

IF THE PRESENT LOOKS LIKE THE PAST, WHAT

Equally important, however, [to "What it is, brother?"] is "What it is, sister?" No one dares to utter the plight of her reality, not even my black sisters themselves. But what it is, is the great cannon of cruel racism directed toward the black black woman by the black middle class. The black middle class has for generations excluded the black black woman from the mainstream of black middle-class society, and it has, by its discrimination against her, induced in itself a divisive cancer that has chopped the black race in this country into polarized sections; consequently the black middle class has devoured its own soul and is doomed, a large number of black working-class people believe, to extinction.

What it is, is an insanity that has helped whites turn blacks on themselves and that has caused the black middle class to claw itself into a form of psychic annihilation.

Thus the black working class is beginning to ask itself the questions: "What is a people that props itself up on the color of its skin? And what is a people that excludes the womb-source of its own genetic heritage?" For certainly every Afro-American is descended from a black black woman. What then can be the destiny of a people that pampers and cherishes the blood of the white slaveholder who maimed and degraded their female ancestor? What can be the future of a class of descendants of slaves that implicitly gives slaveholders greater honor than the African women they enslaved? What can be the end of a class that pretends to honor blackness while secretly it despises working-class black-skinned women whose faces reveal no trace of white blood?

—Trellie Jeffers, "The Black Black Woman and the Black Middle Class: A Personal Viewpoint," *The Black Scholar* (March-April 1973).

For many years I pondered Jeffers' statement, then turned to black literature, because it is so very instructive, to see whether it had support. I began with three 19th-century novels by black women, as background, and this is what I found.

In the first novel one character says to another:

"But if you'd seed them putty white hands of hern you'd never think she kept her own house, let 'lone anybody else's."

"My! but she's putty. Beautiful long hair comes way down her back; putty blue eyes, an' jez ez white as anybody in dis place...."

In the second novel, it goes like this:

Meg Randal opened wide a pair of lovely dark eyes and raised two small, white hands in surprise.

Ethel sat down and took one of Meg's perfect little hands in her own. Meg's hand was her one source of pride, and it would almost seem as if she were justified in this pride. Such a delicate, white, slender, dimpled hand it was!

In the third novel:

Her dress was plain black, with white chiffon at the neck and wrists, and on her breast a large bunch of "Jack" roses was fastened.... Tall and fair, with hair of a golden cast, aquiline nose, rosebud mouth, soft brown eyes veiled by long, dark lashes which swept her cheek, just now covered with a delicate rose flush, she burst upon them—a combination of "queen rose and lily in one."

The novels quoted from are: *Iola LeRoy*, Or

Shadows Uplifted (published in 1895) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper; *Megda* (1891) by Emma Dunham Kelly, and *Contending Forces* (1899) by Pauline E. Hopkins.

Photographs of the novelists show them to be identifiably "colored" if not literally black. Why are their black heroines depicted as white—and non-working-class? After all, Frances Watkins Harper—the most notable of these writers—did not spend most of her time with white-skinned, middle-class black women, but, following the Civil War, she worked as a lecturer and teacher among the black- and brown-skinned freed people during Reconstruction, in the briefly "liberated" South. She wrote of the women:

I know of girls from sixteen to twenty-two who iron till midnight that they may come to school in the day. Some of our scholars, aged about nineteen, living about thirty miles off, rented land, ploughed, planted, and then sold their cotton, in order to come to us. A woman near me urged her husband to go in debt five hundred dollars for a home, as titles to the land they had built on were insecure, and she said to me, "We have five years to pay it in, and I shall begin today to do it, if life be spared. I will make a hundred dollars at washing, for I have done it." Yet they have seven little children to feed, clothe and educate. In the field the women receive the same wages as the men, and are often preferred, clearing the land, hoeing, or picking cotton, with equal ability.

No "queen rose and lily in one," here. No "delicate white hands." Brown hands, and black hands, all—if not because of genetics, then because of the work. Yet no 19th-century black novelist, female or male, wrote novels about these women.

Indeed, the very first novel by an African-American to be published, *Cloettle: Or, The Colored Heroine* (1853) by William Wells Brown, in the very first paragraph of the 1867 edition not only offers black womanhood as indistinguishable, physically, from white, but slanders, generally, the black woman's character:

For many years the South has been noted for its beautiful Quadroon [one fourth black and capable of passing as white] women. Bottles of ink, and reams of paper, have been used to portray the "finely-cut and well-moulded features," the "silken curls," the "dark and brilliant eyes," the "splendid forms," the "fascinating smiles," and "accomplished manners" of these impassioned and voluptuous daughters of the two races—the unlawful product of the crime of human bondage. When we take into consideration the fact that no safeguard was ever thrown around virtue, and no inducement held out to slave-women to be pure and chaste, we will not be surprised when told that immorality pervades the domestic circle in the cities and towns of the South to an extent unknown in the Northern States. Many a planter's wife has dragged out a miserable existence, with an aching heart, at seeing her place in her husband's affections usurped by the unadorned beauty and captivating smiles of her waiting maid. Indeed, the greater portion of the colored women, in the days of slavery, had no greater aspiration than that of becoming the finely-dressed mistress of some white man [my emphasis].

Notice how adroitly Brown places the responsibility for rape, child abuse, incest and other "immoralities" squarely on the shoulders of the persons least responsible for them, being enslaved and powerless—black women—whom he

sets up for this calumny by describing them as "voluptuous" and "impassioned."

It is unlikely that a raped, enslaved servant to a planter's wife assumed, because of this rape, that she had "usurped" the wife's place in the rapist's "affections." Brown obviously intended blacks to feel proud of the insulting "attentions" of the rapist and victorious because of the suffering of the wife. In fact, Brown would have us believe the enslaved woman was as powerful as the enslaver, since with her smile she "captivate[d]," i.e., captured, him, just as he captured her with his gun and his laws.

Nor does Brown consider the millions of raped, enslaved African women who had no likelihood whatsoever of becoming "finely-dressed," or ever attaining "mistress" status.

"Bottles of ink, reams of paper...." he says. But who were these writers? They were, in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, with few exceptions, white men, writing out their own sadistic fantasies about black women, and describing—in lurid detail—their own perverse sexual preferences, where enslaved women were concerned. These feverishly imagined "quadroon" women were not real, and had more to do with the way white men chose to perceive black women than the way black men perceived them or black women perceived themselves.

And yet, Brown, our first black novelist, in this, our first black novel, gives us scene after scene and crisis after crisis in which pale, fragile blondes and brunettes—burdened under the weight of their alleged "color"—grapple with the tedium of slave life—always involved with some faithless white man or other, and rarely doing anything resembling ordinary slave work.

The three black women novelists of the 19th century turned away from their own selves in depicting "black womanhood," and followed a black man's interpretation of white male writers' fantasies. Consequently, as late as 1929 it was unheard of for a very dark-skinned woman to appear in a novel unless it was clear she was to be recognized as a problem or a joke. As in the case of Emma Lou in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), which explored the very real trials of a black black woman in a white and a color-struck black society.

She should have been a boy, then color of skin wouldn't have mattered so much, for wasn't her mother always saying that a black boy would get along, but that a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment?

The heroine of this novel thinks of her black color as something unnatural, even demonic. Yet for millions of quite contented women, here and in Africa, black skin is the most natural, undemonic thing in the world.

It is interesting to note the changes wrought in the male hero of William Wells Brown's novel, over the course of its several versions. In the first version he is white-skinned, even as Brown was himself (his father was white, his mother "mulatta"), and capable of passing. In the final version he is black-skinned, though with straight black hair. The heroine, however, remains fair, and never becomes darker than a "dark" European:

There was nothing in the appearance of Cloettle to indicate that a drop of African blood coursed through her veins, except, perhaps, the slight wave

DOES THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE? . . .

BY ALICE WALKER

of her hair, and the scarcely perceptible brunettish tinge upon the countenance. She passed as a rebel lady.

One reason the novels of 19th-century black authors abound with white-skinned women characters is that most readers of novels in the 19th century were white people: white people who then, as more often than not now, could only identify human feeling, humanness, if it came in a white or near-white body; and because, although black men could be depicted as literally black and still be considered men (since dark is masculine to the Euro-American mind), the black-skinned woman, being dark and female, must performe be whitened, since "fairness" was and is the standard of Euro-American femininity.

Of course in the 19th century, few of the former slaves could read at all, having been denied literacy under penalty of law, and certainly could not hope to struggle through a novel, however true it might have been to their experience. It is understandable that writers wrote to the capacities of the audience at hand. Yet their depictions of themselves and black people as whiter than we are has led to a crippling of the imagination and of truth itself for which we pay dearly—in anger, hurt, envy and misunderstanding—to this day.

Fortunately, for us, there came a black woman writer—Zora Neale Hurston—who did not view her black women characters through the eyes of men, black or white, and it is in her work—coming after Brown, Watkins, Kelly and Hopkins in the 19th century—and after Jesse Fauset, Nella Larsen and Jean Toomer in the 1920s [writers who still depicted black women as fair-skinned, if not actually white-skinned, and in other ways atypical]—that black women begin to emerge naturally in all the colors that they exist, predominantly brown skin and black, and culturally African-American. Though Janie Crawford, Hurston's best-known heroine, is described as being light of skin and feathery of hair, as soon as she opens her mouth we know who and what she is—and her hands, though genetically "light," are brown from the labor she shares with other blacks, from whom she is not, in fact, separate; though all three of her husbands attempt to convince her that she is.

Many dark-skinned black women find it hard to identify with Janie Crawford and speak disparagingly of her "mulatto privileges." "Privileges" that stem from being worshipped for her color and hair, and being placed—by her color-struck husbands—above other black women while not being permitted to speak in public because her looks are supposed to say it all.

And, for the black man, based on our literature and too often, unfortunately, on reality, the white-looking woman's looks do say it all. But what do these "looks" in fact say? For the dark-skinned black woman it comes as a series of disappointments and embarrassments that the wives of virtually all black leaders (including Marcus Garvey!) appear to have been chosen for the nearness of their complexions to white, alone. It is true that Frederick Douglass' first wife was black-skinned, but he managed to hide most of her activity in his life. According to research done by Sylvia Lyons Render, Annie Murray Douglass sewed the very sailor suit Douglass escaped from

slavery wearing, yet nowhere does he give her credit for her help. His second wife, the wife he chose in Freedom, was white; this marriage continued a pattern that began in the days of slavery, when white was right and the octoroon or quadroon offspring of a raped black or mulatto mother was the next best thing to white. A look at the photographs of the women chosen by our male leaders is, in many ways, chilling, if you are a black-skinned woman. (And this "chilling" experience is one which the dark-skinned black woman can hardly escape having, in these times of black pictorial history.) Because it is apparent that though they may have consciously affirmed blackness in the abstract and for others, for themselves, light remained right. Only Malcolm X, among our recent male leaders, chose to affirm, by publicly loving and marrying her, a black black woman. And it is this, no less than his "public" politics that accounts for the respect black people, and especially women, had for him, and this that makes him radical and revolutionary in a way few of our other black male leaders are.

Black black women are not supposed to notice these things. But to tell the truth (and why shouldn't we?—we may be living our last months on earth), this is often all we notice. We are told such things are not "serious" and not "political" and mean nothing to the black liberation struggle. And some of us, after all, marry white men; who are we to "complain"? But no black woman pursues and proposes to octoroon and quadroon or white men as a matter of female prerogative; the patriarchal society in which we live does not permit it. The man chooses; frequently with the same perceptivity with which he chooses a toy.

Every black man in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* lusts after Janie Crawford. They lust after her color and her long hair, never once considering the pain her mother and grandmother (one raped by a white man, one by a black) must have endured to "pass along" these qualities to her. Never once thinking of Janie's isolation because of looks she did not choose, nor of her confusion when she realized that the same men who idolize her looks are capable of totally separating her looks from her self. These were all backcountry folk, and they wouldn't have thought of it in these terms, but their true interest in Janie is sadistic and pornographic, just as that of the white men of the time would have been. And I think this is one of the reasons Hurston (with her usual attention to the difference between what black folks said and what they meant) made her character so "fair." To point this out to us.

The first few times I read *Their Eyes* I managed to block the implications of the scene in Chapter 17 in which Tea Cake beats Janie. Feminists have often flagged my attention to it, but I always explained it as simply a "mistake" on Hurston's part. In truth, I missed the point entirely of what happened, and what happened is one of the most important insights in the book.

As the Hurston reader will recall, Tea Cake is very jealous of Janie, where Mrs. Turner's brother—he of light skin and flyaway hair—is concerned. There is no reason for this, as Janie time and again insists. One reason Tea Cake is jealous is because it is so unusual for a woman as light and well-to-do as Janie to be with a man as poor



Dogon kneeling female figure. Mali. Wood. 23½".

and black as he is. Not because all the light-skinned women chase after and propose to light-skinned men, but because both light- and dark-skinned men chase after and propose to light-skinned women. Since the light-skinned men generally have more education than the blacker men, and better jobs (morticians to this day in the South are generally light-skinned blacks, as are the colored doctors and insurance men), they have the advantage of color, class and gainful employment, and so secure the "prizes" light-skinned women represent to them. Like all "prizes," the women are put on display and warned not to get themselves dirty (other black black people often being this "dirt"). Their resemblance to the white man's "prize," i.e., the white woman—whom they resemble largely because of rape (and I submit that any sexual intercourse between a free man and a human being he owns or controls is rape)—must be maintained at all times.

Unlike Janie's first two husbands, Tea Cake has discovered that his "prize" is as attractive dirty as she is clean and supports her in her determination to dress, speak and act as she likes. But he must still show his male friends, and the ubiquitous Mrs. Turner, who wishes to bring Janie and her brother together (light belongs to light, in her mind), that his ownership is intact. When Mrs. Turner brings her brother over and introduces him, Tea Cake has a "brainstorm." Before the week is over, he has "whipped" Janie.

He whips her not, Hurston writes, "because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams."

An astute reader would realize that this is the real reason Tea Cake is killed by Janie in the end. Or, rather, this is the reason Hurston permits Janie to kill Tea Cake in the end. For all her "helpless" hanging on to him, Janie knows she has been publicly humiliated, and though she acts the role of battered wife (from what I read, coming out of battered women's shelters, the majority of such batterings end in sex and the total submission—"hanging on helplessly"—of the wife), her developing consciousness of self does not stop at that point. She could hardly enjoy knowing her beating becomes "visions" for other women—who would have to imagine themselves light and long-haired, like Janie, to "enjoy" them—or "dreams," i.e., sexual fantasies, for Tea Cake's male friends.

"Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man," Sop-de-Bottom told him. "Uh person can see every place you hit her. Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. Take some uh dese ol' rusty black women and dey would fight yuh all night long and next day nobody couldn't tell you ever hit 'em. Dat's de reason Ah done quit beating mah women. You can't make no mark on 'em at all. Lawd! wouldn't Ah love tuh whip uh tender woman lak Janie! Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake?" [my emphasis].

"Dat's right."

"See dat! Mah woman would spread her lungs all over Palm Beach County, let alone knock out mah jaw teeth. You don't know dat woman uh mine. She got ninety-nine rows uh jaw teeth and git her good and mad, she'll wade through solid rock up to her hip pockets."

[To which Tea Cake replies:]

"Mah Janie is uh high time woman and useter things. Ah didn't get her outa de middle uh de road."

What is really being said here?

What is being said is this: that in choosing the "fair," white-looking woman, the black man assumes he is choosing a weak woman. A woman he can own, a woman he can beat, can enjoy beating, can exhibit as a woman beaten; in short, a "conquered" woman who will not cry out, and will certainly not fight back. And why? Because she is a lady, like the white man's wife, who is also beaten (the slaves knew, the servants knew, the maid always knew because she doctored the bruises) but who has been trained to suffer in silence. Even to pretend sex is better afterward, that she enjoys it because her husband obviously does. A masochist.

And who is being rejected? Those women "out of the middle of the road"? Well, Harriet Tubman, for one, Sojourner Truth, Mary McCleod Bethune, Shirley Chisholm, Ruby McCullom, Assata Shakur, Joan Little and Dessie "Rashida" Woods. You who are black-skinned and fighting and screaming through the solid rock of America up to your hip pockets every day since you arrived, and me, who treasures every 99 rows of my jaw teeth, because they are all I have to chew my way through this world.

That black men choose light and white women is not the women's fault, any more than it was their fault they were chosen as concubines to rich plantation owners during slavery. Nobody seems to choose big, strong, fighting light or white women (and these have existed right along with those who could be beaten). Though there used to be a saying among black men that fat white women are best because the bigger they are the more whiteness there is to love, this is still in the realm of ownership, of "prize." And any woman who settles for being owned, for being a "prize," is more to be pitied than blamed.

We are sisters of the same mother, but we have been separated—though put to much the same use—by different fathers. In the novels of Frank Yerby, a wildly successful black writer, you see us: the whiter-skinned black woman

placed above the blacker as the white man's mistress or the black man's "love." The blacker woman, when not preparing the whiter woman for sex, marriage or romance, simply raped. Put to work in the fields. Stuck in the kitchen. Raising everybody's white and yellow and brown and black kids. Or knocking the overseer down, or cutting the master's throat. But never desired or romantically loved, because she does not care for "aesthetic" suffering. Sexual titillation is out, because when you rape her the bruises don't show so readily, and besides, she lets you know she hates your guts, goes for your balls with her knees, and calls you the motherfucker (in the original sense) you are until you knock her out.

Perhaps one problem has been that so many of our leaders (and writers) have not been black-skinned themselves. Think of William Wells Brown, who could pass; Charles W. Chesnutt, who could and did pass; Jean Toomer, who passed with a vengeance; Langston Hughes, who could pass (when young) as a Mexican; Booker T. Washington, John Hope Franklin, James Weldon Johnson, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Arna Bontemps, Nella Larsen, Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Frank Yerby—all very different in appearance from, say, Wallace Thurman, who was drawn to write about a black black woman because he was so black himself, and blackness was a problem for him among other blacks lighter than himself, as it was among whites. We can continue to respect and love many of these writers, and treasure what they wrote because we understand America; but we must be wary of their depictions of black women because we understand ourselves.

In his landmark essay "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois wrote: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War." This is a true statement, but it is a man's vision. That is to say, it sees clearer across seas than across the table or the street. Particularly it omits what is happening within the family, "the race" at home; a family also capable of civil war.



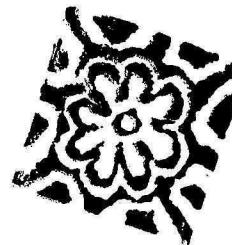
In paraphrase of this statement I would say that the problem of the 21st century will still be the problem of the color-line, not only "of the relation of the darker races of men [sic] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea," but of the relations between the darker and the lighter people of the same races, and of the women who represent both dark and light within each race. It is our "familial" relations with each other in America that we need to scrutinize. And it is the whole family, rather than the dark or the light, that must be affirmed.

Light- and white-skinned black women will lose their only link to rebellion against white America if they cut themselves off from the black black woman. Their children will have no hip pockets in which to keep their weapons, no teeth with which to chew up racist laws. And black black women will lose the full meaning of their history in America (as well as the humor, love and support of good sisters) if they see light and white black women only as extensions of white and black male oppression, while allowing themselves to be made ashamed of their own strength and fighting spirit: that fighting spirit that is our birthright, and, for some of us, our "rusty black" joy.

As black women, we have been poorly prepared to cherish what should matter most to us. Our models in literature and life have been, for the most part, devastating. Even when we wish it, we are not always able to save ourselves for future generations: not our spiritual selves, not our physical characteristics. (In the past, in our literature—and in life too—the birth of a "golden" child to a dark mother has been perceived as a cause for special celebration. But was it? So much of the mother was obliterated, so much changed in the child, whose birth as often as not was by her unplanned.) But perhaps we can learn something, even from the discouraging models of earlier centuries and our own time. Perhaps black women who are writers in the 21st century will present a fuller picture of the multiplicity of oppression—and of struggle. Racism, Sexism, Classism and Colorism will be very much a part of their consciousness. They will have the wonderful novels of black African women to read—Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and others—as 19th-century black women did not. They will have a record of the struggles of our own times. They will not think of other women with envy, hatred or adulation because they are "prizes." They will not wish to be prizes themselves. How men want them to look, act, speak, dress, acquiesce in beatings and rape will mean nothing whatsoever to them. They will, in fact, spend a lot of time talking to each other, and smiling. Women of all colors will be able to turn their full energies on the restoration of the planet, as they can't now because they're tied up with all this other stuff: divisions, resentments, old hurts, charge and countercharge! And talk about the need for teeth and hip pockets then! Women who are writers in the 21st century will undoubtedly praise everyone.

In any case, the duty of the writer is not to be tricked, seduced or goaded into verifying by imitation, or even rebuttal, other people's fantasies. In an oppressive society it may well be that *all* fantasies indulged in by the oppressor are destructive to the oppressed. To become involved in them in any way at all is, at the very least, to lose time defining yourself.

To isolate the fantasy we must cleave to reality, to what we know, we feel, we think of life. Trusting our own experience and our own lives; embracing both the dark self and the light.



FOR THE WHITE PERSON WHO WANTS TO KNOW HOW TO BE MY FRIEND

BY PAT PARKER

The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.

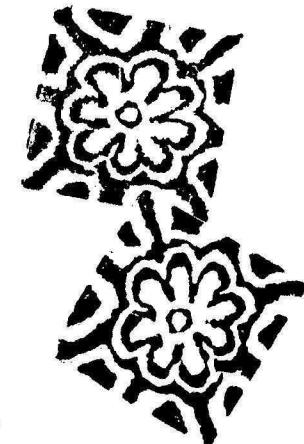
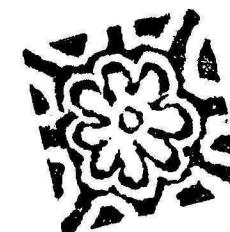
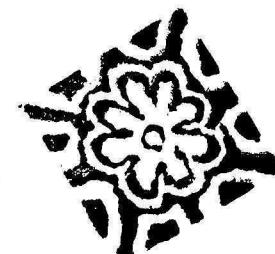
You should be able to dig Aretha, but don't play her every time i come over. And if you decide to play Beethoven—don't tell me his life story. They made us take music appreciation too.

Eat soul food if you like it, but don't expect me to locate your restaurants or cook it for you.

And if some Black person insults you, mugs you, rapes your sister, rapes you, rips your house or is just being an ass—please, do not apologize to me for wanting to do them bodily harm. It makes me wonder if you're foolish.

And even if you really believe Blacks are better lovers than whites—don't tell me. I start thinking of charging stud fees.

In other words—if you really want to be my friend—don't make a labor of it. I'm lazy. Remember.



THE SUBURB DREAMS OF EVIL IN NEWARK, NJ

BY HILDRETH YORK

Small groups of teachers huddle like prisoners within circles of students, mostly Black;
all the department stores are filled with sleazy rayon blouses and the signs are in Spanish;
they have stolen the horses of the mounted police and canter arrogantly through the parks, not even stopping several rapes and muggings, even laughing and shouting obscenities; the city is completely locked, barred, gated, burned, or looted; the people are all thieves, rapists, murderers, or shiftless; all they do is drink, laugh, dope, pimp, collect welfare and stand around on corners; someday they will screech toward the suburbs in Cadillacs with fins or old jalopies with missing fenders, and we will have to give up our maids and hide in our split-level closets.

Pat Parker lives and works in Oakland. Her most recent book is *Movement in Black*.

Hildreth York, an art historian and artist, is an Associate Professor and currently Chair of the Art Department of Rutgers University, Newark College of Arts and Sciences.

Linoleum prints by Michele Godwin, who studies at the School of Visual Arts, NYC.