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Nama, Adilifu. Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino

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Nama, Adilifu. Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino

David Roche

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Nama, Adilifu. *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2015. 169 pp. ISBN 978-0292768147 Hardcover \$55.00, Paperback \$25.95, Kindle \$16.91

- 1 In *Race on the QT: Blackness and the Films of Quentin Tarantino*, the prolific Adilifu Nama, Associate Professor of African American Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, pursues his study of the interplay between identity politics (race, as well as gender and class) and genre in popular culture initiated in his previous books *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* and *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. The first full-length study devoted to this topic, *Race on the QT* is resolutely inscribed within critical and academic discussions on the politics of Tarantino's films. Each chapter deals with two films that are examined in chronological order; equal attention is paid to Tarantino's first seven films—from *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) to *Django Unchained* (2012)—as well as *True Romance* (1993), written by Tarantino but directed by Tony Scott. The book also includes an introduction, a conclusion, notes, a substantial bibliography and a useful index.
- 2 The introduction makes it immediately clear that Nama's interest lies not in the director's clumsy and sometimes embarrassing statements, but in the films themselves (2-3). Analyzing the films' representations of race should not be reduced to exploring their debt to the blaxploitation movies of the 1970s; rather, the "racial candor" the films exhibit pursues the legacy of New Hollywood filmmakers like Martin Scorsese (4). Nama provocatively contests the received idea that "Spike Lee is unquestionably

American cinema's most skilled (and accepted) racial provocateur for our present era" and goes so far as to contend that race is often just a gimmick in Lee's films (7). Praising the work of white filmmakers like Tarantino, John Sayles and Norman Jewison, Nama considers that "in-group racial orientation does not necessarily provide a director with ability or insight when it comes to articulating racial politics in America" (8). In defending Tarantino as "a complex screenwriter and director who questions America's traditional notions of race, ethnicity, and gender" (10), Nama sides with cultural critic Stanley Crouch against film critics like Armond White (9). Analyzing the "symbolic and cultural meaning" of the individual films through a cultural studies approach, Nama aims to "frame and then deconstruct Tarantino's film work as a form of referential cultural production in dialogue with historical and concurrent racial anxieties in American society" (10).

- 3 Racial tensions, though covert, underlie the American filmmaker's early work. In seeing the black detective Holdaway as "the ideological center of *Reservoir Dogs*'s racial politics" (17), Nama follows Paul Gormley's demonstration that he acts as "the central causal agent of the film's narrative" (19). Though relegated to the Commode Story flashback and optically marginalized in single shots, Holdaway is the one who, by training Mr. Orange for his undercover operation (17), undermines the white masculinity the thieves strive to uphold through racist, sexist and homophobic discourses. In this respect, Holdaway announces the racial avengers Django and Major Marquis Warren in *The Hateful Eight* (2015). Racial anxieties also permeate *True Romance*. Both the hero, Clarence, and the Sicilian mobsters who pursue him are driven by the fear of racial miscegenation, a fear enacted in Clarence's confrontation with the white wanna-be-black pimp Drexel (26-30), and in the mobsters' quest to avenge the allegations of racial impurity made by Clarence's father Clifford. By empowering the female character, Clifford's girlfriend Alabama, in the final act, *True Romance* shifts the focus from race to gender, before heading toward a politically disappointing Hollywood happy ending in which the two lovers "can fulfill traditional gender roles" (34).
- 4 *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), in Nama's mind, "threw wide open the lid on America's racism and black stereotypes and reached into the darkest corners" (37). Much attention has been paid to the apparently gratuitous use of the n-word, but little to the complexity of the films' racial politics (40). *Pulp Fiction* goes against the grain of Hollywood films by positioning black characters (Jules the hitman and Marsellus Wallace the head gangster) as peers to their white counterparts; Jules in particular "is able to fulfill a role rarely ceded to a black character in mainstream Hollywood movies—a redeemed and empowered figure who lives to the end of the film" (52). For Nama, the use of racist language by the white characters (Lance the drug dealer, Jules's friend Jimmie who happens to be married to a black woman) in the domestic sphere "signifies the run-of-the-mill, domesticated racism circulating in American society" (47), while getting rid of the evidence of a young black man's (Marvin's) death is "a brilliant metaphor for the disposability of young black men" in the contemporary U.S. (46). Though the rape of Marsellus initially "invites interpretation that his victimization is symptomatic of a racist film industry" punishing such a powerful black man, Nama believes that Butch's change of heart doesn't so much reinstate the position of the white hero as it "advocates racial reconciliation and mutual respect between blacks and whites," along with the necessity to join forces against discrimination (51). Nama celebrates *Jackie Brown* for the way it "is most noticeably invested in the intersection of race and economics and frames much of its racial dynamics within the limitations of

frustrated class aspirations” (64). Indeed, the movie pits Jackie, an ageing, working class black woman who acts as a drug mule, against Ordell Robbie, “the most outstanding and complex version of ominous black criminality to date” (57), a self-hating black man who values whiteness over blackness and uses his white girlfriend Melanie to “affirm and bolster his self-esteem” (60).

- 5 Nama qualifies the view that Tarantino’s next two films, *Kill Bill* (2003-2004) and *Death Proof* (2007), are “escapist fare that jettisoned the controversies of black racial representation” (65), but he does foreground the way the homage to exploitation cinema also leads to more contradictory politics. *Kill Bill Vol.1*, in particular, “perpetuates a trend whereby Asian characters are stereotyped and/or displaced by white characters” (70), yet on a metafictional level, it attacks, as its title indicates, the figure of the “yellow face” symbolized by David Carradine, who took Bruce Lee’s part in *Kung-fu* (ABC, 1972-1975) plays Bill (72), and in *Vol.2*, the whiteness embodied by the Bride who is humiliated by the ultimate figure of Orientalism, Master Pai Mei (80). *Kill Bill* does not fall into the trappings of the likes of *The Last Samurai* (Edward Zwick, 2003), not only because it is a fantasy, but because it rejects “romanticizing white characters as the honorable heirs to or noble practitioners of another ethnic/racial group’s culture,” but portrays them as “refreshingly corrupt” instead (82). *Death Proof* is effective as a critique of the white male gaze, but Nama regrets that the lack of development regarding Jungle Julia’s subversive potential as a black sex symbol in Austin, a predominantly white (and I would add Hispanic) Southern environment (87), and, worse, the “stock representation of black femininity as vulgarly hypersexual and, oddly enough, masculine” in the character of Kim (90).
- 6 “[R]ace once again takes center stage” in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) and *Django Unchained* (92). Tarantino’s war movie can be seen as a satirical fantasy, similar in tone to *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1964) and *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1972) (94): “the film indulges in metaphoric rhetoric and imagery to examine some current ethical dilemma by means of social or political allegory” (95). For Nama, “the ‘hidden’ meaning of *Inglourious Basterds* suggests the pathology of German Nazism is the ideological cousin to American racism” (102). The analogy is constructed by the Nazi characters, notably by an SS officer who interprets *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933) as an allegory of African American history (101). Nazism comes to represent the paradigm of institutionalized racism, overturned by a Jewish heroine, Shoshanna Dreyfuss, associated with various forms of otherness: a cousin of Debbie in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), Shoshanna flees the house from the Nazis, engages in an interracial relationship (with Marcel) and puts on make-up like Indian war paint (98). For Nama, *Django Unchained* is more of a Gothic romance than a Western (106-7), with Django as the spectre of retribution (108), Schultz as the fanciful aristocrat (107) and Calvin Candie as the epitome of the Gothic villain (109). In Nama’s reading, *Django Unchained* works “on a broader ideological scale” than *12 Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen, 2013) (116) because its fantastical quality allows it to address racial issues in American history beyond the peculiar institution: Mandingo fighting can be seen as a metaphor of the white exploitation of black bodies not just under slavery, but also in contemporary team sports (116), and “when Stephen [the Uncle Tom character] and Django occupy the same cinematic frame, they symbolize, albeit reductively, an ongoing and strident ideological divide within black political discourse over whether accommodationism or militancy is the most effective approach toward gaining racial justice in America” (111). Even the film’s main flaw, its depiction of individual rather

than collective revolt, can be read as political allegory, for Candie's racist pseudoscientific discourse

overlaps with Du Bois' belief that exceptional African Americans, the best and brightest of the black race, will lead the masses of black folk out of social decay. In this sense, the extended pseudoscience that Calvin Candie drones on about at the dinner table and the triumphant heroism of Django work as metaphors for the real politics of racial uplift and social change that have their place in African American history. (119)

- 7 Nama concludes that much of the criticism leveled at Tarantino's films is grounded in the ideology of "black respectability" with its "conservative overtones" that reduce the treatment of race to an opposition between positive and negative representations in the belief that the latter can "shap[e] the popular memory regarding race in America" (121-22). For Nama, these reactions can be seen as participating in "a broader and more troubling ideological impulse operating in American society today: a desire to deny or erase history" (124). This "revisionist impulse" can be observed in the post-racial colorblind worldview proposed in Hollywood films like *The Help* (Tate Taylor, 2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) (126). For Nama, Tarantino's "films are where the real poststructural action resides, because they do dialogue with real structures of racial marginalization and engage the ideological justifications used to legitimize these structures and the unequal relations they produce" (130).
- 8 *Race on the QT* is required reading for anyone working on Quentin Tarantino and, more generally, on representations of race in contemporary American cinema and culture. Scholars and students interested in studying representation would greatly benefit from following Nama's methodology that endorses neither "black respectability," nor the precept that one's identity determines one's legitimacy. Nama does a great job contextualizing Tarantino's films, foregrounding his debt to New Hollywood filmmakers and showing how the films are not merely escapist exploitation but address contemporary concerns. *Race on the QT* is also exemplary as a work that combines a cultural studies approach with in-depth analyses of narrative, characterization and genre conventions; attention to the camerawork and editing would be required to go even further than Nama.
- 9 It is not often that you read a book on a topic or filmmaker you have studied intensively and find yourself agreeing with practically everything the author says. This was clearly my experience: I agree with at least 95% of Nama's analyses and conclusions. I can only bicker on details here and there. Nama's conclusions on *True Romance* and *Kill Bill* are probably not as clearly put forth as they are on the other films. I wonder, in particular, whether *True Romance* resolves the ambiguities raised by the character of Drexler, who is, after all, a white man (played by a British actor) appropriating black hypersexuality. I also think what Nama reads as ambiguities in the characterization of O-Ren in *Kill Bill* and Julia in *Death Proof* are coherent in light of the films' assault on patriarchy: their appearances (O-Ren as a Geisha, Julia as a poster girl) confirm that, though powerful, they remain willfully subjected to patriarchy (Bill, the male gaze), in spite of the potential sisterhood between O-Ren and the Bride suggested through the common reference to *Lady Snowblood* (Toshiya Fujita, 1973). Finally, I think that, in *Inglourious Basterds*, lurking under the reference to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming et al., 1939) (99) is Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr Mabuse* (1933), so that Shoshanna's revenge is also that of "the Jewish-German intellectual cinema of the 1920s" Goebbels loathed, as Lieutenant Archie Hicox explains in the film.

- 10 In a way, my comments tie in with Nama's conclusion on possible responses to the character of Stephen in *Django Unchained*. Nama explains that, for him "along with other African American friends and professional acquaintances [he] talked to about the film, the comedic import of Jackson's performance and his strident interpretation of the character appear to be drawn from Malcolm X's scathing critique of the house Negro" (132). Nama thus wonders: "what is it about Jackson's quintessential portrayal of a house slave that makes white audiences erupt with laughter?" (132). Some white viewers may, indeed, be laughing for the wrong (i.e., racist) reasons, but some may also be laughing for the same reason as the African American viewers Nama mentions. Indeed, the limitation to Tarantino's approach to filmmaking is that it is so steeped in intertextuality, cultural references and film genre conventions that it requires an informed viewer to decode it, which is exactly what Nama does in his book. In the case Nama mentions, African American viewers are, no doubt, more likely to analyze the character of Stephen in a similar manner, but other viewers (though maybe less) may equally do so, regardless of their race, ethnicity or nationality.
- 11 In any case, I want to thank Adilifu Nama for writing such an excellent book that is a worthy complement to Philippe Ortolé's *Le Musée imaginaire de Quentin Tarantino*. And for leaving room for others to follow his lead.

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