode mark, but also, she lasted until the end of the season, and then starred in the next season of *The Bachelorette*. Rachel was the perfect person to take on the honor as the first the first African American to star in a *Bachelor* series (Bonos) because she was “a bachelorette who happened to be black, not a black bachelorette” (Boylorn). Rachel entered the franchise attempting to find love with a man who had never had interest in pursuing a serious relationship with a black woman. She serves as the only black woman who has been more than a “temptation” or “distraction” in *The Bachelor* franchise—all because her “respectable” qualities overshadowed any “blackness” she possessed.

People of color nearly comprise a sufficient portion of dating reality television, but agitation stems from how these groups are portrayed. In her essay, Bunton encourages the use of a “turn off and talk back” strategy to combat shows that use “ethically questionable stereotypes” (37). The plan to boycott reality dating shows is completely unreasonable because a) they are way too fun and entertaining to give up and b) they have grown to be too large a part of society to simply ignore. Moreover, the motivation for avoiding reality dating shows is entirely flawed. The personas of “stereotyped” contestants is not the issue. The main problem is that under the beliefs of respectability politics, marginalized groups that uphold their respective racial stereotypes, such as hypersexual and bold African Americans, are labeled “unrespectable” because they fail to align with white middle class values. Instead of demanding change from the racists, respectability politics calls for victims of racism to act more like their oppressors (Young). By conforming to the ideals and behavior of the white middle class, people of color are giving up their power for a false sense of positive social change while actually strengthening pre-existing social norms. Rather than being boycotted, “damaging” reality television should be celebrated in all of its overdramatic, ratchet glory for truly representing people that come from different backgrounds and demonstrating a more progressive image of diversity.

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