

READING WRITING

THIS TEXT: READING

1. Parenti's examples may seem a bit dated to you, though you have probably seen *Pretty Woman*. Can you think of more recent examples of classist and sexist films?
2. Find Parenti's thesis statement. *Hint*: He hits you with it right off the bat. Do you agree with his contention about Hollywood?

YOUR TEXT: WRITING

1. *Sling Blade* is a fairly popular movie that deals with issues of class. Write an essay on *Sling Blade*, *The Full Monty*, *Titanic* or some other movie that foregrounds class tensions. How does Hollywood deal with class? Is that different than the way an independent film might approach class?
2. *Pretty Woman* bears a strong resemblance to *Cinderella*, which is also about class. Write an essay in which you explore the links between gender and class. Are issues of power involved?
3. Write a comparative essay in which you compare a film and a short story or poem in terms of what each has to say about social and economic class.

The World is a Text: Writing, Reading, and Thinking about Culture and its Contexts. Ed. Jonathan Silverman and Dean Rader. 2nd ed. New Jersey: Pearson, 2006.

MOCK FEMINISM: WAITING TO EXHALE

■ bell hooks ■

Taken from her provocative book *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, bell

hooks' essay (1996) offers a reading of the popular movie *Waiting to Exhale*. Unlike most reviews that praised the film for its depiction of black women, hooks' review charges the film merely masks harmful stereotypes.

IN THE PAST A BLACK FILM was usually seen as a film by a black filmmaker focusing on some aspect of black life. More recently the "idea" of a "black film" has been appropriated as a way to market films that are basically written and produced by white people as though they in fact represent and offer us—"authentic" blackness. It does not matter that progressive black filmmakers and critics challenge essentialist notions of black authenticity, even going so far as to rethink and interrogate the notion of black film. These groups do not have access to the levels of marketing and publicity that can repackage authentic blackness commodified and sell it as the "real" thing. This was certainly the case with the marketing and publicity for the film *Waiting to Exhale*.

When Kevin Costner produced and starred in the film *The Bodyguard* with Whitney Houston as co-star, the film focused on a black family. No one ever thought to market it as a black film. Indeed, many black people refused to see the film because they were so disgusted by this portrayal of interracial love. No one showed much curiosity about the racial identity of the screenwriters or for that matter, anybody behind the scenes of this film. It

was not seen as having any importance, for black women by the white-dominated mass media. Yet *Waiting to Exhale's* claim to blackness, and black authenticity, is almost as dubious as any such claim being made about *The Bodyguard*. However, that claim could be easily made because a black woman writer wrote the book on which the movie was based. The hiring of a fledgling black director received no critical comment. Everyone behaved as though it was just normal Hollywood practice to offer the directorship of a major big-budget Hol-



wood film to someone who might not know what they are doing.

The screenplay was written by a white man, but if we are to believe everything we read in newspapers and popular magazines, Terry McMillan assisted with the writing. Of course, having her name tacked onto the writing process was a great way to protect the film from the critique that its “authentic blackness” was somehow undermined by white-male interpretation. Alice Walker had no such luck when her book *The Color Purple* was made into a movie by Steven Spielberg. No one thought this was a black film. And very few viewers were surprised that what we saw on the screen had little relationship to Alice Walker’s novel.

Careful publicity and marketing ensured that *Waiting to Exhale* would not be subjected to these critiques; all acts of appropriation were carefully hidden behind the labeling of this film as authentically a black woman’s story. Before anyone could become upset that a black woman was not hired to direct the film, McMillan told the world in *Movieland* magazine that those experienced black women directors in Hollywood just were not capable of doing the job. She made the same critique of the black woman writer who was initially hired to write the screenplay. From all accounts (most of them given by the diva herself) it appears that Terry McMillan is the only competent black woman on the Hollywood scene and she just recently arrived.



It’s difficult to know what is more disturbing: McMillan’s complicity with the various acts of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal cultural appropriation that resulted in a film as lightweight and basically bad as *Waiting to Exhale*, or the public’s passive celebratory consumption of this trash as giving the real scoop about black women’s lives. Some bad films are at least entertaining. This was just an utterly boring show. That masses of black women could be cajoled by mass media coverage and successful seductive marketing (the primary ploy being that this is the first film ever that four black women have been the major stars of a Hollywood film) to embrace this cultural product was a primary indication that this is not a society where moviegoers are encouraged to think critically about what they see on the screen.

When a film that’s basically about the trials and tribulations of four professional heterosexual black women who are willing to do anything to get and keep a man is offered as a “feminist” narrative, it’s truly a testament to the power of the mainstream to co-opt progressive social movements and strip them of all political meaning through a series of contemptuous ridiculous representations. Terry McMillan’s novel *Waiting to Exhale* was not a feminist book and it was not transformed into a feminist film. It did not even become a film that made use of any of the progressive politics around race and gender that was evoked however casually in the novel itself.

The film *Waiting to Exhale* took the novelistic images of professional black women concerned with issues of racial uplift and gender equality and turned them into a progression of racist, sexist stereotypes that features happy darkies who are all singing, dancing, fucking, and having a merry old time even in the midst of sad times and tragic moments. What we



saw on the screen was not black women talking about love or the meaning of partnership and marriage in their lives. We saw four incredibly glamorous women obsessed with getting a man,

with status, material success and petty competition with other women (especially white women). In the book one of the women, Gloria, owns a beauty parlor; she is always, always working, which is what happens when you run a small business. In the movie, girlfriend hardly ever works because she is too busy cooking tantalizing meals for the neighbor next door. In this movie food is on her mind and she forgets all about work, except for an occasional phone call to see how everything is going. Let's not forget the truly fictive utopian moment in this film that occurs when Bernie goes to court divorcing her husband and wins tons of money. This is so in the book as well. Funny though, the novel ends with her giving the money away, highlighting her generosity and her politics. McMillan writes: "She also wouldn't have to worry about selling the house now. But Bernadine wasn't taking that fucker off the market. She'd drop the price. And she'd send a nice check to the United Negro College Fund, something she'd always wanted to do. She'd help feed some of those kids in Africa she'd seen on TV at night . . . Maybe she'd send some change to the Urban League and the NAACP and she'd definitely help out some of those programs that BWOTM [Black Women on the MOVE] had been trying to get off the ground for the last hundred years. At the rate she was going, Bernadine had already given away over a million dollars." Definitely not a "material girl." It would have taken only one less scene of pleasure fucking for audiences to have witnessed Bernie writing these checks with a nice voice-over. But, alas, such an image might have ruined the racist, sexist stereotype of black women being hard, angry, and just plain greedy. No doubt the writers of the screenplay felt these "familiar" stereotypes would guarantee the movie its crossover appeal.

Concurrently, no doubt it helps that crossover appeal to set up stereotypically racist, sexist conflicts between white women and black women (where if we are to believe the logic



Loretta Devine, Lela Roaton, Angela Bassett, and Whitney Houston in *Waiting to Exhale* (1995).

Source: 20th Century Fox/The Kobal Collection.

of the film, the white woman gets “her” black man in the end). Let’s remember. In the novel the movie is based on, only one black man declares his love for a white woman. The man Bernie meets, the lawyer James, is thinking of divorcing his white wife, who is dying of cancer, but he loyally stays with her until her death, even though he makes it very clear that the love has long since left their marriage. Declaring his undying love for Bernie, James moves across the country to join her, sets up a law practice, and gets involved with “a coalition to stop the liquor board from allowing so many liquor stores in the black community.” Well, not in this movie! The screen character James declares undying love for his sick white wife. Check out the difference between the letter he writes in the novel. Here is an excerpt: “I know you probably thought that night was just something frivolous but like I told you before I left, it meant more to me than that. Much more. I buried my wife back in August, and for her sake, I’m glad she’s not suffering anymore . . . I want to see you again, Bernadine, and not for another one-nighter, either. If there’s any truth to what’s known as a ‘soul mate,’ then you’re as close to it as I’ve ever come . . . I’m not interested in playing games, or starting something I can’t finish. I play for keeps, and I’m not some dude just out to have a good time . . . I knew I was in love with you long before we ever turned the key to that hotel room.” The image of black masculinity that comes through in this letter is that of a man of integrity who is compassionate, in touch with his feelings, and able to take responsibility for his actions.

In the movie version of *Waiting to Exhale*, no black man involved with a black woman possesses these qualities. In contrast to what happens in the book, in the film, James does not have a one-nighter with Bernie, because he is depicted as utterly devoted to his white wife. Here are relevant passages from the letter he writes to Bernie that audiences hear at the movie: “What I feel for you has never undercut the love I have for my wife. How is that possible? I watch her everyday. So beautiful and brave. I just want to give her everything I’ve got in me. Every moment. She’s hanging on, fighting to be here for me. And when she sleeps, I cry. Over how amazing she is, and how lucky I’ve been to have her in my life.” There may not have been any white women as central characters in this film, but this letter certainly places the dying white wife at the center of things. Completely rewriting the letter that appears in the novel, which only concerns James’s love and devotion to Bernie, so that the white wife (dead in the book but brought back to life on-screen) is the recipient of James’s love was no doubt another ploy to reach the crossover audience: the masses of white women consumers that might not have been interested in this film if it had really been about black women.

Ultimately, only white women have committed relationships with black men in the film. Not only do these screen images reinforce stereotypes, the screenplay was written in such a way as to actively perpetuate them. Catfights between women, both real and symbolic, were clearly seen by the screenwriters as likely to be more entertaining to moviegoing audiences. In the portrayal of a divorced black woman unexpectedly meeting her true love—an honest, caring, responsible, mature, tender, and loving black man who delivers the goods. Black women are portrayed as so shrewish in this film that Lionel’s betrayal of Bernie appears to be no more than an act of self-defense. The film suggests that Lionel is merely trying to get away from the black bitch who barges in on him at work and physically attacks his meek and loving white wife. To think that Terry McMillan was one of the screenwriters makes it all the more disheartening. Did she forget that she had written a far more emotionally complex and progressive vision of black female-male relationships in her novel?

While we may all know some over-thirty black women who are desperate to get a man by any means necessary and plenty of young black females who fear that they may never find



What values are truly driving *Waiting to Exhale*?

Source: 20th Century Fox/The Kobel Collection/Nicole Goode.

a man and are willing to be downright foolish in their pursuit of one, the film was so simplistic and denigrating in its characterization of black womanhood that everyone should be outraged to be told that it is “for us.” Or worse yet, as a reporter wrote in *Newsweek*, “This is our million man march.” Whether you supported the march or not (and I did not, for many of the same reasons I find this film appalling), let’s get this straight: We are being told, and are telling ourselves that black men need a political march and black women need a movie. Mind you—not a political film but one where the black female “stars” spend most of their time chainsmoking themselves to death (let’s not forget that Gloria did not have enough breath to blow out her birthday candle) and drowning their sorrows in alcohol. No doubt McMillan’s knowledge of how many black people die from lung cancer and alcoholism influenced her decision to write useful, unpreachy critiques of these addictions in her novel. In the novel the characters who smoke are trying to stop and Black Women on the Move are fighting to close down liquor stores. None of these actions fulfill racist fantasies. It’s no accident that just the opposite images appear on the screen. Smoking is so omnipresent in every scene that many of us were waiting to see a promotional credit for the tobacco industry.

Perhaps the most twisted and perverse aspect of this film is the way it was marketed as being about girlfriend bonding. How about that scene where Robin shares her real-life trauma with Savannah, who is busy looking the other way and simply does not respond? Meaningful girlfriend bonding is not about the codependency that is imaged in this film. At its best *Waiting to Exhale* is a film about black women helping each other to stay stuck. Do we really believe that moment when Savannah rudely disses Kenneth (even though the film has in no way constructed him as a lying cheating dog) to be a moment of profound “feminist”

awakening? Suddenly audiences are encouraged to believe that she realizes the dilemmas of being involved with a married man, even one who has filed for a divorce. Why not depict a little mature communication between a black man and a black woman? No doubt that too would not have been entertaining to crossover audiences. Better to give them what they are used to, stereotypical representations of black males as always and only lying, castrating dogs (that is, when they are involved with black women) and professional black women as wild, irrational, castrating bitch goddesses.

Nothing was more depressing than hearing individual black women offering personal testimony that these shallow screen images are “realistic portrayals” of their experience. If this is the world of black gender relations as they know it, no wonder black men and women are in serious crisis. Obviously, it is difficult for many straight black women to find black male partners and/or husbands. Though it is hard to believe that black women as conventionally feminine, beautiful, glamorous, and just plain dumb as the girlfriends in this film can’t get men (Bernie has an MBA, helped start the business, but is clueless about everything that concerns money; Robin is willing to have unsafe sex and celebrate an unplanned pregnancy with a partner who may be a drug addict; Gloria, who would rather cook food for her man any day than go to work; Savannah has sex at the drop of a hat, even when she does not want to get involved). In the real world these are the women who have men standing in line.

However, if they and other black women internalize the messages in *Waiting to Exhale* they will come to their senses and see that, according to the film, black men are really undesirable mates for black women. Actually, lots of younger black women, and their over-thirty counterparts, go to see *Waiting to Exhale* to have their worst fears affirmed: that black men are irresponsible and uncaring; that black women, no matter how attractive, will still be hurt and abandoned, and that ultimately they will probably be alone and unloved. Perhaps it feels less like cultural genocide to have these messages of self-loathing and disempowerment brought to them by four beautiful black female “stars.”

Black women seeking to learn anything about gender relationships from this film will be more empowered if we identify with the one black female character who rarely speaks. She is the graceful, attractive, brown-skinned lawyer with naturally braided hair who is a professional who knows her job and is also able to bond emotionally with her clients. Not only does she stand for gender justice (the one glimpse of empowering feminist womanhood we see in this film), she achieves that end without ever putting men down or competing with any woman. While we never see her with a male partner, she acts with confident self-esteem and shows fulfillment in a job well done.

The monetary success of a trashy film like *Waiting to Exhale*, with its heavy sentimentality and predictable melodrama shows that Hollywood recognizes that blackness as a commodity can be exploited to bring in the bucks. Dangerously, it also shows that the same old racist/sexist stereotypes can be appropriated and served up to the public in a new and more fashionable disguise. While it serves the financial interests of Hollywood and McMillan’s own bank account for her to deflect away from critiques that examine the politics underlying these representations and their behind-the-scenes modes of production by ways of witty assertions that the novel and the film are “forms of entertainment, not anthropological studies,” in actuality the creators of this film are as accountable for their work as their predecessors. Significantly, contemporary critiques of racial essentialism completely disrupt the notion that anything a black artist creates is inherently radical, progressive, or more likely to reflect a break with white supremacist representations. It has become most evident that as



Female bonding or female stereotyping?

Source: 20th Century Fox/The Kobal Collection/Nicolas, Randee St.

black artists seek a “crossover” success, the representations they create usually mirror dominant stereotypes. After a barrage of publicity and marketing that encouraged black people, and black women in particular, to see *Waiting to Exhale* as fictive ethnography, McMillan is being more than a bit disingenuous when she suggests that the film should not be seen this way. In her essay, “Who’s Doin’ the Twist: Notes Toward a Politics of Appropriation,” cultural critic Coco Fusco reminds us that we must continually critique this genre in both its pure and impure form. Ethnographic cinema, in light of its historical connection to colonialist adventurism, and decades of debate about the ethics of representing documentary subjects, is a genre that demands a special degree of scrutiny.” Just because writers and directors are black does not exempt them from scrutiny. The black female who wrote a letter to the *New York Times* calling attention to the way this film impedes the struggle to create new images of blackness on the screen was surely right when she insisted that had everyone involved in the production of this film been white and male, its blatantly racist and sexist standpoints would not have gone unchallenged.

READING WRITING

THIS TEXT: READING

1. At first, you might find hooks overly critical of *Waiting to Exhale*. But are her contentions reasonable? Why? Why not? What standards is she holding the film to?
2. What political and cultural forces are influencing her review of the film? Or, what can you glean about her political leanings from her review? What is hooks’s writing situation?

3. Do you agree with hooks that a seemingly harmless film like *Waiting to Exhale* is culturally dangerous?

YOUR TEXT: WRITING

1. Write your own review of *Waiting to Exhale*. Will you focus on the representations of gender, or are you more interested in plot and character development?
2. Compare *Waiting to Exhale* with *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Both movies are adaptations of Terry McMillan novels. How are the films similar? How are they different? How does the film version depart from the novel?
3. Write a personal essay in which you analyze Hollywood representations of *your* gender and ethnicity. For instance, if you are a Hispanic male, write an essay in which you analyze how Hispanic males are represented in movies. What do you notice?
4. Write a comparative paper analyzing what hooks has to say about women in *Waiting to Exhale* with the suite in Chapter 6. How do women define representations of women?

**HOLY HOMOSEXUALITY BATMAN:
CAMP AND CORPORATE CAPITALISM
IN BATMAN FOREVER**

• Freya Johnson •

Both intellectually challenging and humorously insightful, Johnson's candid essay (1995) sheds light on the semiotics of gayness in the popular movie Batman Forever. Is Johnson reading too much into the film, or are American audiences not reading enough into it? Johnson's essay and our own reaction to it and the movie may allow an interesting reading of sexual orientation and American culture.

Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventure of the mature "Batman" and his young friend "Robin."

—Frederic Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent*

SO PSYCHIATRIST FREDERIC WERTHAM warned parents and lawmakers in 1953, as he detailed the "factually proven" method by which comic books turned innocent children into homosexually and pederastically inclined "deviants and perverts." In this hilariously paranoid document of homophobic panic, he unwittingly anticipates queer theoretical practice as he ransacks the comics for "clues" (nowadays we call them "signifiers") revealing the homoeroticism leaking from the pages of the books into impressionable pre-pubescent brains. Sure enough, his spot-the-homo routine reveals Bruce Wayne and "Dick" Grayson (Wertham supplies the snide quotation marks) enacting "the wish dream of two homosexuals living together" as Wertham presents this condemning evidence:

Sometimes Batman ends up in bed injured and young Robin is shown sitting next to him. At home they lead an idyllic life. They are Bruce Wayne and "Dick" Grayson. Bruce is described as a "socialite" and the official relationship is that Dick is Bruce's ward. They live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler, Alfred. Batman is sometimes shown in a dressing gown . . .