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## Race, Representation, Misrepresentation, Caricatured Consumption Tropes; and Serious Matters of Inequity and Precarity

Nikhilesh Dholakia  
*University of Rhode Island*

Deniz Atik  
*University of Texas Rio Grande Valley*

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## Markets, Globalization & Development Review



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# **Race, Representation, Misrepresentation, Caricatured Consumption Tropes; and Serious Matters of Inequity and Precarity**

## **Introduction**

We do not know if it is a trend or a temporally short uptick. At MGDR, we are noticing that there is some increase in significantly influential entertainment products – films, television programs, video series on streaming platforms, etc. – that strive to represent people, cultures and regions that have been marginal or underrepresented. Of course, from a ‘markets’ perspective, it makes sense – in rapidly diversifying societies such as United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Germany and Australia – to create entertainment products that supplement the large corpus of ‘mainstream’ entertainment products. In other words, the mainstream needs to start accommodating – and, we hope, merging and blending with – parallel sub-streams. Indeed, in all aspects of life, especially in the United States – and, from there, echoing worldwide – there is increasing evidence of multiracial and multiethnic representation in foodways, fashion, films and more.

Given all this, we at MGDR have decided to strive to feature and analyze, in multiple issues of the journal, the emerging patterns of new or novel representations. In this issue, we focus on some films. First, the focus is on a film that, while partly cinematic fiction, also has very substantial elements of documentary-style realism. The second set of films – the original and its sequel, after a 30-year gap – deal with the relationship with the African-American culture of New York, and a mythical well-off nation in Africa.

## **Dialogue and Reviews in this Issue**

This first issue of 2021 starts with a commentary by Atanasova and Eckhardt (2021) on the agonizing story of the North American nomads as consumers at the periphery of the globalized marketplace, inspired by the award-winning movie *Nomadland*. There is a growing number of older Americans who are driven out of the workforce with insufficient savings and end up living nomadic lives in barely running vans with minimal material possessions. They work in seasonal low-wage jobs when they can, “living at the intercept of precarity and insecurity (p.5).” MGDR readers will find this commentary very enriching not only because it sheds light on the nomadic lives and consumption experiences, but also because it is loaded with intriguing theoretical reflections on the tyranny of the marketplace, consuming and being

consumed, possessions and materiality, and nomadism as a way of modern life.

The two media reviews in this issue are about the movies *Coming to America* (CTA) and its 30-year later sequel *Coming 2 America* (C2A). CTA was first perceived, at its release, as a comedy, only. The sequel C2A is not generally regarded as good as the original, but it is still perceived of reasonable quality. In light of *Black Panther* and other significant films in Black cinema, there is an ongoing cultural-cross-global reinterpretation of the two *Coming* films. The first review author Bowles (2021) eloquently examines how CTA, the original movie, eventually came to be seen much more than a comedy; it was a cultural pathbreaker, in terms of representation and other matters. For the first time in Hollywood, Africa was portrayed as wealthy, independent and proud, and an upwardly mobile, self-made Black American family was featured. According to Bowles, “*Coming to America* entered a landscape brimming with evolving cultural and sociopolitical rhetorical currents and fresh examinations of Black screen representations that confronted long held conventions of identity, beauty and sexuality, and asserted new paradigms of freedom, gender and power” (p.3). C2A, on the other hand, also touches upon certain important cultural, representational elements, but “posits a reductive framing of sexualities and gender hierarchies” (p.3). The review by Bowles goes beyond a simple discussion of the sequel movies and delves critically into the mis-representations, with theoretical and historical insights on the evolution of Black cinema and the representation of Black women on screen.

In the second review, Bonsu and Godefroit-Winkel (2021) also agree that the two movies feed into the mis-representation of Africa with stereotypical Western imaginary: the portrayal of Africa as a wild, primitive continent, an exotic paradise, with lush vegetation and dangerous animals. Similar to Bowles’s assessments, the authors put a special emphasis on the stereotypical representations of African women, often beautiful, obedient to a husband or a father with no voice in family decision making. In their concluding remarks, they express both their disappointment about *Coming to/2 America* movies, which “seem to promote negative stereotypes of Africa even as they try to shine a good light on the continent” (p.6), and their concern that many people may be unable to separate the fiction from the reality.

## Concluding Comments

In this issue, we presented two very different patterns of representation – a realistic, docudrama style of representation in the multi-Oscar-winning *Nomadland*; and the comic representations of Africa and of parts of New York in the *Coming-to/2* movies of Eddie Murphy. As our *Nomadland*-based commentary authors powerfully

argue “*Nomadland* is ultimately a critique of the death of the American dream at the hands of Amazon and similar behemoths, while at the same time a story of solidarity amongst the dispossessed who have taken a chance on bucking the system and living with a sense of freedom at the end of their lives” (Atanasova and Eckhardt 2021, p.6).

Via reflections on the two Eddie Murphy movies – *Coming to/2 America* – the contributors to this issue have raised, and analyzed and interpreted, critical issues about filmic representations of Africa. At MGDR, we have encouraged contributions that look at cinematic representations of global cultures – of Japan (Mizukoshi 2018; Takemura 2017), of Africa (Bowles 2018; Eckhardt 2018), Korea (Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen 2021; Uzuner 2021), affluent Asia (Eckhardt and Kerrigan 2019; Vijay 2019; Zhao 2019), and even extra-terrestrial spaces (Ulusoy 2020). In all these cases, we see ongoing struggles of globalization (and, in an emergent way, even of extra-post-globalization).

One of the core underlying issues seems to be this: Does representation always entail (an exploitative) appropriation of the culture of the Other? This seems to be the case, even in the film ‘*Crazy Rich Asians*’ (CRA) that was seen as fairly Asia-centric and somewhat critical of an increasingly economically and culturally flaccid America (Eckhardt and Kerrigan 2019) – some have commented on CRA not being Asian enough (Vijay 2019; Zhao 2019), or somewhat caricaturing of Asia, despite its strong Asia centrality.

An overall comment we want to offer – editorially – is that in these films – and other cultural products such as books, theater, music, theme parks, etc. – there is often the step-forward/step-backward dialectic. In the worst cases, there is one step forward and three backwards. In the better cases, there are two steps forward, and step-and-a-half backwards. Regardless of the cases, it is encouraging to have such representation-laced media products – even the regressive ones – available in global marketplaces and consumptionscapes. They raise awareness and trigger dialogues. With time and effort and greater exposure, the world would move to representations that are not caricatured ones, and are genuinely transformational. Perhaps ‘*Minari*’ – which we cover in the next issue of MGDR (Tran-Nguyen and Nguyen 2021; Uzuner 2021) – is a start in this ameliorative direction.

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