

What Love's Got to Do with It

By Breon Tyler
Indiana University, Bloomington

As a Black woman who consumes and indulges in romantic films, I have observed that the vast majority of romantic movies involve White couples. There are, however, exceptions. Between the late 1990s to the very early years of the twenty-first century, there were several African-American romances that reached the big screen, like *Love and Basketball*, *Love Jones*, and *Brown Sugar*, to name a few. Nevertheless, the trend was short-lived, as Hollywood saw little to no promise in generating a great deal of revenue from these films. On one hand, I found these movies to be positive representations of Black love, going against the typical portrayals of the heterosexual Black couple who are natural-born enemies and destined for failure. The astonishing fact is that in any given year, there are multiple romance films featuring White couples. There is even a growing interest in and acknowledgement of middle-aged White women getting married and/or finding love. This is reflected by the increase in romance films geared toward middle-aged White women hitting the big screen these days. In response, someone might say, "Well, what about *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*?" Although it is in fact a romance geared toward middle-aged African-American women, there still are not nearly as many of these films geared towards Black women as there are for White women. Consequently, with the scarcity of Black heroines and heroes in this genre, I arrived at the conclusion that romance and thus love might be unattainable for a Black girl like me.

Prior to the eighteenth century, Africans were depicted as noble and heroic individuals by western Europeans. During this time, the West believed that Africans were highly moral people and, according to the ancient Greeks, particularly favored by the gods. However, as ties between Europe and Africa diminished, western sentiments transformed to a delusion of White superiority. One method of dehumanizing those of African descent was to strip them, figuratively, of all human characteristics, such as the ability to love. The main question driving my research is whether love is racialized as White. Mostly, I am interested in the relationship between African-American men and African-American women, or the lack thereof. My intent is to find instances of resistance against stereotypical depictions of African-American heterosexual couples as being overtly and uncontrollably sexual, while having nothing more to offer one another other than heartache and frustration.

Generally speaking, my interests lie in cultural studies, particularly, Black literature and art history of the African Diaspora. I hope to design a course with a focus on Black romantic comedies that have been inspired by western literature and/or plays. For example, the Black romantic comedy, *Deliver Us from Eva*, is a take on William Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. However, when the shrew is presented as a Black woman, the character only reiterates the stereotype of the emasculating Sapphire. Thus, the purpose of this class would be to examine the nuances of a White romance in its original state versus an African-American adaptation of it. Since romance is a western concept, race automatically becomes an issue when it is applied to Blacks. Hence, there is a fine line to tread when portraying Blacks in a "positive" light. The typical answer to presenting Blacks in this manner is to conceal their Black "inferiority" with a White demeanor. More specifically, to show Blacks in a noble light means to portray them as White. Nevertheless, the ideal portrait of Black would be a human one, which in turn would be more dynamic than masquerading in White. Therefore, the challenge of this course would be to

discover and investigate instances of resistance by Black artists (literary and cinematic) who successfully present alternative representations of African Americans.