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Book Review

Humanity & Society

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Román, Elda María. 2018. *Race and upward mobility: Seeking, gatekeeping, and other class strategies in postwar America*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 296 pp. \$27.95, ISBN: 978-1-5036-0378-3.

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Well we're moving on up

To the East Side . . .

To the deluxe apartment in the sky

Theme song from *The Jeffersons*

We [Latinos] never say congratulations . . . what do we say?

Oh so now you think you're all bad or what?

Yeah, go to the Hallmark store and look for that card.

George Lopez, Latin Kings of Comedy

From the Talented Tenth to *Tio Tacos*, the language of race and upward mobility has always been complicated, particularly for Black and Brown communities in the United States. As I began to read Román's engaging book about how race and upward mobility are depicted in novels, plays, films, and TV sitcoms (hereinafter "cultural texts"), the theme song from *The Jeffersons* kept ringing in my head as well as George Lopez's observation of how Mexican Americans respond to successful family members. This may have been her intent as she begins her book by comparing George Jefferson and George Lopez. The comparison immediately strikes a chord of familiarity that comes with being a first-generation woman of color who grew up in the 70s and 80s. Many of the texts Román uses are recognizable such as *Hunger for Memory*, *Blackish*, and *The Living Is Easy*. From these touchstone texts, and the language of analysis she develops in moving through them, she invites our imagination onto a cultural scavenger hunt for a particular language of racial mobility.

Challenging the notion that with upward mobility comes the loss of racial authenticity, Román defines, develops, and identifies four types of literary characters that represent the complicated narrative around middle-class Black and Mexican

Americans. Those types are *status seekers*, *conflicted artists*, *mediators*, and *gatekeepers*. *Status seekers* are characters that actively seek opportunities to increase their economic standing and individual worth by distancing themselves from poorer, less resourced members of their community. *Conflicted artists* are characters who love their community and their art but struggle because being an artist is not a marker of success. Unlike the *status seekers*, the *conflicted artists* are not materialistic but are often reminded that art does not pay the heating bill. *Mediators* represent characters that have “made it,” remembered their roots, and carry a sometimes-overwhelming responsibility to represent their people and community. *Gatekeepers*, on the other hand, are individuals who have made it, but they hoard their resources and dole them out after someone has sufficiently demonstrated worthiness. Throughout her book, she identifies characters that take on and take off these various forms as they move in and out of different social contexts to make it clear that these types are fluid and open to change. In identifying these characters, Román provides new language for scholars who study race, gender, and class, one that helps us to understand that mobility is linked to the construction of culturally idealized performances of success.

The texts she uses as her point of analysis are rich and varied and add an empirical thickness to her conceptual framework. Texts include characters such as Silla Boyce in Paule Marshall’s novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*; the lawyer for Chicano activists in Oscar Zeta Acosta’s memoir *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*; Memo in the film *Mi Familia*; and Udine Barnes Calles (also known as Sharona Watkins) in Lynn Nottage’s play *Fabulation*. To truly understand the texts, she also provides the historical context in which they were created including, but not limited to, the post–War 1940s, Black Power and Chicano Movements, and the Egoistic 80s. She places cultural texts alongside several sociological and legal studies, essentially providing a prosaic narrative to the oft-inaccessible lingo of social science and law. One may not be able to define “segmented assimilation” as expressed by Portes and Rumbaut (1996), but they can recall the characters in the film *Machete* and the strategies they employed to achieve their goals. She places fictional characters together with social realities captured in social science data. For example, she discusses how the characters in the TV show *Blackish* “disrupt class and cultural heterogeneity disrupting assumptions that there is a singular Black community” (p. 161). Her work is deftly interdisciplinary and offers a model for other scholars to follow.

What Román ultimately adds to the literature on middle-class identities within communities of color is that class is much more strategic and flexible than static and linear. She challenges the binaries of being Black versus Bougie and Chicano versus *Pocho* by providing alternatives such as the *conflicted artist* who struggles to reconcile these extremes. Middle-classness does not represent a straight line to selling out. Instead, she reveals that upward mobility does not often require a choice between authenticity and assimilation but the recreation of new cultural worlds. Engaging with an intersectional perspective, she demonstrates that “racialized minorities can

be simultaneously inside and outside of privilege” (p. 22). Choices, she explains, are not limited to either/or. They can also be both/and. It is this nuance that history, sociology, and legal studies can occasionally miss.

My only challenge with her book comes from the uneven nature of the texts she selects for analysis. By switching from intense novels to comedic TV sitcoms, she almost implies parity between the genres. As an example, in one chapter, I would read the powerful words of a former professor in *Sons of Darkness, Sons of Light* who says, “You could work in a famous and vigorous civil rights organization in charge of the college program . . . but you also had to know, finally, that none of that was going to do any good” (p. 81). Just a few pages later reading Jimmy’s scolding of his sister in *Mi Familia* when he says, “don’t ever call me ‘bushwacked’ again, *cabrona*, whatever the f**k that means” (p. 103). I found myself having to stop often to digest the material and resist the urge to create a table of types and characters to find continuity. There seems to be some filling in of the lines Román could have offered in order to more deeply account for what may be a less-developed part of her theory, that context shapes the particular ways in which we embrace complex identities around race, class, and gender. What carries across that context *and* how it differs across literary genres could have been more closely explicated.

On that note, it is possible to speculate other novels, plays, films, and TV shows she did not but could have included, but that would miss the opportunity to use her book and the language she creates to develop an assignment or lesson plan. I see much room for application and extension of Román’s framework. A few examples, one could ask students to watch *Jumping the Broom*, *School Daze*, or read *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and use Román’s text to analyze how the characters negotiate class and upward mobility and how their identity embraces new pathways to realizing cultural celebration and cultural change. One could also, using her four types, perform a content analysis on *Blackish*, *Fresh Off the Boat*, and *Christina*, all television sitcoms written by people of color depicting middle-class, upwardly mobile Black, Chinese American, and Mexican American families in a number of different sociology classes that grapple with inequality, race, and identity. In clear, concise, and eloquent language, she brings together the formal with the familiar to open a dialogue about the complicated nature of the social experience of mobility. If the sign of a good book is that it makes one think of the ways in which it can be used and extended to better understand the social world, then *Race and Upward Mobility* is outstanding.