

Queen Latifah, unruly women, and the bodies of romantic comedy

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Bodies, stardom, narratives

[1] The questions that compel this essay concern the relationship between bodies and narratives: the narratives available to certain bodies and the disruptive impact of those bodies on narratives. My focus is the embodiment of the spunky heroine of the romantic comedy film--the feisty screwball leading lady whose excessive speech, aspirations, and energy have endeared her to generations of cinema lovers and to feminist film theory as well, which has celebrated her as woman-on-top and fast-talking dame. Earlier versions of this film character were played by the likes of Rosalind Russell, Barbara Stanwyck, Carole Lombard, and Katherine Hepburn, the later versions by Meg Ryan, Julie Roberts, Drew Barrymore, and Jennifer Aniston. As this list suggests, the excessiveness of this heroine is proscribed by the cultural ideals of white femininity, which in turn is pictured through very select bodies. While feminist film scholarship has long acknowledged the power of the unruly woman in comedy, this scholarship has glossed over the ways in which race in particular enables the unruliness of this character and intersects with class ideals in the picturing of this heroine. Using the star persona of Queen Latifah as a case study, this essay centers on how the romantic comedy narrative handles the sexuality of the unruly woman who is black, or conversely, the narratives available for racial unruliness when it is female.

[2] The traditional romantic comedy ends in the coupling of the unlikely couple, but the pleasure of the narrative--and its feminist appeal--is the lively, quarrelsome give-and-take of the courtship, fired by the struggle for egalitarianism between the unruly woman and the man who is her match. This film genre has proven remarkably resilient since its formulation in the 1930s, retaining its original formula but shape-shifting to accommodate social change and contemporary issues (Krutnik 131-37; Paul 126-28; Preston 227-29). As a result, following a decline in the 1970s and early 1980s, romantic comedy has seen a steady resurgence since 1984, and it remains one of the most prevalent versions of heterosexual romantic ideology.

[3] Stardom is a key issue here because these comedies register cultural wishes and fantasies about the bodies of heterosexuality. As popular culture's most salient narrative of marriage, it is no surprise that romantic comedy shares the ideals Chrys Ingraham describes in the representations of contemporary wedding culture: "what counts as beautiful is white, fair, thin, and female" (81). Confirming this configuration, the women of color who have starred in this genre--Halle Berry, Jennifer Lopez, Gabrielle Union, Nia Long, Sanaa Lathan--are light-skinned women with Caucasian features and the bodies of fashion models. When the Bridget Jones films came out (*Bridget Jones Diary*, 2001; *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, 2004), there was nearly obsessive press attention to Rene Zellweger's weight gain for the roles, even though the extra thirty pounds put her at an average weight and size for most women (Brennan and Schwabauer). Another telling example is the 2002 runaway hit *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, which begins with a heroine who does not fall into the classic romantic-body template. So the narrative is embedded with a makeover subplot that irons out her more stereotypically ethnic features--even though the narrative is focused on ethnic comedy. The popularity

of this film, a low-budget venture that reaped unexpectedly large box-office returns, may have resided in the appeal of a star (Nia Vardalos) who was not Hollywood-style glamorous, but its romantic plot is triggered when she becomes not only thinner but less "Greek." Even lesbian romantic comedies, which have a better record with race, tend to rely on Hollywood's ideal for leading ladies in films such as *Better Than Chocolate* (1999), *Saving Face* (2004), *Chutney Popcorn* (1999), and *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999).

[4] The physical and racial profile of the romantic-comedy heroine and the whiteness of the romantic narrative itself may be obvious. More interesting is the testing of the body-narrative relationship through particular cases of stardom and celebrity, first of all because those cases foreground the bodies at stake in the cultural imagination of heterosexuality, and secondly because they delineate the genre's cultural work in articulating gender and race. The film career of Queen Latifah (Dana Owens), still very much in progress as I write this essay, provides a fascinating example of this intersection of body, cultural fantasy, and available narratives. Latifah has achieved stardom with a physique that is unconventional in star culture, but her films--with one exception--have so far resisted centering her as part of a romantic couple.

[5] The exception, *Bringing Down the House*, her 2003 comedy with Steve Martin, is the focus of this study because it conspicuously twists the romantic-comedy narrative to avoid romance between the two main characters, suggesting the dissonance of the large, black female body in this cinema formula. In *Bringing Down the House*, Martin and Latifah are a classic screwball couple: he's the uptight lawyer who needs soul, and she's the funky homegirl who has been framed for a crime and needs him to clear her name. In the spirit of romantic comedy, they perform the requisite sparring and pratfalls, but then end up coupling with far less interesting characters. As Roger Ebert protested, this "violates all the laws of economical screenplay construction. . . . A comedy is not allowed to end with the couples incorrectly paired." The *New York Times* critic blamed it on squeamishness, claiming the film "doesn't have the nerve to follow through on what seems like its romantic-comedy setup" (Mitchell 15). Rachel Swan, the reviewer for *bitch*, put it even more bluntly: "Though *Bringing Down the House* is initially set up as a romance between Charlene and Peter, it becomes clear as the movie progresses that love would blossom only if Charlene were white" (27).

[6] The assumption of these and other disappointed reviewers was that race is the obstacle preventing the romantic formula from playing out. Yet the success of an interracial comedy such as *Something New* (2006) indicates that mixed-race romance is hardly a screen taboo anymore. It is not simply race, but the raced body and persona of a particular star which is at stake here. In this conjunction of stardom and narrative, the unruly woman as progressive romantic heroine takes on particular racial implications. *Bringing Down the House* celebrates Latifah as a hip-hop version of this heroine, but it also reduces her to a series of racist stereotypes, revealing the axis of race upon which the unruly-woman figure revolves.

[7] My aim in this essay is to frame Latifah's role in *Bringing Down the House* within the contexts of romantic comedy, the racial implications of that genre's unruly woman, and the histories of other popular unruly-woman actresses--Mae West, Josephine Baker, and Whoopi Goldberg--who have likewise tended to disrupt or be diminished in romantic-couple film narratives. In particular, *Bringing Down the House* repeats the narrative structure of a 1935 Josephine Baker film, *Princess Tam Tam*,

which similarly posits a powerful African-American star as a romantic heroine and then erodes her subjectivity as she becomes a racial marker within a white, masculinist narrative. I am not claiming that romantic comedy is impossible for the black, non-glamorous female star, and in fact Whoopi Goldberg's foray into that genre, *Made in America* (1993), is discussed later in this essay. However, given Latifah's high-profile stardom in both hip-hop and mainstream popular cultures, the odd narrative twists in *Bringing Down the House* merit attention for their cultural implications. The following section rereads the overlapping histories of the unruly woman and romantic comedy as histories of racialized bodies, and examines the sexuality, race, and class of the female bodies of romantic comedy. The final section analyzes the narrative impact of the Queen Latifah persona on *Bringing Down the House*, in particular its racialized twist on an unruly-woman plot formula, and juxtaposes this film with the Josephine Baker vehicle *Princess Tam Tam*.

Unruly women

[8] To date, *Bringing Down the House* is Latifah's only film that draws on the romantic-comedy formula. Queen Latifah often plays characters who are overtly sexualized, but in her other comedies--*Taxi* (2004), *Beauty Shop* (2005); *Last Holiday* (2006)--her characters' romantic interests have been bracketed to the margins of the narrative, and in earlier films, she played powerful women who were not associated with men at all. Latifah was cast as a butch lesbian bank robber in her breakthrough film *Set It Off* (1996), a role with continuing implications for her career, and she was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in *Chicago* (2003) as a prison matron whose sex life is suggested, succinctly, by an unbuttoned blouse in a scene with Catherine Zeta Jones. In the successful television comedy series *Living Single* (1993-98), Latifah played the independent-minded editor of an urban magazine, coolly at odds with her man-crazy roommates and friends.

[9] This cinema and television history of strong, non-traditional roles matches her outspoken star persona, originating in the male-dominated world of hip-hop music, where she debuted with a platinum-selling album, *All Hail the Queen*, in 1989. Equally unorthodox is Latifah's publicity, which aggressively foregrounds her size and a discourse of bodily acceptance. Because Latifah had breast-reduction surgery and had in fact lost weight in 2004, the bodily-acceptance discourse has at times contradicted her more conventional celebrity-body publicity. Her *Glamour* cover photo of May, 2004 carried the caption, "Enough with the unreal cover girls! Curvy, proud Queen Latifah," but the accompanying story included an account of her weight loss and a series of photos suggesting the requisite before-and-after effect (Childress 85). Nevertheless, a predominant theme of Latifah's stardom has been self-confidence about body-image, and her references to her size-16 frame are striking in the cultural "hegemony of the fat-free body," as Susan Bordo has put it (xxxix). A 2006 *Essence* article, challenging the reigning definitions of beauty, quoted Latifah as feeling fortunate "to be supported by people who like me for me and don't try to make me look like somebody else" (Robertson 103). The "somebody else" cited in this quotation is precisely the Hollywood body likely to be cast in a romantic comedy.

[10] It is significant that *Bringing Down the House*, her only post-*Chicago* film to do well at the box office as of this writing, was also her only film promoted as a romantic comedy, suggesting that audiences were indeed ready for a screwball pairing of Latifah and Martin. The film was financially successful despite mixed reviews, which registered appreciation of the considerable comic talents of the stars but also uneasiness with the film's satire of racism and with its odd shirking of the romantic-

comedy formula.

[11] The failure of the film to follow through with Latifah's role as romantic heroine is especially ironic because by many accounts, romantic comedy is the site in Hollywood cinema where female unruliness has best been able to thrive. In her pioneering work on women in film, Molly Haskell described the genre as "a world in which male authority, or sexual imperialism, is reduced or in abeyance, while the feminine spirit is either dominant or equal" (131). The formula itself requires the sparring of well-matched contenders, with "the couple meeting up, or ending up, as equals," thus fulfilling "their desires of equal standing and of equal motive power," as Deborah Thomas describes it (58-59). In their more recent incarnations, romantic comedies are more likely to stage cultural ambivalence about feminism and shifting gender roles (Cornut-Gentile 112-13; Tasker and Negra 171-73). But overall, romantic comedy remains the genre where women's issues and desires are likely to be prioritized.

[12] In her book-length study of the unruly woman figure, Kathleen Rowe persuasively argues that romantic comedy, because of its inherently subversive nature, is one of the few popular narratives possible, in fact, for this comic, rebellious, and powerful female character who talks back, laughs loudly, and makes clear her own desires (101-02). The utopianism of romantic comedy--its projection of a younger, better generation--springs from this vetting of the couple whose union signifies a triumph over the old guard. Thomas Schatz goes even further in his description of the antiauthoritarian young couple in this genre, noting that their unconventional behavior in courtship precludes the possibility of settling into a staid, traditional marriage; in short, the genre promises marriage but also promises an unruly, unconventional couple (159).

[13] Taking a different perspective on the spirited romantic-comedy heroine, Maria DiBattista emphasizes her verbal clout, arguing that the "fast-talking dames" of 1930s and 1940s comedy were characterized by their smart talk, verbal wit, and ability to use language to claim space and power--certainly characteristics shared by the Queen Latifah persona. DiBattista traces this strong tradition through dozens of films starring Irene Dunne, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, and others, all of them playing heroines "who balked at traditional gender roles and were insistent on self-rule" (11).

[14] This rebellion against female gender roles is possible in romantic comedy because no matter how transgressive she may be, the unruly heroine's destiny is thoroughly conformist. The implication may be that the romantic couple will turn into unconventional citizens, as Schatz claims, but this will happen to them as a couple, securely under the sign of heterosexuality and within the social auspices of matrimony. The eccentricities of even the most "screwball" characters are, as genre critics repeatedly point out, tempered by their concurrence to the middle-class ideology of marriage (Neale and Krutnik 155-56; Schatz 159).

[15] It is not simply that the ideologies of the unruly woman contradict those of romantic comedy, but that the genre staging this heroine thrives on this very tension, endlessly promising both glorified individualism and the bittersweet compromises of marriage. Addressing this tension, comedy scholar Geoff King claims that the contradiction is palatable because even though the heroine is "tamed" into bourgeois life at the end of the narrative, the assumption is that she never loses her rebellious elan (132). King makes a distinction, however, between this dynamic heroine of romantic comedy and the comedian whose stardom is based on the unruly-woman persona. The latter, he says, is a far greater

risk in Hollywood cinema. Unlike her raucous male counterpart whose horseplay maintains male authority (Robin Williams, Adam Sandler, Ben Stiller), the unruly woman comic "represents a more serious challenge to the gender hierarchies on which so many social relationships are based" (133).

[16] However, Rowe argues that the stakes are not just social relationships, but sexual difference itself. The woman who disrupts the status quo by talking back and laughing loudly enacts male privilege and thus posits a possible breakdown of sexual categories, a possibility at which romantic comedy occasionally hints before the couple is safely recontained into the heterosexual norm (43, 118). If the investment is sexual difference itself, then the conservative function of romantic comedy is spelled out as the popular narrative that disciplines a powerful female figure--a figure threatening to the very categories of sexuality--by positioning her within the heterosexual couple.

[17] Certainly the absent terms in this history of unruly women in romantic comedy are race and queer or gay sexualities and bodies. For King, the Julia Roberts character Vivian in *Pretty Woman* (1990) is the primary example of the "tamed" woman whose rebelliousness is the powerhouse of the film. But it seems to me the powerhouse of that film is Julia Roberts herself and her status as the eponymous pretty woman--a woman who looks like a high-end fashion model (thin, white, or with white features). When King moves into a discussion of subversive women comic characters, he drops romantic comedy and instead uses as examples characters played by Whoopi Goldberg, Barbara Windsor, Julie Walker, and Marianne Sagebrecht.

[18] Neither King nor Rowe specify that only a particular feminine version of female unruliness makes romantic comedy possible. Femininity is a concept inherently racialized, historically configured, and weighted with specific class connotations. Romantic comedy strikingly illustrates how the very categories "masculine" and "feminine" are imagined through these lenses. As Judith Halberstam puts it in her study of female masculinity, "femininity and masculinity signify as normative within and through white middle-class heterosexual bodies." Halberstam is particularly interested in Latifah's role as Cleo in *Set it Off* because it conforms to the stereotype of the inherent masculinity of African-American women and because it makes Cleo's performance of masculinity both edgy and attractive (29). These stereotypes of race and gender empower the performance, she argues, producing "credible butchness" (228).

[19] The stereotype works both ways, as Ann M. Ciasullo has argued about the lesbian femme body in popular culture which, she says, "is nearly always a white, upper-middle class body" (578). For its heterosexual models, we can posit from this that the unruly woman of romantic comedy can be black only if she plays against the race/class stereotype--that is, if she looks like Gabrielle Union or Sanaa Lathan, whose bodies and demeanors reinforce rather than threaten middle-class concepts of the feminine, as we see in films such as *Love and Basketball* (2000) and *Deliver Us From Eva* (2003).

[20] So in order to place Queen Latifah into this history of the unruly woman, the category itself needs more scrutiny in that it seems to signify both radical sex/gender transgression but also a conventional middle-class heroine. In her history of the unruly woman in popular culture, Rowe is in fact interested in subversive female bodies--androgynous, grotesque, excessive, masculine--but the structure of her argument separates the truly transgressive bodies from the ones in romantic comedy. The first part of the book focuses on Miss Piggy and Roseanne Arnold, or as one chapter is entitled, "Pig Ladies, Big

Ladies, and Ladies With Big Mouths." Tracing these strong female personas to older literatures and folklores, Rowe describes the unruly woman as one who refuses her proper place and is associated with jokes and laughter, masculinity, androgyny, looseness, dirt, liminality, and excessiveness of body and speech (31). Using Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, Rowe demonstrates the unruly woman's association with the grotesque body, which emphasizes its "lower stratum" (belly, buttocks, genitals) as opposed to the classical body with its privileged "upper stratum" (head, face, eyes) (33).

[21] The second part of the book focuses on the unruly woman in popular film narratives. Rowe begins with Mae West as the brassy unruly woman whose sexually-experienced persona (the prostitute with a heart of gold) was unsuitable for romantic comedy as it developed in the 1930s. Instead, Rowe suggests, the heiresses of West's legacy are Miss Piggy and Roseanne (117). Rowe then shifts to romantic comedy as the site where "the woman on top" tradition materializes in Hollywood, and the shape and look of the heroines shift, too: the primary examples are characters played by actresses such as Claudette Colbert, Katherine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Julia Roberts, and Cher, whose performances of subversive unruly-woman traits are embodied as white, middle-class femininity. Even Cher gets a bourgeois makeover in *Moonstruck* (1987). Rowe's point is that romantic-comedy heroines carry on the comic woman-on-top tradition in the only narrative available that allows them autonomy and individuality--and spares them the crueler fates of the femme fatale or the melodramatic victim, the other configurations of Hollywood heroines. But for this mainstream narrative as pictured by Hollywood, the bodies become petite and pretty, small-breasted, classical. The transgressive body has dropped out of the conversation.

[22] And missing from the conversation entirely is race. The disruptiveness of the woman-on-top has a different effect if played by Katherine Hepburn or Meg Ryan instead of Queen Latifah. For the traditionally attractive white woman in white culture, unruliness can be a liberating quality of female individualism. For the black woman in white culture--someone who is already under suspicion as part of an "unruly" subculture--the opposite occurs: her subjectivity diminishes as she slides into racial stereotype. In his treatment of race and gender in comedy, Geoff King makes this point about Whoopi Goldberg's ability to play the disruptive comic: "To be a loud, crazy, unruly figure is to go against dominant stereotypes of 'acceptable' female behavior and is something of a rarity in film, even in the realm of comedy. The same qualities might fit more easily into the parameters of long-standing racial stereotypes, however, most notably that of the 'coon': the racist version of the African American as black buffoon" (143). For King, race both enables Goldberg's performance and positions it in a risky space where one possible interpretation is racist spectacle (145). This is exactly the risk of many of the jokes in *Bringing Down the House*. The final section of this essay treats in more detail the film's racial humor, but my point here is that the concept of "woman on top" assumes white privilege--the ability of disruptive behavior to be interpreted as laudable individualism.

[23] The other significant aspect of Queen Latifah as unruly woman is her ability to perform female masculinity, as suggested by Halberstam. Rowe does not theorize certain masculinized unruly bodies as queer, but she does include two cases of "grotesque" or excessive bodies and campy performances which backfire for romantic comedy: Mae West in the 1930s and the Marilyn Monroe-Jane Russell combination in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). They are also the bodies engaged in the truly subversive tradition of camp, which, in its scorn of sentimentality and sexual categories, has no place in the middle-class pieties of romantic comedy. The example of Mae West is particularly relevant to Latifah. Although Rowe does not discuss masculinity as part of West's sexual/gender

transgressions, the latter's physical heft and demeanor are intrinsic to what Rowe names as the subversive, "unruly woman" qualities of West's performance--the exaggerations of gender performance and inversion (119). West literally outsized most of her leading men, walked with a macho swagger, and dominated the space around her, even as she invoked feminine stereotypes. As Pamela Robertson Wojcik points out, West's masculinity was produced by her mimicry of female impersonators, so it always involved mixed gender codes (291). Rowe argues that West's dominating and highly sexualized presence, as well as her affinities to camp, limited her comic narratives to gold-digger films, resulting in "a single-note performance" (124).

[24] The parallels with Latifah are striking. Like West, Latifah has strong affinities to gay culture. Especially because of her role as Cleo in *Set It Off*, gay rumors have haunted her publicity, so that "a decade later, she's still getting asked how much she and Cleo have in common," a 2006 article in *Essence* reports. Her reply in this interview is typical of what she has said over the years: "Latifah refuses to confirm or deny. She says she has plenty of gay friends, and to deny anything about her personal life would be an insult to them" (Amber 182). As Ciasullo reports, Latifah's remarks about lesbianism over the years have ranged from defiance ("I'd rather have you die wanting to know") to a cool distancing from the topic, with the effect of leaving the question ambiguous (598). Discussing the strong, womanist character played by Latifah on *Living Single*, Krystal Zook argues that this ambiguity was a key to Latifah's power on that show, which played up her resistance to traditional sex and gender roles (68-74).

[25] In addition to these biographical similarities, Latifah also shares West's proclivities for outrageous poses, costumes, and performances, most notably her over-the-top Chicago musical number "When You're Good to Mama," a tour de force tribute to camp divas such as Sophie Tucker, Eartha Kitt, Ethel Merman and of course West herself. In addition, Latifah sometimes uses her large body for the effect of female masculinity in her films, most obviously in *Set it Off*, but also in her dominating gestures and skillful driving (coded as "masculine") in *Taxi*. As Charlene, the tough ex-con in *Bringing Down the House*, she jumps into a fist fight with men twice her size and beats up a prissy white girl whose Tai Bo lessons are no match for what Charlene "learned in the hood," as she puts it.

[26] As this suggests, the performance is not simply tough chick but tough chick from the 'hood, and here the class and racial issues overlapping with Mae West more pointedly delineate the female bodies excluded from romantic comedy. Mae West's success as a 1930s sex symbol was highly racialized, as Wojcik has shown, particularly in her screen relationships with subordinate black female characters. These relationships constructed, through contrast, "West's glowing whiteness" (290), but the films also emphasized West's intimacy and identification with these women as winking co-conspirators about sex with men, and also as possible lesbian interests. This association, claims Wojcik, constructed West's sexuality as working-class, an effect intensified by her appropriation of a "dirty blues" singing style that in the 1930s was associated with lower-class black culture (291-92). A similar set of class associations converge around the stardom of Latifah, whose associations with "the hood" are made not so much through her lower-middle-class background, but rather through her place in hip-hop culture and rap music, resulting in her public image as "New Jersey-bred bad girl" (Daniels), "the Jersey homegirl" (Amber 180), or "former tomboy from the 'hood" (Norment 130).

[27] My interest here is how these class markers--"dirty blues" and "Jersey girl"--merge with racial markers in the production of an unruly woman who disrupts or simply does not fit the romantic comedy

narrative. In her 2001 analysis "The Colour of Class," Ann DuCille uses the classic romantic comedy *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) as her primary example in arguing that "there is no space for a black middle or upper class in the American popular imagination" (409). In this film, she says, "the class signifiers... are so recognizably haute couture that the characters could only be imagined as white" (410), and she points to the failure of the 1996 romance *The Preacher's Wife*, a black re-make of a white romance, *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), as further evidence of the dissonance between "colour" and class. For DuCille, the issue is the American cultural positioning of the "coloured figure--the dark form, the black body" as "low-Other," to use the term Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have developed in accounting for marginalized configurations that support a status quo (412).

[28] As DuCille's example suggests, the issue is also "the coloured figure" as the marginalized low-Other in romantic ideology. In popular culture, whiteness as a class signifier conveys the privileged status of the romantic heroine and hero. Analyzing the meanings of the "white wedding," Ingraham emphasizes the importance of race in the signification of class: "Whiteness, wealth, and wedding become central features of the ideology of romantic love, communicating a sign system that collapses them into one package" (88). It is not simply that DuCille's example happens to come from romantic comedy, but that romantic comedy exemplifies this race-class packaging of heterosexuality which, Ingraham argues, suppresses the "complicated ways institutionalized heterosexuality works in the interest of the dominant classes" (88).

[29] My argument so far has focused on the relationship between the unruly woman and the bodies of romantic comedy in order to make the case that the Latifah persona, as "former tomboy from the 'hood'" is triply excluded (masculinized, black, lower class) from the cultural imagination of heterosexual romance. Moving now to a more detailed reading of *Bringing Down the House*, I want to explore how the coherency of this text is disrupted under the cultural weight of this particular unruly heroine and how, in the resulting narrative, Latifah functions as a racial/cultural signifier at the expense of the subjectivity and individuality usually accorded the romantic-comedy heroine.

Romance as safari

[30] A favorite plot for romantic comedy is the rescue of a stodgy and dreary man by the zany, unruly woman. Rowe discusses this pattern in classic comedies such as *The Lady Eve* (1941) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and the formula continues in films such as *Pretty Woman*, *You've Got Mail* (1998), and *Along Came Polly* (2004). The possibility of this male redemption in romantic comedy is exactly what makes it such an ideal narrative for egalitarianism and the unruly woman; it gives the heroine agency, subjectivity, and license for gleeful chaos (Rowe 146-47). The 1992 screwball comedy *Housesitter* is an especially significant example of this plot in that this too was a Steve Martin vehicle, with Goldie Hawn playing the madcap woman who moves into the hero's house and eventually makes him realize she is more his match than the dowdy ex-fiancee for whom he yearns for most of the movie. *Housesitter* was cited in reviews of *Bringing Down the House* by critics displeased that the later film failed to follow through on the formula that succeeded in the earlier movie (Mitchell, Swan).

[31] In *Bringing Down the House*, the racial twist on this formula works especially well for Steve Martin, whose inhibited WASP persona is one of his specialties and a signal that whiteness itself is being broadly satirized in this film. Here he plays Peter, the divorced, middle-aged tax lawyer losing his grip.

A younger man is dating his ex-wife, another younger man is usurping his power at the law firm, and his kids are constantly disappointed by his lack of attention. Peter's life is suddenly rattled by Charlene, the character played by Latifah. Charlene is an obvious version of the Queen Latifah persona--tough, outrageous, excessive in body and style. Peter meets Charlene on an internet chat site where she has been posting as Lawyer Girl, leading him to believe she is the svelte blonde professional in the photo she sends. The joke is that Charlene is in the photo, but in the background, being handcuffed by cops; in actuality, she's broken out of prison and needs a lawyer to help prove her innocence. The photo startlingly captures the racialized sexual dynamics of mainstream visual culture: the blonde woman foregrounded as icon, the black woman's story nearly obscured in the distance--a pattern which the film at first seems to reverse.

[32] As much as Peter is repulsed by Charlene and repeatedly ejects her from his house and life, she cons him into taking her in, bringing him jive, bling, dancing lessons, and soul food, as well as emotional support for his children. She teaches the younger one to read; she teaches the teenager to respect herself. Peter, in turn, learns that Charlene's ex-boyfriend is the one who framed her, and in the film's climactic scene, Peter disguises himself as a white rapper so he can infiltrate the bad boyfriend's club and manipulate a confession from him. In sum, Charlene gets legitimacy and Peter gets soul.

This so far adheres to the cultural exchange intrinsic to the romantic-comedy formula, which tends "to play both ends against the middle, to celebrate the contradictions within our culture while seeming to do away with them" (Schatz 159). The film up to this point strongly resembles *Housesitter*, setting up the expectation that Peter and Charlene will kiss, couple, and commit to a crazy future together as the main characters do in the earlier film.

[33] However, the romantic comedy plot is hijacked, and the hijacking occurs in a cheesy turnaround that defies its own clichéd moment. During the melee at the black nightclub--a wild free-for-all fistfight pitting the bad boyfriend's heavies against Peter and his friends--Charlene is shot and seems to be dying. Peter rushes to take her into his arms. This is a standard melodramatic moment when, conventionally, the sparring couple realize what they mean to each other and succumb to the inevitable kiss. The camera moves in for a tight shot of the two, Peter tenderly touches her cheek, and since the bullet hit her titanium cellphone instead of her breast, Charlene comes miraculously back to life. But instead of the kiss, Peter turns around and calls to his sidekick Howie to tell him Charlene is alright. Howie (Eugene Levy) is the oddball Jewish lawyer besmitten by the "cocoa goddess," as he calls her. She calls him "freakboy." He has been courting her throughout the film with a deadpan appropriation of Charlene's hip-hop slang--"You got me straight trippin, Boo"--which instantly achieved eye-rolling notoriety in reviews. The upshot is that in the coda, we see Charlene with Howie, while Peter has reunited with his blonde ex-wife.

[34] Ebert's review, emphasizing the wrongness of "the couples incorrectly paired" in a romantic comedy, points out that "There isn't a shred of chemistry between Latifah and Levy," while Peter's ex-wife "exists only so that he can go back to her." The film is sprinkled with hints that Peter misses his wife and desires the reunion, but Ebert here is referring to the film's lack of emotional investment in this reunion, as happens in the romantic comedy of re-marriage, in which the story revolves around the divorced couple, as in *The Awful Truth* (1937) and *His Girl Friday* (1940). In this kind of comedy, the focus of the entire film is the reunion of a couple who should never have broken up. The stars are

the separated main characters, and the dynamic between them is what keeps the film going.

[35] In striking contrast, the reunion with the ex-wife at the end of *Bringing Down the House* repudiates the dynamic between Peter and Charlene--unless, that is, we recognize the racial dynamic that overrides the romantic one. The unruly woman who rescues the nerd may be standard for romantic comedy, but the black unruly woman in that position bears the pressure of another, specifically racial cultural narrative. As the reviewer for *The Boston Globe* put it, "it has always been in American pop culture that white people can only find validation, get crazy, get real if they hang with black folks" (Burr 1). This racial trajectory of white masculinity in crisis actually structures the film, despite the romantic-comedy formula recognized by many reviewers. The plot begins with Peter's emasculation at work and on the home front. It ends with him winning back his ex-wife, restoring a healed nuclear family, and gaining a multi-million dollar client so he can quit his stuffy law firm and open his own business. And it happens because of his journey into hip-hop culture via Charlene.

[36] Peter's heroism occurs literally as the journey to the black club called the Down Low, which is urban slang for "secret" but also for the man with a homosexual life kept from his wife or girlfriend. This disavowal of attraction characterizes Peter's relationship to Charlene but also to black culture, which is portrayed throughout the film, by way of Charlene, as sexier and livelier than Peter's white suburban world. Peter borrows clothes from some brothers so he can slip into the club as a drugged-out, weirdo white rapper. In this way, he takes on a type of blackface that has the effect described by Michael Rogin in his treatment of blackface performances in Hollywood film: it frees the performer from rigid racial identity and allows sexual aggression (102-03, 184). Inside the club, Peter dances and jives with a variety of black women, and then boldly traps the bad boyfriend into a taped confession. The FBI agent who makes the arrest congratulates Peter for a job that was "pretty ballsy," as he puts it.

[37] If this rings of colonial triumph, the white man on the jungle adventure to prove his stuff, it may be symptomatic of the larger cultural positioning of this story as a Disney film aimed at a predominantly white market. According to Latifah, Disney Studios approached her with the offer of the starring role and also the role of Executive Producer. "The studio felt the script needed not just a black voice, but because it was so racy and edgy, it also needed someone who could develop a different take on the characters" (Hart). As several reviewers pointed out, Disney was indeed anxious to channel a "black voice" for white audiences as a way to tap into the vast popularity of hip-hop culture. Steve Martin wearing a gangsta doo-rag and big jewelry, freaking on the dance floor, is comedy that both enacts and parodies white appropriation of hip-hop fashion and music. Typifying African-American cultural critics who are skeptical about the superficial and often racist dynamic of this culture-surfing, historian Kevin Powell argues that "all this fascination with hip-hop is just a cultural safari for white people" (Samuels 62).

[38] In *Bringing Down the House*, the safari to the Down Low club is particularly rewarding for Peter because, in an unlikely scenario, this is where he bonds with the snooty, wealthy, and racist client Mrs. Arness (Joan Plowright), who has been brought to the club against her will by Charlene and Howie, has gotten stoned, and survives the brawl. After the police and FBI clean up the scene, Mrs. Arness asks Peter to take her to a diner because she has the munchies. She then withdraws her multi-million dollar account from Peter's law firm and as a private client directs it instead to Peter, so he is suddenly a tax lawyer with his own business. In short, in a comedy about restoring white masculinity, Charlene is the strategy that enables the restoration by serving as guide and translator through racial otherness.

[39] Judith Mayne has described this cultural narrative as one in which "a black character functions centrally and crucially to enable the fantasy of the white participants" (143). As scholars have pointed out, a number of mainstream films attest to the popularity of this narrative: *Field of Dreams* (1989), *Ghost* (1990), *Shawshank Redemption* (1994), *The Family Man* (2000). Donald Bogle, historian of African-American cinema, comments that *Bringing Down the House* delivers "the typical depiction of blacks as the ones who come in to teach and help whites be all they can be" (Samuels 62). The black redeemer characters are thus positioned as versions of the faithful servant in relation to needy white characters--in this case, enabling the reunion of the white family and the re-masculinization of Peter. The Charlene character does attain her goal of clearing her police record, but along the way, she is subject to some humiliating humor, including a literal positioning as servant, and she's the one who takes the bullet, a traditional sign of selflessness in this kind of narrative.

[40] Reception of this film, as gauged by reviewers from both the mainstream and African-American press, indicates considerable uneasiness about the racial humor centered on Latifah's character and disappointment about Latifah's involvement in this project. According to the *New York Beacon*, "the movie's racially insensitive subject matter ... drew harsh reactions from the audience" at the media screening in New York (Daniels). The *Washington Post* reviewer observed that "Since [Latifah] has acknowledged cleaning up the crude script, she clearly read the thing and agreed to play a hip hop Aunt Jemima" (Kempley). Reviews frequently remarked on how, even with all Charlene's tough talk and charm, she is often positioned as butt of the joke. "The comedy of mismatched partners works only if the laughs are at each player's expense," the *Los Angeles Times* reviewer pointed out. "Charlene sasses [Peter] every which way, but somehow the joke is usually on her" (Dargis).

[41] An ongoing gag--and the one reviewers noted most often--has Charlene posing as a nanny for Peter's children in order to save his reputation--that is, to explain his association with a loud black woman heavy on bling and cleavage. Charlene calls the nanny pose "that slave bit" and slathers on a fawning plantation accent to camp it up. In the most prolonged comic scene on this theme, Peter convinces Charlene to wear a maid's outfit and serve dinner in order to appease the visiting Mrs. Arness, who then reminisces fondly about black servants in her childhood household who were grateful for table scraps. She caps it by singing "a sad Negro spiritual" with the refrain, "Is massa gonna sell us tomorrow? Yes, yes, yes." Charlene's revenge for the dinner scene is to season a dish of food with Milk of Magnesia and hand it to Mrs. Arness--but it ends up being eaten by Peter instead. In the long run, neither Mrs. Arness nor the bigoted country-club types are ever made to suffer for their racism. The *Wall St. Journal* review claimed this takes racial satire "to a new level, allowing several characters to crack racial slurs, with no comeuppance" (T. King 6).

[42] Charlene's tough, trash-talking posture and outrageous clothing are clearly meant to spark and satirize racist reactions from Peter and his horrified white neighbors and colleagues. She appears at the Beverly Hills country club in low-cut, thigh-high urban chic. She breaks into Peter's house to host a wild party around his pool, filling the BMW-laden neighborhood with the sound of rap music and with black partiers in scanty clothing. But this unruly-woman behavior takes on other connotations in relationship to black stereotypes. Reviewer Kam Williams of the *New York Beacon* says Charlene "behaves like a rap video ho' who finds fulfillment as a hyper-sexualized Mammy" (27).

[43] The problem is that that these stereotypes are the film's sole markers of "authentic" blackness. The film takes care to recuperate Charlene from these stereotypes, showing that she was an astute reader of law books while she was in prison and is an astute reader of human nature with Peter's children. However, the uneasy reception of the racial humor indicates these more subtle characterizations are overshadowed by the troubling nature of the negative ones. The Los Angeles Times reviewer observed that the film "desperately wants her hip, her edge and mostly her blackness but doesn't know what to do with the human being who comes with the package" (Dargis). That is, the film has invested not in a character played by Latifah but in her cultural and commodified meanings as rap star and hip-hop diva.

[44] Overall, Charlene functions as a racial signifier rather than a romantic heroine, a position usually privileged with far more subjectivity even in comedies. More specifically, as "former tomboy from the 'hood," Latifah enacts the type of unruly woman excluded from middle-class romance. Her size and toughness constitute one of the film's running jokes. After their disastrous blind date, Charlene cons Peter into giving her a bed for the night, but when he comes in to wake her up the next morning, she is startled awake still in prison-mode and punches him in the face, knocking him flat. When she shows up at Peter's country club to embarrass him, Peter considers calling the security guard. Then he looks at the comparatively diminutive guard and says, "No, she could probably take him." In a later scene at the club, Charlene gets into a brawl with a skinny white shrew (Missi Pyle) who doesn't stand a chance against Charlene's heft and street smarts. Upon learning that Peter's teen-aged daughter is being sexually harassed by her date, Charlene "bitch-slaps" him, as the daughter reports later, and then hangs him over a balcony by his feet until he apologizes. These physical scraps always position Charlene sympathetically as a kind of hip-hop wonder woman, and the joke is always on the white victim. But the cliché of the masculinized black woman is embedded in the text not as a joke but as a serious plot point. The bad boyfriend, it turns out, framed her by robbing the bank disguised as a woman. The video footage captured a figure that seems to be Charlene. Because we too see the video footage at one point, identified as Charlene, the implication is that Charlene herself looks like a man in drag.

[45] My point is that this narrative struggles not simply with racial stereotypes but with the stardom of a popular female entertainer whose physical dimensions combined with her race defy the cultural profile of the heterosexual body in romantic comedy. As a thinly-disguised version of Latifah, Charlene is positioned ambivalently as a figure of fascination but also as a threatening cultural and sexual power that is fetishized and disavowed through various objectifications--rap video ho'--but also through the narrative of the masculine colonial voyage into the world of the exotic Other.

[46] Understood in these terms, *Bringing Down the House* bears an uncanny resemblance to the Josephine Baker vehicle *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), one of two French films made by Baker at the height of her popularity in France. *Princess Tam Tam* is widely regarded as a colonialist fantasy about a white writer who regains his career, masculinity, and estranged wife through his relationship with the Baker character, Alwina, a "primitive" Tunisian shepherdess whom he meets when he travels to Africa for inspiration. Just as Charlene is a thinly-disguised version of the Latifah persona, the Alwina character is a thinly disguised version of the Josephine Baker persona--comic, spontaneous, outrageous, highly sexualized.

[47] At the time *Princess Tam Tam* was made, Baker was lionized in France as *La Bakaire*, the

fabulous Black Venus, a problematic embodiment of primitivism, the object of ceaseless scrutiny and fetishization. The French press adulated Baker's "primitive" beauty, obsessed about the darkness of her skin, and exclaimed about the grotesquery of her body and her dancing (Sweeney 56-61; Dalton and Gates 913-18). In France, her primary work was onstage, though she made, in addition to Princess Tam Tam, one other musical film, *Zouzou* (1934), which similarly gives her an interracial romance that goes astray. *Princess Tam Tam* reflects French culture's racialized idolization of Baker, and its object is to satirize the white man and his superficial world--similar to the satire in *Bringing Down the House*. But like the later film, *Tam Tam* gets entangled in its own racist biases. Critics have agreed that the satire never gets past its own fetishization of the Baker character as the exotic object of the colonialist gaze (Ezra 124-45; Coffman 380-83; Kalinak 319-21).

[48] As in *Bringing Down the House*, the story opens with the hero symbolically castrated; his wife has thrown him out of the bedroom and his writing career is at a standstill. The answer, he believes, is to go "among the savages. The real savages! Yes, to Africa!" After Max discovers Alwina in Tunisia, he decides to take her home and pass her off as an African princess in the tradition of Eliza Doolittle, a good joke on Parisian culture. Just as the flirtation between Max and Alwina begins to get serious, we learn that the entire Pygmalion story was a fantasy and that Alwina has never left Africa. In short, the romantic-comedy trajectory is suddenly hijacked. But in writing the story about Alwina, Max has won back his wife and become a huge success as an author. As in *Bringing Down the House*, these plot twists come at the expense of coherency, logic, and generic formula. The revelation that most of the film has been Max's fiction is puzzling because there is no clear marker of a framework to the story-within-the-story. As critic Kathryn Kalinak puts it, "Race disturbs the very coherence of the narrative itself" (332).

[49] The films are also parallel in their depiction of heroines representing "unruly" cultures positioned as exotic, sensual, and far more sexualized than the cultures of the white protagonist. This is demonstrated when, at a high-class Parisian ball, Alwina is tricked into breaking out of her carefully learned demeanor and throwing herself into a wild, captivating dance performance. The parallel moment in *Bringing Down the House* occurs when Charlene tries to teach Peter to freak on the dance floor of an upscale night club. The uncanny similarity is that Peter's ex-wife and sister-in-law, horrified, look down from a balcony at the couple on the dance floor, just as the uppity society women look down from a balcony at Alwina's dance. In both cases, the staging signifies the split between the bawdy physical "lower stratum" versus the refined "upper stratum." Alwina and Charlene also closely conform to Rowe's description of the unruly woman whose body and speech are excessive, whose "behavior is associated with looseness" and who is "associated with dirt, liminality" and pollution taboos (31). Alwina plays a trick on white tourists by filling their salt shakers with sand, similar to Charlene's trick of spicing a plate of food with a laxative. Both characters are associated with dancing, food, drink, the lower body, refusal of constrictive behavior and dress, and even crime--the writer meets Alwina when he catches her stealing oranges. Alwina's most charmingly subversive behaviors conform to white expectations of the colonial native: she won't wear shoes, she eats with her hands, and she refuses to obey clocks and schedules, positioning her, like Charlene, as a beguiling outsider to the boring orderliness of white culture.

[50] Without losing the historical specificity of *Princess Tam Tam*--the French presence in Tunisia, Baker's stardom in France, French xenophobia in the 1930s--my case here is that the repetition of this story in *Bringing Down the House* suggests how Baker and Latifah, as black stars fetishized in white

culture, disrupt and actually hijack a traditional white narrative, but then are themselves hijacked into demeaning roles, functioning as signs of racial/cultural difference rather than heroine. Kalinak's description of Princess Tam Tam could easily apply to the later Latifah film; Tam Tam, she says, is a film "genuinely fascinated and sympathetic to Baker on the surface, and one whose underlying structure marks her as a signifier of her race" (323)

[51] The larger question is what, exactly, is being romanced in these films, which celebrate a larger-than-life black female stardom and its exotic culture, and then retreat to whiteness and the safety of the familiar and the status quo. In her well-known essay "Eating the Other," bell hooks describes this cultural use of "the body of the colored Other" as "unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for [the] reconstruction of the masculine norm" (24). Because Charlene functions as racial marker rather than subject, her sexuality is constantly deferred in *Bringing Down the House*, no matter how much cleavage squeezes out of her camisoles. As the Boston Globe reviewer points out, Howie's leering comments to Charlene are "as close as the movie gets to actual sex. Every time the script hints that she and Peter might possibly be physically attracted to each other, everyone involved dances skittishly away" (Burr).

[52] Hortense Spillers wrote about this sexual displacement more than twenty years ago in analyzing the failure of the white cultural imagination to deal with black female sexuality. For whites, says Spillers, "sexual experience among black people (or sex between black and any other) is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium through which the individual is suspended" (85). Thus in *Bringing Down the House*, the Eugene Levy character sexualizes Charlene constantly through a stream of suggestive comments and come-ons, but the sexual life of these two characters is an offscreen joke, "boundlessly imagined." Charlene as "rap video ho" embodies an updated version of primitivism and the exotic Other, her sexuality a fantasy rather than a facet of personhood.

[53] The one sexualized scene actually included in the plot is Charlene's comic attempt to teach Peter how to be a sexual tiger after they've both had too much to drink and Peter asks for advice about how to win back his ex-wife. As Ebert notes, this is a standard ploy in romantic comedy films and is in fact part of the formula which this film confounds: "they are constantly thrown together, they go from hate to affection, and they get drunk together one night and tear up the living room together, which in movies of this kind is usually the closer." Peter and Charlene drunkenly clamber all over each other, she puts his hands on her breasts, and they end up on the sofa poised for action. Instead, they are suddenly interrupted when the racist neighbor appears at the door--a metonym for the larger racist pressures looming at the perimeters of this film.

[54] The door appears to mark the threshold of sexual possibility for this particular version of the unruly black woman in cinema. A strikingly similar moment occurs in Whoopi Goldberg's interracial romantic comedy, *Made in America*. When she and the Ted Danson character finally have the opportunity for a sex scene, it similarly morphs into physical comedy. They scramble through the house knocking over lamps and shattering knickknacks, but at the moment they get to the bed, a knock at the door downstairs interrupts them. Unlike *Bringing Down the House*, *Made in America* follows the screwball formula to its end, with the Danson character miraculously reformed of his drunken, redneck behavior and hooked up with the Goldberg character at the closure. That is, it doesn't escape the clichés of the black woman as savior. But neither does it allow the characters the requisite sexuality of romantic

comedy.

[55] Exemplifying the resistance to certain black unruly bodies in heterosexual narratives, Goldberg's films are curiously prudish in their representations of sex, as *Made in America* indicates. Even though Goldberg has often been paired romantically in her films, the camera each time turns tactfully away from sex scenes, so that even in a film such as *Fatal Beauty* (1987), the lovemaking scene is signified by a smiling Goldberg in a bathrobe the following morning. Goldberg has joked about the long lapse between her screen kisses in her debut, *The Color Purple* (1985), and her comedy with Danson eight years later. "My first screen kiss was with another woman, and I hadn't been kissed since" (Pickle 1).

[56] Critics' comments on these deferrals of sexuality in Goldberg's films support my case about how the black unruly woman troubles the narratives of heterosexuality if she does not conform to white, middle-class ideals. Yvonne Tasker argues that Hollywood can't quite picture Goldberg as a woman, mainly because of the masculinity she projects in some of her roles. (172-73). Chris Holmlund includes Goldberg as one of the "impossible bodies" of Hollywood which "exceed the parameters within which we think of 'ideal' or even 'normal' physiques" (4). Referring to Goldberg's role in *Ghost*, in which she channels a dead man so he can kiss his widow, Holmlund observes that "Whoopi is the first, and so far the only, black woman who 'becomes' a straight white man in mainstream movies" (133). The masculine poses are compounded by Goldberg's deliberately outrageous off-screen clothing which "effectively de-sexes her," claims critic Andrea Stuart (13), indicating the refusal of feminine norms.

[57] The bracketing of Queen Latifah with Mae West, Josephine Baker, and Whoopi Goldberg foregrounds the problem of available romantic narratives for highly popular female stars whose "impossible bodies" and unruly-woman demeanors disrupt the norms of heterosexuality. My argument here has been that race complicates this problem as a primary inscription of the unruly-woman character, evident in the juxtaposition of *Bringing Down the House* and *Princess Tam Tam*. The startling similarities between these white masculinist fantasies, built around high-profile African-American female stars in two very different eras, delineate the racial contours of romantic comedy and its feisty traditional heroine. The unruly woman thrives in this narrative only to the extent that she conforms to racialized ideals of femininity, which can be pictured only through specific bodies and stars. Indeed, the figure of the unruly woman palpably reveals the impact of race in the conjunction of stardom and narrative, as well as its impact in the cinematic picturing of bodies within genres. Latifah's popularity as a hip-hop "crossover" star inevitably reveals racialized and contradictory cultural desires, including fascination with a black, full-figure body at odds with mainstream feminine ideals and thus at odds with heterosexuality's favorite stories.

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