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Hot Combs, Curling Irons, and Contradictions: Portrayals of African American Women in Mid-1990's Pop Fiction

It's old news to argue that Terry McMillan's 1992 novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, started a revolution within African American pop fiction. Certainly, McMillan did something no one else had: she presented contemporary African American women as highly educated, professional characters struggling within daily life in the ubiquitous American urban jungle. Basing her portrayals on modern African American women, McMillan focused on contemporary problems that spoke volumes for her largely female, African American reading population. Jumping on this publishing bandwagon (and out to make a bit of money in the process), other authors began to follow McMillan's lead, continuing and furthering the literary pop movement by churning out bestsellers.

Favoring the intelligent, qualified women that McMillan created, these authors fashioned their own black women characters after McMillan's initial four, producing novel after pop novel featuring educated and successful black women who take on the racist and sexist American urban environment, thriving both in careers and relationships. Connie Briscoe's *Sisters and Lovers* (1994), Bebe Moore Campbell's *Brothers and Sisters* (1994), Venice Berry's *So Good* (1996), Eric Jerome Dickey's *Sister, Sister* (1996), Terry McMillan's own follow-up novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back: A Novel* (1996), and Yolanda Joe's *He Say, She Say: A Novel* (1997), each take up the characteristics which made *Waiting to Exhale* a smash hit and try to improve upon the formula.

The novels' spotlights are on the women characters' romantic relationships, which are exclusively heterosexual and

sometimes dysfunctional. A secondary concentration focuses readers on the characters' careers or professional ambitions; however, more frequently the workplace environment simply offers yet another backdrop for the characters to meet or respond to the various men in their lives. Not quite Arabesque's "multicultural romance," not quite *Beloved*, these novels strike a precarious balance between being contemporary "bodice-rippers" with "happily-ever-after" endings and the more "serious" literature generally read by an academic crowd. Sharing interesting and powerful race and gender analyses, the novels offer these morsels of social commentary within an easy-to-read candy coating. Not surprisingly, the novels are decidedly fiction of the 1990's. Referencing recent popular culture, current events, and slang usage, they expect readers to know the issues and styles of their times.

Offering exciting new dimensions to old and boring stereotypes, the novels share positive representations of black women's success while critiquing the (white) standards of beauty that surround black women in the United States. Strangely though, these seemingly positive portrayals have disturbing contradictions within them, generating problematic readings. Specifically, several of the physical characterizations stumble, negating the analytical racial critiques that occurred earlier as crucial characters physically embody the very beauty standards earlier analyzed. At best, the characters offer glimpses of African American female success while they are undermined by poor authorial awareness of the impact of physical descriptions.

The majority of female characters portrayed within these novels center on highly professional and successful African American women, ranging in age from their early twenties to early forties. The characters exhibit success usually through the accumulation of material goods, high professional status, educational level attained, and financial affluence. For example, within *Waiting to Exhale*, readers learn quickly that Savannah is a successful professional within the television industry, financially supports her mother long-distance, and does not equate her personal ambition with marriage (2-3). Although "taking a twelve-thousand-dollar-a-year pay cut" for a new job in Arizona,

Savannah shows her risk-taking mentality by moving to a new city for “plenty of opportunities to advance” within the field she loves (3). Later, readers discover Savannah also collects expensive African and African American art (4, 161, 253-4). Clearly, Savannah is successful and has earned a certain economic and social status. She is the prototype for the other female characters in the books which follow *Waiting to Exhale*. These professionally successful women, portrayed quite favorably in several ways, dominate the books.

Also within *Waiting to Exhale*, Gloria, Savannah’s friend, is the owner of a beauty salon, catering to the elite black community of Scottsdale, Arizona. Gloria owns her own home and has invested enough to ensure she can purchase the material goods she wants for herself and her son, Tarik (296-7). In the same novel, although troubled by her mounting credit card debt, Robin is also financially secure, employed as a successful insurance underwriter (194-5). Likewise, even though Bernadine is unhappy being “a controller for a real estate firm” (34), she is good at it and manages “all fiscal transactions” effectively for her clients (220). She is even able to “put money aside” without her greedy husband realizing it (35).

Black female characters in other novels maintain similar professionalism. Within *Sisters and Lovers*, Beverly is a successful senior editor at a magazine (94) while her sister, Evelyn, a graduate of Smith College (15), has a “steady stream of daytime clients” (177) in her flourishing psychology practice and makes enough to “cover the bills” of her upper-middle-class house even without her husband’s income (25). Esther, in *Brothers and Sisters*, has an advanced degree (364) and is a banking executive (8). In *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, the title character holds both a Master of Fine Arts degree as well as a Master of Business Administration degree, choosing to use the latter degree as a systems analyst. Stella “make[s] a shitload of money” (16), jetting on whims to Jamaica twice within a few weeks.

Correspondingly, Sandy, in *He Say, She Say*, is a radio executive, holding down several major projects, which have the potential of large bonuses and is obviously “making some dough from the way [her] apartment [is] laid out” (151). In *Sister, Sister*,

Inda earns her Master's degree from Stanford and is a social worker (138). Likewise, in *So Good*, Danielle, an advertising executive who enjoys "all the [...] material possessions of upper-middle-class status" (15), Lisa, a Ph.D. candidate in Communication Studies (20), and Sundi, a successful self-employed business woman (40), each continue the representations of prosperous African American women.

Clearly, these novels present African American women within a variety of powerful careers in urban America. By doing so, they undermine negative stereotypes of race and gender, which have classified African American women as primarily domestic workers or in other low-paying, low-status positions. These new representations, or "i-mages" as cultural theorist Marlene Nourbese Philip names them, can "succeed in altering the way a society sees itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness" (12). In essence, if applying Nourbese Philip's theory, offering new and positive i-mages of African American women within popular fiction can help make society re-define the role(s) and expectation(s) of African American women in reality.

In other words, this is fiction that *a lot* of primarily African American women are reading while they vacation, as they travel to work, and on their lunch breaks. In fact, McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* "spent months on the *New York Times* bestseller list and sold nearly 4 million copies" (Konkel and Ossei). Likewise, two years later, Campbell's *Brothers and Sisters* "reached the *New York Times* Bestseller [*sic*] list just two weeks after its release" (Hill); similarly the other books also flew off the shelves and into the hands of an enthralled, previously untapped, audience.

By creating visibly successful, female, African American fictional characters, real African American women readers are able to envision black women who resemble them thriving in high-paying, high-power careers. In a world where African American television actors are overwhelmingly relegated to a few "black" channels, where Oscar award-winning black film actors sift through tiresome scripts trying to find a way out of racist and stereotypical material, and African American directors and producers rarely get the opportunity or cash to create their own visions of the American landscape, for these reasons alone the

books offered a Mecca of opportunity for re-thinking possibilities. These novels, through their fresh representations, showed the promise of that alteration, re-framing visions of black women in working America.

Moreover, several of the novels extend these positive images by critiquing American values of (white) beauty that are not favorable (or fair) to African American women. Within *Sisters and Lovers*, Beverly, Evelyn, and Charmaine offer one of the best critiques of racialized beauty values, discussing the rejection black women feel when they see a black man with a white woman:

Evelyn said [,] “But we also [...] feel rejected. We’ve been put down for so long about our looks. Our hair’s too nappy, our lips are too full, our behinds too big. It was years before we had a black Miss America.”

“Yeah,” Charmaine said. [...] “She didn’t even look black.”

“They corrected for that the following year,” Beverly said. “We got a dark-skinned one [...].”

“One of them was real pretty,” Charmaine said. [...]

“People just think that because she’s got Caucasian features,” Evelyn said.

“She’s as dark as they come,” Charmaine protested.

“But she’s got a thin nose and lips. The one before had more African features, and some people were saying she was ugly. It just goes to show you that society hasn’t accepted black women as beautiful beings, at least not the way they do with white women.”
(299)

Clearly these characters (as well as author Briscoe) are aware of the privileged treatment given to black women whose features and skin color reflect “standard” white female beauty. Their discussion confirms the very limited standards of beauty that have entrapped and suffocated African American women within the United States. Cultural theorist Carole Boyce Davies believes that “whiteness is conceptualized, then, not primarily in skin color, but in the conjunction of Caucasian racial characteristics with the acceptance and participation in the domination of others” (6). In this case, it is not that whiteness or a white appearance is actually more desirable; instead, it is that racialized beauty standards regarding

skin color and “Caucasian racial characteristics” have consistently dominated women of color, often affecting their self-esteem. Whiteness is equated with privilege, something that allows more access, gains more opportunity, and offers more acceptance. The characters’ discussion helps illustrate these issues, questioning standards of beauty within the United States.

Similarly several other characters criticize African American men’s preferential selection of black women born with features associated with “whiteness.” Gloria (*Waiting to Exhale*) discovers her teenage son Tarik “was picking girls who looked white [...] [questioning,] What was wrong with black girls with dark skin and short, nappy hair?” (295). Gloria’s interrogation helps draw attention to the implicit insult that Tarik’s choices may indicate as well as delivers an initial possibility of multiple racial beauty standards. Likewise, Esther (*Brothers and Sisters*) cannot absolve her brother for marrying “someone with hair that blew in the wind, with skin the color of the inside of an almond. It was a betrayal that continued to wound” (390). As a “cocoa-colored” black woman (4), Esther’s feelings of “betrayal” and a general lack of “forgive[ness]” (290) toward her brother, reflect the importance of this issue, not only for African American communities but for the larger multi-ethnic communities within the United States. As long as “whiteness” is given privileged status, it will continue to be a concern. As noted by Kathy Russell, Midge Wilson, and Ronald Hall in their book, *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color Among African Americans*, “among Black women, straight hair and European hairstyles not only have been considered more feminine but have sent a message about one’s standing in the social hierarchy. ‘Good’ hair has long been associated with the light-skinned middle class, ‘bad hair’ with Blacks who are less fortunate” (82). The fact that Briscoe, McMillan, and Campbell reveal these painful scenes of color privilege shows their attempts at affecting change within the American unconscious regarding racial politics. By writing of the often-silenced issue of colorism, these authors offer chances to look more critically at the painful issues that affect the daily lives of their average African American female readers. They speak the unspeakable in order to effect change.

Some of these authors extend the issue of skin color privilege by examining the issue of interracial relationships and the concerns they signify for African American women. Like the three women in *Sisters and Lovers*, Danielle, Lisa, and Sundi (*So Good*), also comment on seeing a black man with a white woman, noticing that he “play[ed] a game called gentleman” with the white woman, questioning whether he would “act like that if he was with one of [them]” (226). Their comments, like those in other books, again reflect the preferential treatment given to white appearance by society, media, and the like in the United States. As one “very dark skinned” man stated in *The Color Complex*, “It makes all the difference in the world to walk into a restaurant with a White man, as opposed to another Black man. We are treated much better because they assume we have money” (122). The issue of white privilege is one that has occurred for centuries in the United States. Even during slavery, colorism reared its ugly head as “slaves [...] with the lightest skin had the highest status [...] on the [...] plantations” (Russell et al. 18). This privilege extends today by allowing those with light/white skin to gain a presumption of wealth, leading to preferential customer service and other benefits.

Similarly, *Waiting to Exhale* shows the ways in which light/white skin can become a status symbol. Bernadine, angry that her husband has started divorce proceedings and entered a relationship with a white woman, realizes that “*Hell*, [she] was his white girl for eleven years” (original emphasis 25). Indeed, Bernadine *was* part of her white-identified husband’s status symbols, along with many material possessions; “nothing” of which, Bernadine claims of their shared home, “would indicate that black people lived here” (36). Veronica Chambers, in her essay “Betrayal Feminism,” argues that “the tyranny of the beauty myth ha[s] scarred so many women of color” (26) and further posits that “black women *are* instructed to look as ‘white’ as possible” (original emphasis 27). Bernadine’s realization of her own objectification as a status symbol due to her lighter coloring and submissive behavior shows her struggle with the (white) beauty standards ever-present in the United States. As Russell et al. state, many “African American women [...] know that most Black men prefer their women to be ‘light, bright, and sometimes

White' [...] [since] a light-skinned Black partner, or [...] a White partner, on one's arm conveys social status" (107). In finding a younger white woman to replace his brown-skinned wife, Bernadine's husband accepts and perpetuates the racial (and youthful) beauty myths a white- (and age-) obsessed American society has propagated. Bernadine's struggle also offers a chance for McMillan to reveal the mainstream American fixation with light/white skin.

Additionally, many of these novels contribute to the general critique of white privilege by cataloging the various ways skin color can prejudice or aid people during daily life. Campbell, in her novel *Brothers and Sisters*, offers a sobering view of this prejudice, indicating that white people are associated with an "easy childhood" (3), "high SAT scores" (16), "angelic face[s]" (30), "Barbie Doll[s]" (60), "precise" language (61), "proper English" (95), the "language of success and power" (270), "privilege" (344), being "pale [...] and pretty" (360), and "clipped enunciation and perfect diction" (315). Similarly, in Campbell's novel, because white people "look like the people in charge" (196), they also are deemed "responsible" and "qualified" (236) more readily than people of color. In other words, "[t]he important people were blancos" (5). Campbell offers a composite of the ways in which skin color affects careers by showing how unsubstantiated mental associations can create unexamined assumptions in favor of white people.

In contrast, in several of the novels, dark or black skin is also connected with uncorroborated and unfair correlations. LaKeesha, a "young dark-brown-skinned woman" in *Brothers and Sisters* (213), is described as being "a little rough around the edges" and having "something unappealing and maybe even a little threatening about her" (235), based on her skin color. Sandy (*He Say, She Say*) also critiques these racialized beauty standards by questioning the disparaging comments an older "extraordinarily fair" (117) African American woman makes to her because she is a dark-skinned child. The woman remarked, "it's a good thing that you've got that ["good"] hair because if you were nappy-headed and black, that'd be a double curse" (117). Afterwards, Sandy says to her mother, "color must matter if [people] think of it first and it

can hurt so much” (118). Sandy’s innocent childhood commentary offers an assessment about the importance given to skin color within the United States and the realities of discrimination that people of color experience based on their skin pigment. These commentaries also begin to interrogate the myth of (white) beauty standards, offering avenues to new, more inclusive criteria.

Additionally, some novels show the ways in which black skin is associated with crime, welfare, and lower socioeconomic classes. Esther (*Brothers and Sisters*) states “[black people] don’t do *most* of the crime in America. So how did [black people] get the reputation of being the only criminals in this country?” (71). In both *Brothers and Sisters* (69) and *Sister, Sister* (107), black women are immediately thought to be burglars when seen by white women. Also, in perhaps one of the most troublesome scenes of *Brothers and Sisters*, Humphrey, a well-educated, dark-skinned African American man, explains his vision of black women after being teased incessantly about his dark skin during childhood:

Esther was a beautiful woman, but even in the midst of admiring her, he heard loud cussing and saw food stamps and welfare checks. [...] He couldn’t look at any black woman, not even the lightest ones, with the blowiest blow hair, without seeing his mother and his sisters and those other women in the welfare line, without smelling that odor of hair grease and fried chicken. [...] They could be trying to kiss him, and he tasted hair grease and cussing in their mouths. They could be trying to love him with their bodies, but what he felt was all that grease and cussing up inside them. [...] And he couldn’t help but compare Esther to other women, women who were pale and quiet and pretty. [...] This was the kind of woman [...] whose streaming hair let everyone know that he was important, that he was somebody. (360)

Although painful to read, these excellent scenes of colorism and racism offer glimpses into two of the types of damage regarding the acceptance of racialized beauty values. Not only can their acceptance damage the societal “value” of African American people who do not adopt racialized beauty values, but also their acceptance will damage those people without features associated

with (white) beauty values who *do* adopt them. Here Humphrey's racist thoughts affect Esther—even though she remains technically unaware of them. By his acceptance of racialized beauty values which demean black women, Humphrey perpetuates the stereotypes and disparagement of black women in general. Thus, even though Esther does not judge herself by these prejudiced standards, she is certainly disrupted by them as she tries to understand why Humphrey is not interested in her. Similarly, although Humphrey is well-educated, he is unable to avoid the corrosive effects of white beauty values; he finds them insidious, affecting him so greatly that he cannot even relate to a black woman without the devastating overtones of racialized beauty overwhelming him. His acceptance of them as "truth" affects his understanding of his own self-worth. In other words, the adoption of (white) beauty values, which disparage African Americans, only perpetuates negative stereotypes and perceptions about African American people and communities.

By sharing these stereotypes of color, the novels offer dynamic portrayals of the ways in which white privilege exists within the United States. Russell et al. disclose a study conducted in the 1940s by Charles H. Parrish, which showed that "in general, light to medium skin tones were linked to intelligence and refinement, while dark skin tones suggested toughness, meanness, and physical strength" (66). Russell et al. concluded that "although Parrish's study is fifty years old, similar attitudes about skin color prevail" (66). In fact, Leonard Steinhorn and Barbara Diggs-Brown bring this issue up to date in their 1999 book, *By the Color of Our Skin: The Illusion of Integration and the Reality of Race*. They state that "the General Social Survey conducted by the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center" (NORC) indicates "a comfortable majority of whites see blacks as less intelligent, lazier, and more prone to violence than whites" (130). Clearly, the stereotypes that Parrish found in his study more than a half century ago, as well as those discovered throughout the 1990's by NORC, are still prevalent in contemporary pop fiction, even pop fiction written predominantly by, and for, black women. These depictions of stereotypical racial associations share the color prejudices that are still with us.

Fortunately, several novels offer not only powerful critiques of racial discrimination, but also new and positive i-mages of beauty for African American women, sharing black women's beauty through more favorable lenses. When Stella (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*) indicates that she "wische[s] [she'd] been born blacker, so black that [she] was almost Godiva-edible like the proud Africans" (55-6), she subverts prejudices within standards of racialized beauty. By aligning blackness with something sensual (Godiva) and historical (Africa), McMillan creates strong positive i-mages for her readers. Additionally, Stella remarks to Winston that "the very things [they] were teased about as kids—these big lips and round cheeks and full noses and everything—have turned out to be [their] best features" (308). Unlike Humphrey's painful and racist associations with brown skin color, Stella agitates unfavorable racialized beauty standards, showing ways in which African-based beauty can be recognized constructively. These comments indicate a positive appreciation for multiple visions of beauty, praising stereotypical African-based features and again subverting (white) beauty values. This also encourages readers to re-think automatic assumption of (white) beauty standards themselves.

Similarly, both Sandy (*He Say, She Say*) and Inda (*Sister, Sister*) are also described favorably as dark-skinned women, negating some of the obsession with (white) beauty values. Strangely though, Sandy is said to be "classy," not "pretty" (13), a compliment that may devalue her appearance as it makes a subtle, and possibly harmful, distinction between beauty and behavior. In other words, the semantic adjustment may indicate that a dark-skinned woman may not be pretty, but if she "carried herself with class and had good taste in clothes" then she too could be "remember[ed]" (13). Inda, however, nicknamed "Black" by her father (126) because of her dark skin, reiterates that blackness is beautiful through her nickname as well as the studied appreciation by several characters in the novel. One black man remarks to Inda's friend, "I think your friend's got it going on. She's all that and ain't nothing left over" (117). As this man turns out to be kind, generous, artistic, and highly educated, his compliments become even more meaningful. Still more significantly, Inda's strong self-

esteem powerfully reinforces the i-mage of black beauty. By having Inda portrayed as one of the few black women who learns from her mistakes in relationships, author Dickey combines a positive, functional lifestyle with African-based beauty values.

Unfortunately, while the novels offer excellent new i-mages of successful and professional African American women as well as evoke effective critiques on the acceptance of (white) beauty values within the United States, they also display alarming contradictions. Perplexingly, authors have occasionally created characters who actually maintain the racialized status quo, causing an odd sense of dissonance as characters (and authors) fall suspect, almost worshipping characters who represent standard American (white) beauty characteristics.

In many of these novels, the appearance and physical characteristics of several of the women may suggest ideals which pander to the very racialized beauty standards that Briscoe's characters critiqued earlier, undermining the successful status that has been so carefully constructed by each author. For example, many of the women's physical descriptions reflect the societal standard of (white) beauty accepted and propagated within the United States that only extremely thin women are attractive. This seems to contradict sources which reveal that "African-American women's self-image comprises a collection of features: hair, skin, clothes, and body shape. Weight plays a role but to a lesser degree than it does for white women, who tend to use weight as a defining factor of beauty" (Mack C1). Thus, while weight is one factor that black women might use to evaluate their own beauty, the emphasis that is given to it by some of these pop fiction authors seems strangely jarring.

As Laura Frasier, author of *Losing it: America's Obsession with the Industry of Losing Weight*, stated during a 1997 National Public Radio interview on *The Women's Show*, the status symbol of thinness in the United States started in the early twentieth century when it became "all too common" to have plenty to eat. As well, Frasier believes that the influx of immigrants, primarily of ethnicities that had "short" or "stocky" physical frames, to the United States during this time, led Americans from Northern and Western European countries to attempt to distinguish themselves

physically so as to retain their own privilege. Hence, they began to uphold a new beauty value of slimness as a status symbol.

In effect, this societal (white) standard slights physical traits that may be related to ethnicity. Thus, white/light-skinned Americans from Northern and Western European countries began to expand their definitions of “whiteness” as Boyce Davies theorized, limiting those who could claim the privilege of “whiteness.” As Sue K. Jewell, author of *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of U.S. Social Policy*, argues, this type of representation can “devalue women of large stature” (39), possibly creating cultural dissonance within these female African American portrayals of success. Remarking on this issue in her performances, African American sociologist and stand-up comedian Beatrice Berry “ask[s] why Black women with dark skin, nappy hair, and big butts are made to feel so bad about themselves” (as summarized by Russell et al. 62). Although being thin is not necessarily only a (white) beauty value, Frasier’s immigration hypothesis and Berry’s social commentary certainly shares some of the societal issues with portraying African American women characters as impossibly thin.

By creating successful characters that also adopt standards of beauty historically based on “whiteness,” these authors often undermine the success their characters have achieved in evaluating racialized beauty. Specifically, the acceptance of beauty values based upon a very specific ethnicity’s characteristics (such as Frasier suggests) damages the images of the primary characters’ successful lives. This subtle sabotage reveals the multiple ways in which real or fictional African American women can be oppressed.

In each case, it becomes apparent that although successful within a professional arena, these female characters retain some significant cultural issues concerning their appearance and the acceptance of their looks. For example, a majority of primary as well as minor female characters reinforce the societal belief that any weight, even if proportionate to their bodies, is not attractive. Specifically, in *Waiting to Exhale*, Savannah is concerned about her weight but actually weighs only 135 pounds (17), while Robin unbelievably complains she is a “six instead of a ten” (46). Beverly and Evelyn (*Sisters and Lovers*) don’t “have a weight

problem” because “slimness runs in the family” (47), and Stella (*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*), obviously supports the same idealistic weight standard as readers discover she is “va-vavooming” in her new swimsuits, which are made for teenage girls (31). Stella also denies that she is “regressing” simply because she “wear[s] [her] bluejeans a little on the tight side with a bodysuit” (270). Similarly, Sandy (*He Say, She Say*) is described as “skinny” and “real lean” (86), while Chiquita (*Sister, Sister*), is considered a “narrow-ass” (196) and is described as “thin and slim with [a] little bit of butt” (202).

These slender black female characters, idealized both from the black male characters’ perspectives in the novels as well as those of weight-obsessed, white American society, are often unappreciative of their own ethnically-based characteristics and create unrealistic (and undesirable) measures of physical beauty. In fact, even Valerie’s positive commentary—that she does not have the curves most African American women have, is often teased about her “skinny legs” (52), and jokes that her “butt [is] not [...] as ethnically shaped as she wished” (2)—is suspect. Her comments *seem* to indicate a positive reinforcement of ethnically-derived physical traits, yet Valerie’s intense drive to lose weight contradicts her desire for a more “ethnically shaped butt,” and in fact helps the novel perpetuate (white) weight stereotypes by glorifying her weight loss. These portrayals of successful African American women that emulate weight characteristics historically associated with Northern and Western Europeans can cause cultural dissonance as well as a general disparagement of ethnically diverse characteristics. Specifically, the portrayals ring hollow as they suggest issues with weight that some researchers say simply do not exist among real black women. Psychology professor Midge Wilson states her studies indicate that “even though African American women weigh on average 10 pounds more than white women do,” they are more satisfied with their “physical shape and size” than white women (Mack C1). Astonishingly, authors that focus on the weight of their female black characters seem to be almost creating new standards for which real black women should strive—standards that lead to an

idealistic notion of unattainable beauty, especially regarding weight, for the average woman.

Even worse, primary and minor characters within these novels that are considered overweight are often ridiculed for their sizes. Gloria (*Waiting to Exhale*), a size eighteen “although twenties felt better” (74), with “an ass [...] as big as a house” (327), is an embarrassment to her son (99-100) and, as skinny, size-6 Robin interprets Gloria’s emotional and sexual situation, “doesn’t know anyone who wants to fuck her” (51). Fascinatingly, Sister Monroe (*Waiting to Exhale*), “a true size twenty-two” (70) is mocked for her desire to look young, while many slim characters (like Stella), desiring the same ideal, are not. Desiree, one of Gloria’s hair stylists, wears lots of makeup and has “a thick belt of fat [...] that *apparently everyone could see except her*” (my emphasis 71). Similarly, cousin Sylvia (*Sisters and Lovers*) has “put on quite a bit of weight [...] most of it in the hips” and also wears “*gobs* of makeup” (my emphasis 46). These pejorative remarks regarding weight and make-up subtly insult these characters by creating disparaging pictures of them through negative imagery.

In contrast to these fictional black women who fanatically worry about gaining weight or who are mocked for their larger sizes, real African American women often challenge the notion that weight should be equated with ridicule or disparagement. “At 5 foot 6 inches, 206 pounds,” one black woman offered that “regardless of my clothes size, I’ll always think I’m beautiful” (Mack C1). Mack’s article indicates other studies concur, stating “African American women are much more comfortable with their self-image than women of other races” (C1). Clearly, many real African American women do not have the weight image issue that is so prevalent within these texts—a weight image issue that replicates (white) beauty standards.

Yet, other women’s descriptions also focus on their size. Esther (*Brothers and Sisters*) looks in the mirror and thinks “Jesus, my butt is the size of New Mexico, [...] And my breasts! Elsie the Cow” (23). Likewise Zelma (*Sisters and Lovers*), who is “a little on the plump side,” is also “kind of comical” *because of her* “ample thighs” (69), and male characters indicate that Ann (*He*

Say, She Say), another minor female character, had “let [herself] go” (21) as her “age had got that spread going” (46). And perhaps the most distressing depiction is of Chontelle, Humphrey’s sister in *Brothers and Sisters* who has “gotten even bigger” (311). Chontelle is also on welfare, constantly cursing while asking her brother for more money. Her portrayal contributes to the negative racial stereotypes of unemployed, overweight, single black mothers on welfare—hardly a positive i-mage to alter mainstream (white) society’s perceptions.

Moreover, even in jest, one of the first insults given against any woman is to indicate she has a “fat butt” (*He Say, She Say* 166, *Sister, Sister* 52). Likewise, in *Brothers and Sisters*, Esther’s most effective insult to Belinda, her sister-in-law, described as “pretty” and “petite” (388) with “silky hair and keen features,” is to question whether she was “putting on a little weight” (390). Although weight is not only a beauty standard leveled against African American women, clearly the origins of it, as hypothesized by Frasier, are problematic. The fact that several characters adopt these standards without interrogation of their origins creates awkward readings. As well, considering many real African American women deny the impact weight has on their own standards of beauty, these portrayals seem to be only offering new avenues to insecurity. As Mikki Taylor, *Essence*’s beauty editor, states, “We’ve never been built like the billboard models and we’re fine with that. If you are in a country that negated your beauty from the beginning, you have to establish a different standard of beauty” (as interviewed in Mack C8). Clearly, black women in the United States have a different standard regarding weight and beauty. Unfortunately, the authors are not revealing it, instead imitating white standards of female beauty.

Disappointingly, several authors create idealized minor characters which reproduce other (white) beauty standards that were so effectively critiqued earlier by main characters. Chrissy/Wanda (*Sisters and Lovers*), the “other” woman that Evelyn’s husband had once dated, reflects several other (white) beauty ideals. Described as “pretty” with “a smooth coconut complexion and gray eyes” and “long reddish hair” which made her look like “Vanessa Williams” (179), Chrissy/Wanda represents

several of the *very* attributes the three women in Briscoe's novel critiqued. Since earlier the three black women were commenting on the first black woman to win the Miss America pageant (coincidentally Vanessa Williams), it is strange to show that Chrissy/Wanda is almost Williams's physical double, without any critique of the racialized beauty her features represent. Marlene Nourbese Philip makes a crucial point about black women's appearance and social pressures:

There are certain historical and sociological, not to mention etymological, reasons why when we hear certain words and phrases, such as 'thick lips' or 'kinky hair,' the accompanying images are predominantly negative; such expressions connote far more than they denote. *From whose perspective* are the lips of the African thick or her hair kinky? Certainly not from the African's perspective. (my emphasis 20)

Nourbese Philip's commentary about the pressures that black women experience daily regarding image cannot be underestimated. By viewing black women from a white perspective (and thus deeming almost exclusively black women with straight hair or light complexions as beautiful in conjunction with white beauty ideals), these novels actually perpetuate stereotypes, offering inadequate representations of black womanhood. Significantly, Chrissy/Wanda is also described as "half-white" (321) and "drop-dead gorgeous" (370) by the three sisters. These comments suggest that even while Briscoe and her characters can critique racialized beauty standards and can realize that these standards devalue black women, they may also unintentionally adopt the very prejudices they critique.

Other depictions of black female characters cause similar problems. Bebe (*He Say, She Say*) is "proud [...] of her light skin" (118), and Valerie (*Sister, Sister*), often stopped on the street because she looks like lighter-skinned Halle Berry (83), also reflects these color stereotypes. Valerie's beauty becomes especially suspect after learning she has "most of her mother's features—the oval face, full bottom lip, and especially the green eyes" (22). In other words, she takes after her white mother.

Beverly's (*Sisters and Lovers*) sexy long hair (68), Chrissy/Wanda's (*Sisters and Lovers*) "gorgeous red hair" (371), Sandy's "naturally curly [...] shoulder length [...] 'good hair'" (116), and even Robin's (*Waiting to Exhale*) weave (40) all become questionable since they reflect the fascination of (white) beauty standards which value long, swinging hair. Steinhorn and Diggs-Brown remind readers that most "Black models [in the United States] must have light skin, straight hair, and Caucasian features" (130). While these pop authors (and their characters) are willing to critique the prejudices of beauty within the United States on some levels, they also perpetuate them, leaving a strange feeling of cultural dissonance for their readers.

Part of this intellectual conflict can be attributed to the genre itself. Aware of their functions as life diversions and "mind candy," these popular novels also try to contend with the uncompromising realities of gender and race. Unlike some current multicultural romance fiction, which simply pairs men and women within the view of its readership, never tackling issues of regular life such as discrimination and prejudice, these novels confront serious issues within a light format through casual critiques between characters. While they may fall short on some of their analytical fronts, the novels accept the challenge of intellectualizing race within a popular medium. Easily read and easily digested, these novels evaluate the lot of being born black and female in the United States. Their audience demands some escapism from the harshness of racism, while also desiring stories to which they can relate. Done well, it's an unbeatable combination. Done not so well, it reflects mainstream biases of which the authors themselves weren't able to rid their work.

By creating contradictory associations between successful lives, black appearance, and racialized beauty values, these authors make interesting statements about the ways black women are viewed and perceived within the United States. While the novels offer tremendous critiques of long-held (white) beauty values and stereotypes that do not favor African American women, they also, at times, *uphold* those same beliefs, creating characters that represent a standard of beauty which slights African American women. As such, many of these representations create the same

disturbing stereotypes, which they propose to examine. However, these pop novels also dis-empower other negative stereotypes about African American women regarding education and professionalism.

Therefore, many of these representations create powerful new i-mages, challenging demeaning stereotypes of black female beauty and constructing new visions of qualified, well-educated African American women facing daily life within the urban realities of American cities. Thus, appearance creates a physical setting for readers, creating both realistic and unrealistic cultural ideals for African American women—both in reality and in fiction. In other words, these portrayals may help and hinder African American readers, showing the many paths that acceptance and denial of the physical self has led, or may lead, them as well. While these texts and authors may have floundered in some of their portrayals, their communication of societal racism and white privilege within a popular medium are still essential as they reach an ever-widening audience of readers.

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