The day begins simply enough: two people meet, make small talk, have a drink, paint pottery or take a yoga class, enjoying all the rituals of the contemporary date. Yet soon, things take a turn for the bizarre, and the evening ends with a little person of color dressed in a devil costume poking a well-dressed black man with a plastic pitchfork. Black Entertainment Television’s *Hell Date*, which aired for two seasons beginning in summer 2007, sets unsuspecting singles up on what they believe to be a traditional, albeit filmed, “blind date,” a scenario made famous by the syndicated reality show of the same name. The pleasure of *Blind Date* (1999-2006) centered around the awkwardness as well as the potential for hot-tub hookups, of two (usually white or at least of indeterminate ethnicity) strangers being filmed; the production team added frequently humorous commentary in the form of onscreen text indicating what the daters were “really thinking.” *Hell Date*, however, presents a different scenario and set of potential pleasures, as one “stranger” is an actor, referred to as a “hell dater.” On each date, this performer embodies an often-classed and always (though not inherently) racialized stereotype: for example, the “plus-size diva,” or the “dude who just got out of jail.” As the date progresses, the hell dater’s performance becomes increasingly out of control, and any initial spark of attraction changes to anger and exasperation. The situation builds to a boiling point that usually comes over dinner until the dramatic moment when it is all revealed to be an elaborate hoax. However, the tensions *Hell Date* brings to the surface cannot be contained or dismissed by the dancing with the devil that ends each episode.

This paper argues that *Hell Date* is an important site for questioning the repercussions of proper participation in neoliberal citizenship for African Americans, a group that has a historic, constitutively different relationship to that category’s foundational notions of the marketplace and of choice. *Hell Date* makes clear the inextricability of neoliberalism from cultural politics; neoliberalism functions through culture to urge the rejection of classed and racialized performances of sexuality – formations it summons, but cannot quite exorcise.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon theorizes hauntings as the byproducts of subject and social formations that deny complexity and claim universality. “A postmodern social formation,” such as ours, she writes, “is still haunted by the symptomatic traces of its productions and exclusions.”1 The racialized stereotypes performed on *Hell Date* are a haunting – the return of what must be repressed in order for upwardly mobile African Americans to attempt to gain access to entrepreneurial citizenship. Entrepreneurial citizenship is an emergent
Neoliberal form unmooring participation in national life from historical context and bringing it into the timeless space of the market, whose logic penetrates every arena. This form of citizenship has particularly problematic consequences for members of minoritarian racial or sexual formations, then, as it cannot allow for differences based on historical and structural inequalities, except insofar as those differences can be monetized.

Neoliberal regimes exacerbate the tendency of liberal democracies to govern from a distance. Ideal citizens should be entrepreneurial rather than communal, active participants in their own governance, not coddled by the nanny state or duped by ideology. Neoliberal subject formations rely on the notion of the self as project, unstable and requiring what Laurie Ouellette and James Hay have termed “an entrepreneurial ethic of self-care.” As upward redistribution and privatization become state policy, television is a crucial site of transmission of “techniques of the self,” simultaneously modeling and naturalizing both appropriate and inappropriate behavior as well as their consequences. Thus, as Wendy Brown claims, entrepreneurial citizens are controlled “through formation rather than repression or punishment.”

Such “productions and exclusions” of blackness inhere in BET’s very existence as the sign of blackness on television. Perhaps precipitated by the network’s 2000 purchase by Viacom and the 2004 debut of Comcast and Radio One’s adult-aimed TVOne, BET’s understanding of its historical responsibility to mediate blackness shifted. No longer the only officially “Black” channel on television, BET had to reconceptualize its programming and its target demographic. Along with other BET shows debuting in the mid-2000s, *Hell Date* is a self-consciously black show that draws on the programming of the channel’s new sister networks VH1 and MTV, but engages specific stereotypes and vernacular to interpellate a black youth audience. The attention to lifestyle promoted by this cohort of programming suggests the tension for upwardly mobile black citizen-subjects between achieving mainstream success and access and “keeping it real.” *Hell Date*’s particular success relies on the legibility of the stereotypes it presents as models of “hell dates,” those “others” on whose outrageous behavior the joke of the show depends.

In this relentless othering, the show is compelling as an intervention into the hoax reality show genre, which, critics like Allison Hearn and Bradley Clissold argue, demonstrates bad behavior as a way to promote propriety. *Hell Date* does fit into the category of hoax programs, fulfilling many of the clichés of such shows, but its differences are important, demonstrating the rise of “promotional culture” over the last 50 years since the first “hoax” program, *Candid Camera* aired. For Clissold, part of *Candid Camera’s* influence was in the way it normalized surveillance for a post World War II population unused to and wary of it. Surveillance is actually part of the appeal on *Hell Date*; everyone knows it’s television, daters merely think they’re on a “normal” dating show, one that would provide an opportunity to develop an entrepreneurial self through demonstrating one’s adaptability and capacity for self-promotion.

The “characters” *Hell Date* constructs are sometimes threatening, but in the words of Robin Kelley, always “alluring” to the duped dater (at least at first), but also to the viewing audience. This tension between the pleasure of excess and its disciplinary function is one many reality shows must navigate. Even as they delight and mystify viewers, the hell daters remain “the thing against which normality, whiteness, and functionality” are defined. Conversely, the duped daters are called on to perform “normality” and “functionality,” setting the limits of acceptable difference in ways that uphold neoliberal regimes’ “explicit fetishization of difference.” As Grace Hong argues, this fetishization allows minoritarian subjects to occupy the subject positions of neoliberal capitalism as long as they disavow their difference and uphold normative values.

Despite this embrace of mainstream values and exclusions, full participation in the life of the nation or equal place in the national imaginary remains unattainable. Neoliberal citizenship is unstable for everyone, but particularly untenable for racialized populations. Despite neoliberalism’s claims about individuality, members of minoritarian formations are not judged as individuals. At its simplest
level, as realized on *Hell Date*, this consists of the “hell dater” with bad manners representing a conspicuous example of poor home training, behavior which is taken as representative of a group rather than an individual. This person’s very literal failure to behave properly results in embarrassment not only to him or herself, but to others, as his or her behavior feeds into cultural stereotypes about black excess and lack of propriety.

“Everyone is in on the Hellish Joke:” Racialized Neoliberal Citizenship

Although racialized citizenship is nothing new in the liberal democratic history of the U.S., it is rearticulated in neoliberalism. The ability to be a self-enterprising citizen is a raced and gendered one, which doesn’t account for the material histories of groups of people who were once legally considered property. Beginning in the 1970s and intensifying with the Clinton Administration’s NAFTA and welfare reform, appeals to the timeless marketplace took center stage as capital became more mobile than ever, though American workers could not. In the face of increasing outsourcing and the rise of a service, rather than production, economy, American welfare recipients were presented with a plethora of work “opportunities” and exhortations. The rhetoric surrounding the famously titled Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 has become paradigmatic of the racialization of citizenship in the neoliberal U.S. As a way to justify drastic cutbacks in services, welfare recipients were racialized as black, and characterized as lazy and inappropriately dependent on the state – traits which manifest themselves in many and varied forms through the hell daters. Through welfare reform, the necessity of an entrepreneurial self in a neoliberal labor market became state policy. In its incitement to participation and esteem, welfare-to-work became about *choosing* to work rather than passively waiting to receive a check.

Proper choices and self-esteem create the active citizen that is the ideal of neoliberal governance, a notion of citizenship that is “less about the exercising of rights and the fulfillment of obligations and more about fulfilling one’s political responsibilities through socially sanctioned consumption and responsible choice.” Such an “activation” also draws formerly “passive, dependent” citizens into the sphere of responsibilized consumerism, and lifestyle reality programming is one way citizens learn how to remake themselves. Some hell daters manifest their excess through an inability to control non-sexual bodily functions and information about themselves: the show features both a women who farts uncontrollably and lets her date know she is menstruating as well as one with atrocious table manners. Most of the dates, however, can be grouped into two categories: those who are either unwilling to overcome their histories to take advantage of the equality the marketplace seems to offer, or those who do not possess sufficient rationality (as demonstrated by their sexual non-normativity) to participate in it.

“That Was About to Bring the Hood out of Me:” Hell Daters Lost in Time

A key set of out-of-control subjects represented on *Hell Date* is the cadre of individuals with inappropriate relationships to time. In many cases, this means inappropriate relationships to individuals from the hell dater’s past, though it may also mean that the dater in question fails in some way to exist in the continuous present of the (romantic) marketplace. One man, the “doomsday dater from hell” performs this failure through his belief that the apocalypse is imminent, giving him an excuse to act out. The doomsday dater refuses to make a proper investment in his own future; rather than an inappropriate relationship to the past, he has an inappropriate relationship to the future. More common, though, are instances like the one referred to in the title of this section, in which a duped man alludes to the type of behavior, presumably buried in his past, that might have governed his actions had the charade continued. His words are evidence of the continual work that is necessary to exist in the responsible present; the phantom-like daters unable to successfully govern themselves are tangible proof of the pervasive threat of slipping up.

Pierre, the “recently divorced dater from hell,” plays a character who was “physically there, but mentally in the past.” The show uses his grief over
the failure of his relationship to feminize him. He is described in voiceover as “a scorned man,” an expression far more commonly used to refer to women; unlike a woman scorned, however, Pierre’s fury is mostly directed inward. Aggression against one’s former partners might be a more typically masculine response, a dynamic seen on *Hell Date* through a variety of characters with “baby daddy”/“baby momma” problems. Rather than lash out at his ex-wife, however, Pierre speaks in the measured tones of someone reciting a therapist’s maxim, using the language of self-esteem that is so frequently ascribed to women, and so crucial to a successful entrepreneurial self: “the road to self-esteem is paved with pride.”14 Continuing to describe himself as “a poor excuse for masculinity,” he proceeds to break down in tears at several points in the date. That his failure to exist responsibly in the present should be the site of such shame is indicative of what makes these ties to the past unseemly; Pierre, like the many other manifestations of the rebound hell dater, cannot let go of his past to sell himself to a new future.

Like connections to the past, connections to non-normative friends and family can also imperil the formation of an entrepreneurial self. Daters like the mama’s boy from hell, the father with the rebellious daughter, or the woman with the ex-boyfriend from hell, are guilty of insufficient independence. They cannot take responsibility for themselves since responsibility for their temporal dislocation is shared with others. These characters rely on stereotypes about the dangers of inappropriate relationships; in the first two cases, the black mother who infects her son with her pathological culture and the young black woman whose desires are out of control, are guilty of insufficient independence. They cannot take responsibility for themselves since responsibility for their temporal dislocation is shared with others. These characters rely on stereotypes about the dangers of inappropriate relationships; in the first two cases, the black mother who infects her son with her pathological culture and the young black woman whose desires are out of control, are guilty of insufficient independence.

What’s at stake in *Hell Date’s* attempt to temporalize appropriately normative subjectivity is not race, *per se*, but rather the individual’s capacity to occupy the timeless space of the market. This capacity seems to rest on Hong’s notion of the fetishization of difference discussed earlier, a construction of difference that obscures the historically grounded nature of these identities and the power relations that called them into being. When whiteness and freedom have been defined against blackness for so long and in such a constitutive manner, “Black” cannot be just another form of cultural difference to celebrate. In order to ensure the proper development of an entrepreneurial self and the ability to rationally participate in the flexible market of labor and other, newer romantic relationships, subjects must cut ties with not only their group membership, but their personal past.

Another danger hell daters represent is the seductiveness of the non-normative. As the show’s promotional materials claim, “they are so hot and sexy, their wild antics can almost be ignored.”15 The radical potential for functional black heterosexuality claimed by some critics is here rendered impossible as the dates collectively evidence Roderick Ferguson’s argument about the cultural positioning of African Americans as “reproductive but not productive; heterosexual but never heteronormative.”16 Almost all of the hell daters exhibit behavior that is outside the narrow bounds of heteronormativity, including prostitution, having children outside of marriage, and a desire for a fat partner. While the duped daters perform bourgeois politesse almost to a fault, their normative strivings are always undercut by the performance of the hell dater. These subjects are seductive rather than entrepreneurial in their attempts to induce behavior that does not carry with it increased market value; part of entrepreneurial citizenship, the show seems to suggest, is a willingness to rewrite desires to conform with those that will maximize market values in accordance with neoliberal mandates. The naturalization of this rewriting is part of the governmental impulse that enables neoliberal regimes to function.
The characters hell daters perform are often excessively heterosexual (the “around the way” dater or the woman who takes her date back home to meet her twin sister). They often exhibit inappropriate relationships to consumption, as well, and these characteristics are often deployed in overdetermined ways. In particular, the menacing “diesel demon” manages to combine stereotypes of excessive consumption with those of aggressive black masculinity as he overconsumes steroids and is inordinately proud of his body. Fulfilling the narrative of the show, in which the most hellish moments revolve around inappropriate public behavior, he breaks a wine bottle over his head while he and his date are at a wine tasting. The lazy “plus-size diva” fulfills a similarly gendered caricature, as she actively eschews a planned physical activity on the date in favor of dinner. Given that so much of the cultural politics of blackness has revolved around the threatening nature of black sexuality to American (white) heteronormativity, it’s not surprising that the majority of hell dates revolve around sexual inappropriateness.

One of the most bizarre hell dates features a woman with “vanilla fever.” The actress spends the entire date criticizing stereotypes of blackness, including being surprised that “they let” a young black man manage a home goods store and hitting on the white men that facilitate other activities on the date. This stereotype seems to encourage the celebration of racial difference as it positively defines blackness; it is one of the few occasions when the duped dater becomes actively angry, asking if his date “work[s] for the KKK.” The “vanilla fever” hell dater’s beliefs and actions are as unacceptable within the realm of tolerant multiculturalism as those of the misogynist hell dater who inappropriately exhorts his date into the ladyhood she was already performing, saying, “you just need to be trained up a little bit...[let me just] crack the whip...if you leave, I can’t train you properly to be the woman you need to be.” The anger of the duped daters in these scenarios is more than sanctioned by the show; it cements their status as proper subjects. As countering overtly racist or misogynist attacks is one function of multicultural citizen-subjects, their rebuttals smooth the path for the fetishization of difference while leaving its more insidious forms untouched.

As Gordon writes, “the most obvious violations...are everywhere to be seen only in the disappearing hypervisibility of their fascinating anomalousness. The more subtle violations are unseen and denied.” In this vein, while the show promotes an acceptable level of tolerance, some daters represent the dangers of going too far politically, of making too much of the “more subtle violations” – the “ultra feminist from hell” whose combativeness and utter refusal to mind her own business make her politics more about herself, or the “colorstruck brother” who, apparently erroneously, sees racial prejudice everywhere.

Aside from the explicit political disciplining the show engages in, these less-overt forms of policing surface in performances of non-normativity that both rely on multicultural tolerance and refer back to a lengthy history of fears surrounding black sexuality. In one instance, a woman playing “the spiritual sister from hell” gets her date to participate in the beginning of a cult initiation ritual, stripping him to his underwear as she mutters incantations over him in a parody of spiritual practice that calls to mind anxieties over black witchcraft and voodoo. She gets away with as much as she does because of her date’s polite open-mindedness to her self-described “freakiness,” or, perhaps, his hope that it might be “freakiness” of a sexual kind.

In another example, a duped dater maintains her allegiance to embodied normativity in the face of the desire of her date, “the big game hunter from hell,” for her to “gain the hot 20 [pounds].” In this episode, the (slender) duped dater’s rationality is confirmed when her date flirts with an overweight woman at the restaurant. According to the opening voiceover, all the people that the main characters on Hell Date encounter are actors, or at least in on the hellish joke, making the fat woman as much of a character as the man who is attracted to her. Hell Date constructs the problem as not merely the hell dater’s inappropriate behavior (flirting with another woman while on a date), but his inappropriate object choice (flirting with a fat woman while there was a thin one available to him).

Often, these two forms of non-normativity work together. The “big game hunter” operates at the nexus of the two types of daters, attracted to
deviance. His attraction says as much about him as it does about the show’s dismissal of fat black women, whose supposed inability to control their desire is often projected onto their bodies, conflating their appetites for food and sex. Similarly, Pierre, the recently divorced dater discussed previously, is both sexually and temporally non-normative; later in his date, he reveals that he has “been taking this class on how to be sexy.” Indeed, the “class” reinscribes Pierre’s distance from acceptable sexiness and provides an excuse for inappropriate behavior, as he begins to strip in the middle of the restaurant. His inability to keep what he’s learned “where it belongs,” that is, in the bedroom, reifies the divide between the “good,” teachable Black subject and the abject spectacularity of the hell dater.

Part of this division relies on the obvious performance of responsibility; one problem with Pierre’s performance is the cracks it reveals in something that is supposed to be natural, or at least naturalized. Similarly, the “sissy” dater from hell is either trying too hard or not hard enough to perform as normative a masculinity as possible. His “questionable masculinity” is manifested via his stylistic and behavioral choices: he wears a pink handkerchief and a spaghetti-strap tank top, and sits with his legs crossed in a stereotypically feminine manner. Of course his performance is untenable, but unlike in the “vanilla fever” episode, overt prejudice is allowed to flourish unchecked. The comments of two misogynist gay men interrupt the dinner portion of the date; perhaps in self-defense, the duped dater lashes out, referring to them as “flamer and flamier.” Her overt homophobia elicits a confession from her hell dater: one of the men is his ex, and he considers himself “ex-gay.” Prior to this confession, the date was assumed to qualify for “hellish” status because of the horror (to the duped dater) of being on a date with an “obviously” gay man. After his non-normative sexuality has been revealed by his own ghost, the show positions same-sex sexuality as a permanent identity that cannot be overcome. Regardless of his claims to have been cured, the hell dater has proven himself untrustworthy. His stereotypical behavior reveals the truth about him, his words do not. Because audience sympathies are with the duped dater, our identification supposedly allied with her disgust and horror at the thought that her blind date is secretly gay, this man’s efforts to perform heterosexuality are not tragic, but rather a haunting in themselves. This scene serves as a reminder that not everyone can be an entrepreneurial subject, a reminder that functions not as a critique of that system, but of people’s personal pathologies.

“I don’t think you could have wrote this date worse:
Acting Out on Hell Date

Not every date can manifest as literal a ghost of bourgeois blackness as a muscular, aggressive black man breaking a bottle of wine over his head. Yet, the most “hellish moments” of each date, signaled by their proximity to the reveal as well as the *Carmina Burana*-esque music playing in the background, revolve around inappropriate public behavior. All the day’s activities have happened in public, but often that space is merely the two daters in a room with someone teaching them a specific skill. The space of the reveal is almost always a space where notions of appropriate and inappropriate behavior are much more circumscribed, a place with other patrons, such as a wine store or restaurant. This spatialization of appropriate behavior makes the hell daters’ “acting out” hypervisible. The spectacularity of the performance elides the un-representability of these subjects in such a context unless their abjectness is being used to discipline others into normativity. In this way, *Hell Date*’s representational choices collapse the distinction between the cultural and the political and reinforce the “racial order” of neoliberal citizen-subjects. Unlike other shows of its type, *Hell Date* does not offer a palliative; there is no financial reward or promise of fame beyond one ten-minute television appearance as the butt of a joke. There is only the relief of avoiding an exorcism, since there is no engagement with the “ghost” either. In this way, *Hell Date* may gesture toward the impossibility of resolution—as I have argued, the recognizability of the hell daters’ characters to the audience as well as to the duped daters speaks to their continuing cultural currency. Moreover, the final confessionals after the reveal often gesture toward a kind of messiness, with the duped daters referencing their own potential capacity to fail to manage themselves.
Performing normativity in the context of *Hell Date* provides its duped daters with another chance to practice this management, which is necessary to participate in a flexibilized economy. These subjects are attempting to perform the work of emotion management in their professional as well as private lives (even as entrepreneurial citizenship requires the collapse of the two); many of them describe their work professions like nursing and retail, which require a good deal of emotional labor. Statements threatening (a return to) violent reactions, like “That was about to bring the hood out of me” or “I think shoes may have been coming off if this had gone any longer” reveal that the entrepreneurial, self-governing citizens neoliberalism produces and requires are not stable formations. Self-governance is a process, the self is a project requiring constant vigilance, and perhaps, repeated viewing of BET.

In this reading, the show becomes merely another way to jettison these non-conforming, ill-behaved populations and to reinforce the importance of self-maintenance. Hell Date establishes non-normativity as abject. People who behave like this are not even people: they cannot be directly represented, they must be characters performed by actors. Proper comportment becomes the sign of the real on Hell Date, because “no [person] would act like that.” Bad behavior becomes a performance, but it can only be a performance.

The disappearance of non-normative subjects from public life “is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent.” Using Gordon’s description of haunting to understand the show prevents the entrepreneurial imperatives of Hell Date from becoming overly totalizing, because its representation of the non-normative subjects as ghosts – explicitly named as hellish manifestations – also opens the door for these subjects to make themselves known. While Hell Date itself has no investment in the sort of memorialization or grappling with ghosts Gordon sees as a necessary project, BET does not control how its audience interprets or uses the show. But understanding Hell Date as one site among many where ghosts and apparitions make themselves known to subjects who are trying to forget them provides access to multiple points of rupture, perhaps to point to numerous ways and opportunities to imagine the self otherwise. As the state becomes governmentalized and old forms of resistance obviated, finding pleasure and responsibility in haunting may be only one strategy for resisting a state that has historically been a site of violence, not one of reconciliation.

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End Notes

5 Herman Gray gestures toward the need for further investigation of this subject in his *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), and Beretta Smith-Shomade takes up this challenge in her *Pimpin’ Ain’t Easy: Selling Black Entertainment Television* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
For example, BET debuted *College Hill* in 2004, creating a franchise of shows that take a reality-based look at the lives of wealthy teenagers and young adults at historically black colleges, just as MTV's *Laguna Beach* did for privileged white Californians. For more information on the rise of lifestyle programming, see Ouellette and Hay.


13 This attitude shares elements with what Cornel West has diagnosed as “nihilism in Black America” in his *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994). In the case of *Hell Date*, this disregard for the future is detached from a structural and historical framework and presented as individual pathology.

14 For more information on the central role of self-esteem in the post-welfare state, see Barbara Cruikshank’s work.


17 In the “virgin from hell” episode, it’s the excessive sexuality of a girl’s roommate that fascinates; the “pretty, prudish” hell dater’s lack of sexual experience and religiosity proves increasingly alienating to her duped dater, and she almost “loses” him to her “freaky roommate.” Normativity requires one to walk a thin line.


19 This is a crack in the façade of an entrepreneurial subject as well, since as Pierre Bourdieu’s work on *cultural* capital accumulation in *Distinction* insists, the important thing in order to naturalize the hierarchical relationships of various forms of capital possession is to appear *never to have learned* or to have had to acquire independently the capital one possesses.


21 While this project is ongoing, the show is not — it lasted only two seasons on BET, perhaps because its popularity made the hoaxes harder to pull off, or perhaps because, with two dates in each episode and a 65-episode first season, the show’s writers exhausted their supply of stereotypes.