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Black intimacy in the popular imagination: re-examining African American women's fiction from 1965-2000

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Black Intimacy in the Popular Imagination:

Re-examining African American Women's Fiction from 1965-2000

By

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PH.D. THESIS

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Abstract

Contemporary African American fiction repeatedly explores intimacy. These explorations have been most sustained in black women's writing. While many black female authors share an interest in romantic interactions, their portrayals reveal wide-ranging attitudes about this theme. Some accounts depict intimacy as a barrier to female advancement. In other texts, feminine success hinges on maintaining a committed relationship. These distinct outlooks not only reflect competing gender discourses within late 20th, early 21st century America but also significant developments in black women's literature. In this dissertation, I analyze how fictional depictions of heterosexual intimacy reveal crucial facts about black women's writing. I argue that various subgenres captured under the heading, popular black women's literature, include narratives about male-female relationships that complicate the efforts celebrated as the black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s. By focusing on the span from 1965-2000, I suggest that at the same moment when Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor were expressing post-civil rights era black femininity in fictions filled with deteriorating heterosexual intimacy, other black women writers were using popular fiction to expose different possibilities for male-female interconnection. These authors exist in the same socio-cultural milieu as their high modernist peers; however, their writings reflect different reactions to decisions about where intimacy fits in the construction of black identity.

My dissertation contains four chapters, and each chapter engages roughly a decade and considers different dimensions of black female popular literature. Looking at the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s roots of this genre's interest in intimacy, chapter one establishes Toni Cade Bambara as a founding figure. Chapter two studies the black romance novel from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s concentrating on pioneers, Rosalind Welles and Sandra Kitt. Dealing with

Terry McMillan's rise to fame between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, chapter three examines chick lit, the site where capitalist feminism and black relationship concerns converge. The final chapter uses Terri Woods' work to interpret ghetto fiction of the late-1990s. Popular black women's literature notes the dynamic nature of black cultural identity and responds to that dynamism with portraits of intimacy that register shifting intra-racial realities within the broader context of evolutions in inter-racial democracy. By identifying intimacy as a telling theme in post-civil rights era experience, my research points out the variegated textures of black civic exertion in both literary and political terms.

Public Abstract

Contemporary African American fiction repeatedly explores intimacy. These explorations have been most sustained in black women's writing. Although female authors share an interest in romantic interactions, their portrayals reveal wide-ranging attitudes about this theme. Some accounts depict intimacy as a barrier to female advancement. In other texts, feminine success hinges on maintaining a committed relationship. These distinct outlooks not only reflect competing gender discourses within late 20th, early 21st century America but also significant developments in black women's literature. In this dissertation, I analyze how fictional depictions of heterosexual intimacy reveal crucial facts about black women's writing. I argue that various subgenres captured under the heading, popular black women's literature, include narratives about male-female relationships that complicate the efforts celebrated as the black women's literary renaissance of the 1970s. By focusing on the span from 1965-2000, I suggest that at the same moment when Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gloria Naylor were expressing post-civil rights era black femininity in fictions filled with deteriorating heterosexual intimacy, other black women writers were using popular fiction to expose different possibilities for male-female interconnection. These authors exist in the same socio-cultural milieu as their high modernist peers; however, their writings reflect different reactions to decisions about where intimacy fits in the construction of black identity.

My dissertation contains four chapters. Each chapter covers roughly a decade and treats the sociocultural realities of that moment. The historical division is important in so far as it shows how black women's popular fiction responded to specific cultural nuances. Starting with a fresh view of the black women's literary renaissance and then progressing through the romance novel, chick lit, and finally urban fiction, I organize my analysis around Toni Cade Bambara during the mid-1960s, Sandra Kitt and Rosalind Welles during the late 1970s, Terry McMillan in

the mid-1980s, and Terri Woods during the mid-1990s. These writers represent women from various upbringings and classes whose works have become iconic examples of black women's literary production. To this end, I bridge the gap between distinctive shifts in black cultural identity (often represented through national phenomena such as the black relationship and now marriage "crisis") and the emphasis that black women's fiction places on intimacy as the primary site of response to these social changes.

My research will not cure cancer. However, it will push other scholars in African American, women's, and genre studies to acknowledge not only the presence of nonwhite writers of contemporary women's fiction, but also to reconsider what is really being weighed in the conversations that these novels are having. For example, black women's popular fiction uses romance as a way of interrogating class based definitions of success, anxieties of the career-oriented woman, emotional trauma, and the sometimes self-destructive behavior that can result. Black women's popular fiction emphatically insists that the most critical conversations facing "post-racial" America are occurring *intraracially* between men and women. This literature suggests that what is at stake in these post-civil rights era discussions is the definition of black intimacy itself.

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Introduction

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965) brought national attention to the crisis of the black family. This "crisis"—often demarcated by the decreasing participation in marriage, rising black male unemployment, and the increasing rates of illegitimate children born to black women—was connected to broader cultural narratives of the pathological family and the feminization of poverty.[1] There have been studies done prior to Moynihan's that made similar claims, however, none of these reports have received as much national attention or produced as much social impact as this particular document. [2] In fact, Moynihan goes out of his way to account for and then systemically deny the long lasting impact of multiple historical and social forces, instead he puts the blame for the failure of black progress on black women. The Moynihan report became the premier sociological narrative that would frame the aspiration towards social progress and racial solidarity. With its focus on the black family and gender strife, the Moynihan report popularized the American conception of the black family as pathological. Of course, often depicted as the cultural cornerstone of the family, black women in particular were singled out as being the root cause of the presumed plethora of dysfunctions besetting the black family. Since the release of the Moynihan report, black women across decades and genres have been producing literature that reprimands, denies, and subverts the allegations made by Moynihan. These allegations not only shaped white mainstream

[1] *The Strengths of Black Families* by Robert Hill argues that the Black family has been demonized for being structured in ways that are foreign to the American idealization of the nuclear family but that nonetheless it has a degree of adaptability in the performance of roles and economic situations. This adaptability allows the Black family to function.

[2] I. e. E. Franklin Frazier's 1939 study, *The Negro Family in the United States*.

perceptions but also impacted intraracial attitudes about black womanhood, exposing one of the cracks in black solidarity.

Racial solidarity within the African American culture is acknowledged by most scholars, to have been at its strongest during the Civil Rights period. To achieve solidarity topics and voices of dissent were quickly silenced under threat of social ostracization. People from otherwise disparate ideological, economic, and moral leanings were brought together by one overarching purpose. Presenting a united front for the collective goals of equality, access to opportunities, and protection under America's legal system was seen as far outweighing any intra-racial squabbling. As the symbolic and literal figureheads for the height of the Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of Malcolm X (February 21st, 1965) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (April 4th, 1968), bracketed the period in which the monolithic narrative of racial solidarity began to publically crumble. Black women womanist writers produced experimental literary techniques in the period spanning from roughly 1965-1975 and have since been embraced as exemplars of black women's expressive tradition. Black female writers saw both a cultural and literary backlash in wake of the release of the Moynihan report towards the end of the Civil Rights movement.

While the emergence of black female writing against the overshadowing narrative of racial solidarity has been analyzed among canonical African American writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Gayl Jones that emerged from the late 1960s through the 1970s, there is also a whole archive of black women's literature that remains critically untapped. Some black women moved away from the high literary modernism of the 1970s and embraced motifs and themes that are strongly identified within more commercial or popular forms of fiction. For example, chick lit, the black romance novel, and urban/ghetto fiction fit squarely within the realm of what

will be henceforth discussed as black women's popular fiction. According to Romance Writers for America, in 2013 the romance genre raked in 1.08 billion dollars, and accounted for 39 percent of the total sales for adult fiction. [3] While exact sales figures have not been produced, urban fiction and chick lit have also been considered to be among the bestselling of genre fiction aimed at both female and African American audiences. Black women's popular fiction reveals black identity as fracturing around issues of class and gender. Where the Moynihan report used markers of domesticity and traditional accounts of the intimate workings of *white* relationships to de-normalize black women and through them the black family, black women's popular fiction engages the same issues and topics but puts them in context of the changing times. Nowhere is this clearer than in its depictions of intimacy. As used throughout this dissertation, intimacy refers to the feelings of affection, trust, and care that one experiences when in connection to another person. More specifically, this project focuses on how black women's popular fiction reflects the changes in the black couple. Thus, this strand of black women's writing richly captures outlooks on heterosexual black relationships and intimacy.

In *Black Intimacies* (2005), Shirley A. Hill explores depictions of black relationships in popular films. Her conclusions explain why intimacy should not be overlooked. She contends that the movies "expose crucial issues that challenge black love, such as the economic impotence of many black men, the stereotyping of black women, the relationship between love and self-esteem, the viability of marriage in the postmodern society, and the issue of gender in relationships" (94). Using intersectional theory to explore what can be understood as the main problems facing the black relationship; Hill seems to suggest that while popular film has offered keen insight into these issues it has not given adequate room for their full interpretation. Hill

[3] [3] See RWA's "The Romance Genre." https://www.rwa.org/p/cm/ld/fid=580

argues that there is no conceptual/critical or cultural lens with which to fully grapple with black relationship issues. By examining black women's popular fiction produced as the womanist/black feminist literary tradition blossoms, one will see that Hill's statements are not exactly true.[4] Since the 1960s, black women's popular fiction has always been engaging these exact points of intersectionality and their effects on the development of intimacy in the black relationship. Thus, looking at the portrayal of intimacy in black women's popular literature clarifies how in the post-civil rights era, the search for freedom involved personal as well as public negotiations. These negotiations became most obvious in the allegations made by sociologists that black women were the chief instigators of a black relationship crisis.

The idea that black women wrecked domestic bliss did not originate with the Moynihan report; nonetheless, the national attention surrounding Moynihan's work meant that one of the most controversial "black family studies" of the late 20th century achieved widespread popularity. While he expressed a well-documented sentiment which was already in black culture, the mid-1960s release of his findings occurred in a charged climate. The tumult of the moment surfaced in riots, demonstrations, and consciousness-raising; it also emerged in the black relationship crisis. In most African American scholarship that touches on the political stakes of the 1960s, Moynihan's report is cited as the originator of the disruptive strife that has plagued black men and women. However, the Moynihan report played on already existing fears within black community about the role of the black male. These fears led to major derailments in intimacy for the black couple, and my dissertation explores what popular literature discloses about this situation.

[4] As a side note, I do use black feminism and womanism as interchangeable terms to articulate that branch of black women's literary production which interrogates relationships and gender dynamics between black men and women in the decade spanning from roughly 1965-1975. This is because it is very clear that while "womanism" may be the proper term for this period as more black women began participating in this national conversation, and with the entrance of womanist literature into academia, the more persistent term has become black feminism.

Between the early-20th century and the start of the 21st century, black women moved out of careers as domestics and factory workers and increasingly into entry and mid-level jobs in government, the business sector, and education. This shift in their status produced growth in their expected incomes and enhanced prestige; however, it has also produced complications in their relationship prospects. Where traditional pictures of family life cast the male as a breadwinner and the female as a "domestic angel," the socioeconomic realities of black families in the late 20th century shifted these roles. When black women started earning more money than their often times less educated male counterparts, their status as breadwinners not only prompted social science narratives of pathology but also required an adjustment in how they and their male partners envisioned romance.[5] Black intimacy as a concept in women's literature produced from 1965-2000 reflects the emergence of these nuanced social realities and the attempts of black women to balance mainstream notions of romance and financial stability even as they engaged the complex transformations that occurred in black life after the civil rights era.

A new obsession with black intimacy—implied in the specific fetishization of marriage and the attempt to create patriarchal homes by the end of the 1960s—emerged explicitly out of the "family values" rhetoric that surrounded the rise of modern conservatism. Simultaneously, national interest in the black feminist movement continued to grow. Put simply, black womanism challenged the Moynihan report's implicit attempt to "ghettoize" black men and women by suggesting that their relationships operate outside of "normal" expectations. Perhaps, this is why the frame of decline was later linked by conservatives (black and white) to the rise of black feminism/womanism. Even today, black feminism is cited as the primary instigator of the black

[5] Stephanie Coontz's essay, "African American Women, Working—Class Women, and the Feminine Mystique," states that "Black men earned, on average, 60 percent of white men's wages throughout the 1950s, and the poverty rate of black families was close to 50 percent, making a male breadwinner-female homemaker marriage impossible for many black families, regardless of their preferences" (*A Strange Stirring*,121).

relationship crisis. This so called "black relationship crisis," which had dominated social discussions since the 1960s, during the early Reagan era (roughly 1980-1993) was populated with a mixture of black ascendancy and decline narratives placing the construction of gender roles, family values, and sexuality in a very stark light.

> "The resurgence of the black relationship crisis, in 2015, in much the same way as the prior black relationship crisis of the mid-1960s, continues to evolve out of a need to enforce the idea of a male headed household as the universal standard of "family." "…we suspect marriage is a trope for other anxieties about respectability, economic stability, and the maintenance of patriarchy. Which social issue appears on the public agenda is never accidental. In this moment of economic crisis, social change and racial transformation it is meaningful that black women are being encouraged to exclusively embrace traditional models of family and to view themselves as deficient if their lives do not fit neatly into these prescribed roles."

Melissa Harris-Perry, in her article "Nightline Asks Why Black Women Can't Get a Man," addresses the national resurgence of the media's interest in the black relationship. What is particularly compelling about Perry's argument is that it raises the issue of intraracial sensationalism within the latest media frenzy concerning the black relationship. From headlines appearing in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Essence* magazine, to melodramatic cinema and relationship guides, the idea of the black relationship crisis has been framed as the decline of the marriage prospects of the single black woman. Cited across the blogosphere, in interviews with black male celebrities, and in recent work produced by black male celebrities, black female ambition is dangerous to a woman's ability to keep a man let alone actually make it down the aisle. For example, in the last five years alone, Hill Harper's *The Conversation* (2008), Steve Harvey's *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man* (2009) which was later made into a film in 2010, and Tyler Perry's film *Temptation: Confessions of a Marriage Counselor* (2013) all delve into the black relationship crisis as a fundamental problem of 21st century black womanhood. The one point on which this corpus agrees as it concerns the black

relationship crisis is that the black woman of the 21st century apparently exhibits a range of behaviors that move from being too independent to being too predatory.

The point raised in the quote by Melissa Harris-Perry is that the relationship guides, and films produced around understanding the state of the black relationship, most often cite the idea that black female empowerment has been the most detrimental force in black relationships. This idea has appeared in various places but has been most obviously present in sociological narratives of black moral decline for the last 82 years. As early as 1957, E. Franklin Frazier's *The Black Bourgeoisie* implied that a working black female is a threat to the interest of the black family because she is a woman who cannot be made to fit the idealized model of pure and submissive womanhood. Frazier's belief that "black women do not allow black men to be men," is a sentiment that repeatedly emerges in the interviews examining the prevalence of black men who chose to date, and marry interracially. He suggested that having access to her own funds would lead to her not being dependent on a husband or significant other. By implication, a working woman is disruptive to the premise of family life because she potentially nullifies one of the greatest imperatives for women to get married, financial security. One of the many results of this line of thinking has been the aggravation of tensions between black men and women over issues of intimacy, trust, and communication. In African American literature there is a narrative of racial progress—one only disrupted by an outpouring of black womanist texts—that persists in framing the black female as endemic to the failure of intimacy.

The current media attention to black relationships is framed within the larger observations of America's declining marriage rates and rising out of wedlock births. One major trend emerging in contemporary black male cinematic and literary production, as evidenced by the films and relationship advice books mentioned previously, is the idea that black women are

exclusively to be blamed for the decline of black marriage—and by implication, the stable black home. This indictment is a recent version of the black relationship crisis, and much like its earlier incarnation in the mid-1960s, it sets out to tell the story of the failure of the black relationship as a foregone narrative that spins out of the deep seated cultural pathology of black women. This has persisted despite the fact that marriage, in the sense of its legal and economic motivations, has been on a national decline to the tune of seventeen percent, in recent years.[6] While some may argue that this is because more women have begun earning salaries comparable to their male counterparts, I would suggest that this actually signaled a larger cultural shift in which the need for emotional development and fulfillment within a relationship for women finally superseded the idealization of marriage as a financial "cure-all" for what ails the heterosexual couple. In focusing on the gender dynamics that have consistently been present in the national narrative surrounding the decline of black marriage, it would seem natural and necessary that any real analysis of the black relationship should focus on the development of intimacy, as this is where the crisis, if one could call it that, becomes the most clear.

To acknowledge the intervention of early black sociologists into the arena of sociological narratives of intimate black dysfunction would then be to recognize that the state of the modern black relationship is the end result of a cultural embracing of black female empowerment as inherently pathological. In terms of the larger picture constructed within African American cultural studies, this would also necessitate the realization of the political and historical tendency to frame black relationships as damaged solely by the institution of slavery is problematic. While

[6] Stephanie Coontz mentioned this in her groundbreaking examination of the shifting attitudes towards marriage in *Marriage: A History* (2005). Coontz examination is further supported by the recent publication from the Pew Research Center, "Record Share of American's Have Never Married: As Values, Economics and Gender Patterns Change" (2014). According to the article from Pew, "shifting public attitudes, hard economic times and changing demographic patterns may all be contributing to the rising share of never-married adults. This trend cuts across all major racial and ethnic groups but has been more pronounced among blacks. Fully 36% of blacks ages 25 and older had never been married in 2012, up from 9% in 1960."

it is true that because of the emphasis placed on the custom of breeding stock rather than buying new and "unbroken" slaves—and because of the systemic prevalence of rape against enslaved women by the plantation master or any white male he considered a friendly acquaintance, or even fellow slave—does have a long term impact on the expression of black intimacy, claiming that it completely reshaped black male and female interactions is not exactly historically accurate. This is not a statement to be made lightly. One of the major threads of African American literature and contemporary black politics for years was that because black men were unable to defend the virtue and honor of the black women they cared about, many of them adopted an attitude of callousness towards black women.

However, this claim completely erases the existence of cultural artifacts such as personal exchanges-letters, poems, and ads placed in Christian and abolitionist newspapers following the end of the Civil War by ex-slaves searching for family and former lovers. Furthermore, this claim does not account for the rather explosively negative turn of black intimacy in the mid-20th century, which directly follows the Civil Rights Movement. By not taking the time to delineate the 20th century into discreet periods of cultural shift, what ends up happening is that we overlook what has been a subtle movement away from the black-white centered trauma of the 19th century, and instead becomes introspection on gender relationships in the 20th century African American community and their impact on intimacy. One of the key points to emerge around the black relationship crisis has been the consistent decline of black marriage rates. This thought promotes an idea of cultural normativity that, frankly, has never been a natural part of African American culture as historically established. In American culture more broadly, marriage is elevated as the epitome of intimate expression and commitment, thus the fact that more black couples are choosing to delay or not get married at all has been taken to mean that

black intimacy is failing. To add to this idea, American culture would also suggest that the adoption of normative gender roles also plays a major role in both attaining and sustaining marriage. With these two perspectives in mind it becomes easier to see how black women, long vilified as being "masculine" and "willful" for working outside the home and being willing enter sectors of physical labor traditionally dominated by men and earning the bulk of the family income. Like any narrative of containment, then, the social pathology surrounding the black relationship has sought to highlight the abnormal (the decline of black marriage rates) in order to sustain a dominate model of relationships as clearly identified through master-subordinate positions reified in terms of gender expectation, and thus perpetuating mainstream ideas of heterosexual fulfillment. Primarily, fulfillment is equated with marriage as being the ultimate expression of intimate happiness. Thus, marriage remains fixed in our minds as the desired natural conclusion of any romantic relationship.

It has been 50 years since the publication of what became known as the Moynihan report. Last year the Urban Institute funded and published a follow up study entitled, "The Moynihan Report Revisited." According to the recent findings of this report, the so called "Tangle of Pathology" originally described by Moynihan has resulted in a severe decline in the traditional family structure among the black community. In fact, the Urban Institute's findings suggests that, "the percentage of black children born to unmarried mothers, in comparison, tripled between the early 1960s and 2009, remaining far higher than the percentage of white children born to unmarried mothers" (7). Ron Haskins, the co-director for the Center on Children and Families at the Brookings Institution in his article "Moynihan Was Right, Now What?", goes so far as to assert that there should be an active focus on promoting marriage. His emphasis here is on promoting black marriage because it will create a stable environment in which black children

will have a real shot at attaining the equality gained under the Civil Rights movement. He cites that "Research conducted on representative samples of couples who have had a baby outside marriage-a group that is disproportionately poor and minority- show that half of them live together, a total of 80 percent say they are in love, and 90 percent of those who live together say their chances of marriage are 'fifty-fifty or better' (McLanahan, 302). Of course, there is one tiny detail that Haskins' (and Moynihan's) interpretation of the crisis around the black family ignores.

In many ways the Civil Rights Movement has been a milestone not only because it forced the American nation to recognize the African American as a liberal subject, but also because it marked the height of the battle to claim a healthy and well balanced disposition in the face of decades of unbridled sexual and psychological devastation caused by hundreds of years of slavery in America. Thus, this dissertation takes as its premise that in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, especially in the years spanning from 1965-2000, there has been an ongoing mass attempt to redefine both the black self and to combat the persistent sociological framing of the black family (intricately tied to the perception of the black couple) as inherently degenerate. To explain, the idea of black marriage as a proper and correct path of a sexual relationship gained traction during the Reconstruction era, and reached a zenith in the wake of the uplift narratives that framed the ideal black couple as emotionally committed, monogamous, religious, and socially involved in the collective efforts to better the condition of "the race." As Claudia Tate and Frances Smith Foster have suggested in their respective texts *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1986) and *Till Death and Distance Do Us Part* (2010), former slaves were deeply invested in establishing themselves as full and legitimate citizens. They pursued marriage as the key to creating the "real" home denied to them by the institution of slavery. Much of America's Civil War years were spent idealizing the notion of family and home, both of which

had to be laid in a firm foundation-the kind believed to be offered by marriage. Decades after achieving freedom, black marriage became an important basis for political reform in the early twentieth century.

Sociologist and "race" man, W.E.B. DuBois figures most prominently as the cultivator of the notion of black marriage as an extension of the quest for racial uplift. It was believed that in marriage, both black men and women could find satisfaction with the status quo—women worked only in the home, while men were the source of income for the home. Like most of Dubois's theories, there is an imagined class for whom the traditional gender roles expected of a married couple may well have been feasible, those who were educated. Authors Claude McKay and Wallace Thurman produced literature which emphasized why marriage and its accompaniment would not necessarily sit well for the average laborer—as a good portion of African Americans were.[7] Most working class blacks could not afford to lose the luxury that two incomes brought to the home. Pointing towards a rupture in black literary development as early as the 1920s, the African American literary canon is shaped on one hand by the narrative of uplift, while on the other hand, the concurrent narrative of moral decline. The latter narrative is made evident in literature produced by African American men. By the time that Richard Wright is writing pathological narratives such as *Native Son* (1940), or James Baldwin publishing *Giovanni's Room* (1956) there is a well-established vein of anti-racial uplift narratives and themes that would form the backbone of the bulk of 20th century literature produced by men in the African American canon.

[7] DuBois's reaction to Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), published in the Crisis, is now infamous. *Home to Harlem* and later, Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929) and *Infants of the Spring* (1932) all decry the idea that the negro should try to acclimate themselves to the social moorings of white society. The idea that any culture is not tainted by blight is untrue, so the pressure that race men like Dubois was putting on African Americans to constantly be the cleanest-or purest of all races was already dooming the race.

For example, in the review of Hurston's work by Richard Wright published in *The New Masses* on October 5th, 1937, he states that "Hurston can write, but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phyllis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes" (25). His statement in many ways was a premonition of the way that womanist literature would later be taken up within the larger criticism of African American literature and popular culture. Yet, as Richard Wright would go on to publish *Native Son* (1940), one cannot help but read his protagonist, Bigger Thomas as being in many ways a man's reimaging of the decision faced by Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In both works sex and violence are uncomfortably close, and erupt in the moments that are a perversion of intimacy. Bigger attacks Bessie—brutally raping her before he murders her-in an attempt to "get her before she get him." Janie, after spending time taking care of Teacake is forced to kill him in a moment of desperation and compassion, his jealousy coupled with the advancing rabies virus, makes a strong case for clear and present physical danger and ill intent on Teacakes part. As there was not only very real possibility of imminent hazard, but no cure for rabies, Janie's killing is final expression of love for the man that Teacake was. In contrast to Janie, Bigger feels mentally threatened by the mere existence of Bessie. The danger of Bessie to Bigger is one of knowing, and being an emotional witness to Bigger's crime and real character. Bigger's rape of Bessie is an attempt to punish her for seeking intimacy with him by turning sexual desire into pain, and mocks the moment of coitus that happens between the two just scenes after his killing of Mary. In short, he rejects and destroys the intimacy that existed between the two.

While literature produced by black female writers, such as Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) in addition to Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy American Style* (1933) also tackled black

marriage, their explorations were a far cry from the frontloading of the more sensual aspects of marriage and the emotional development of the couple as it is in Hurston's novel. As an illustration, the "asexualization" of the black wife is briefly touched on in *Quicksand* with Helga's burying of her dissatisfaction with the lack of sexual gratification in her marriage bed. *Quicksand* forecasts the death of feminine passion in Helga, which ultimately results in her state of mental and physical exhaustion by the end of the novella. Thus, *Quicksand* equates the death of sexual passion with having achieved perfect womanhood. In *Comedy American Style*, beneath the attempts to retain light coloring, there is also a very clear association being made between darker skin and the possession of abundant sensuality. Fauset only includes this tangentially through the repeated references of the sexual attraction of men (white, black, dark and fair) towards the dancer, Marise. Sensuality is singled out as an undesirable trait in a wife. Both Larsen's and Fauset's works focus on the marriage as a site that is constrictive of black women's political and certainly intellectual strengths, yet unlike Zora Neale Hurston, both authors would remain well respected for their craft and contribution to African American literature.

Hurston crafted a female character that was explicitly sexual but irreducible to a "whorish" stereotype by having sex occur within the context of a legal marriage. In addition, she dove into the social narrative of black female dysfunction and crafted a character that still sought empowerment outside of the framework of marriage but remained humanized. In doing so, Hurston upset all existing senses of decorum. In *Stormy Weather* (2010) Anastasia C. Curwood explained that "[t]he belief that slavery had instilled a lack of modesty and proliferation of licentiousness [especially as it relates to black women] was widespread" (17). There were two important and immediate responses of African Americans to this belief. First, was to push for marriage as it "was increasingly seen as a moral credential, evidence of civilization, and a

marker of respectability" (18). But, secondly, to police black female bodies so that it became almost impossible for black women to be the center of public gossip and shaming. In this way, the history of sexual brutality against black women was reworked into the broader imagination of America—as a series of consensual liaisons. It was implicitly understood that only by taming the black female body—by ensconcing reproduction and womanhood within the framework of domesticity—could the race as a whole progress. The duty of the black women then, at least during the early twentieth century, was to recover their own honor by becoming the living embodiment of "true womanhood." In short, the black woman was the center of the imagined New Negro home. The dual gaze-from both white and black males, in addition to the censuring from other black women, ensured a compliance with the proscriptive rules governing black women's behavior. Unlike some of the literature published by black men during the early twentieth century, publications by black women seemed to take for granted that the only way to combat the violent racism and sexism of the period was by appealing to universalized rhetorics of "true womanhood" and "femininity." *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became *the* central example of craft and critical commentary for a generation of black female writers precisely because of the effortless weaving of narrative and black feminine social realities.

Until the rediscovery of Zora Neale Hurston, the bulk of black women's narratives available pre-1960 was centered on defending the black family against the violence of lynching. Or, in the case of Jessie Redmon Fauset, on critiquing hold over ideas of marrying only for class status and the rampant colorism that was used as the litmus test for selecting a potential spouse.[8] Hurston's particular work is remarkably different in so far as it privileges neither the "race

[8] *Comedy, American Style* (1933) is a prime example of how Fauset, deeply influenced by WEB Dubois, offered such criticisms. The plot at the middle of this farce on black marriage explorers the obsession with colorism and passing that became more important than the couple or their potential happiness together.

problem" nor the responsibility of "racial uplift" that was the thematic strong hold of 20th century African American literature. In Hurston's work we see the beginnings of a change in the general understanding of black marriage, the constraints placed by racial uplift on black women, and black male attempts to create a traditional domestic life in which clear gender boundaries delineate day-to-day interactions in the home. The focus on the gendering of desire-what can be understood as Janie's quest to find both equal and emotional satisfaction in her relationships-position this narrative as an exploration equally about intimacy as it is about the failure of a black woman to find comfort and assurance in her role as a wife and domestic. Both aspects of the novel are necessary to understanding why *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), which received and generated negative criticism and public literary, shaming of Zora Neale Hurston at the time of its publication, gained commercial success and a second life that inspired an outcropping of black female literary production.

Hurston's novel, in pinpointing the interwar period (between WWI and WWII) as a moment of significant cultural transition for the black couple, gave black female authors a historical platform to critique the broader notion of racial uplift that had survived in the era. Specifically, in the disillusionment with the romance of black solidarity that had swept through the Pacific, Atlantic, and Northern parts of the United States. Feeling restricted and confined, black women found the direct dependency on maintaining the black home through patriarchal structure and ideas of gender norms centered on the experiences of white female subjectivity, to be an increasingly impossible space to inhabit. The development of womanist literary tradition out of what (until the mid-1960s) had been the chosen medium of black men can be directly connected back to Zora Neale Hurston's novel. Charged with seducing and then morally corrupting three minors, Hurston was virtually banished from the black literary world, and her

work would languish until the black womanist movement of the early 1970s, when Alice Walker would begin a quest to recover Hurston and thus re-establish her as a literary star and as a proto-womanist figure. [9]

In the 1970s Alice Walker and Toni Morrison made their entrances as novelists, Alice Walker with *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Toni Morrison with her publication of *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Both women would go on and produce other works (*The Color Purple* and *Beloved* respectively) that have since become foundational to not only African American literature, but to the creation of a literary heritage of black womanist texts. Their careers, criticisms, and accolades have spanned decades. Their acclaim is so much so, that one cannot mention black female literature or artistry without at least nodding to the contributions made by these two women. While I recognize the importance of their artistry, this is only one aspect of their shaping of contemporary African American and black women's novels. Frankly, their projects of literary recovery and editorship are a far more compelling point from which to frame their real significance to the shaping of black female and African American literature. Before discussing the configuration of intimacy in the black womanist text, I am going to briefly spend time fleshing out how the greatest impact that they have had has come not from their work as authors but as gatekeepers of a small coterie of writers that would rapidly expand between 1970 and 1980 to encompass such figures, among others, as June Jordan, Margaret Walker Alexander, Angela Davis, Carolyn Rodgers, and extend to encompass the literary subjects of this study.

Looking purely at the criticism and scholarly concern generated around fiction produced by the aforementioned black women, the novel specifically became the most celebrated form of black literary production in the twentieth century. Yet, it is hard to imagine that just 50 years ago

[9] Alice Walker "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston," *MS. Magazine* (1975).

the widespread publication and national embracing of black female artistry that has characterized the late twentieth century would be challenged by the competing frameworks of race, culture, and gender. Even today, the story of black female literary production remains deeply fragmented between discourses of feminism, dissemblance, and various accounts of decline and social pathology that have continued to stigmatize African American women. Entrenched thus, black female artistry coalesces around these two impulses and emerges in counterpoint with black identity. Tension and anxiety were raised over not only the way in which black female writers seemed to be attacking black manhood but also over what was perceived in many ways as an attack on the notion of marriage. For example, the response by literary critics to the emergence of postmodernist black female writers (such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker) is well-documented. However, postmodernist writing by black women also occurs in conversation with changes in the marketplace surrounding women's literature. The black female novel captures not only the responses of black women to social pressure spanning from 1965-2000, but also acts as the penultimate reference into how the intimate lives of black people—and America's notions of propriety—have changed radically in the last fifty years. It is these conversations that have allowed for the emergence of the contemporary black romance narrative.

This introduction will now focus explicitly on how the idea of the "tragic" or "doomed" black love became the metaphor for failed intimacy and the backbone of black women's fiction that has continued to be published well into the current moment. There have been novels about black couples that are romantically involved appearing throughout the African American literary tradition going back as far as William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1865). However, reacting largely against the rendering of black female sexuality as dangerous and threatening, fiction produced by black women in the late 1960s and throughout the 1980s candidly acknowledged the challenges

in black heterosexual romance even as it undercut the notion that intimacy was impossible in black relationships. Often questioning the juncture between race and gender, womanist texts begin to question the notion of a racial loyalty that would subvert female interest in service to black manhood. Increasingly, the intimacy of the black couple began to be fraught with the pressure of womanhood inherent in all heterosexual relationships. The successful performance of black domesticity was directly interconnected with the ability of black men to function in American society. Black male anxiety intensified in the wake of 1970s female literary production. Confronting story after story that depicted brutality by black men, many literary critics and several African American studies scholars proclaimed that these kinds of representations were a sort of plantation literature that trafficked in stereotypes that were just as dangerous as the mainstream ones that black women writers sought to combat. These critics accused black female writers of capitalizing on cultural dysfunction, and sensationalizing "rare" occurrences of violence within African American communities and homes.

The failure of intimacy was most noticeably presented in the rhetoric of national and black politics, and more obviously in the African American literature produced by and large by men prior to 1965. However, this trend is also featured most prominently as a central theme in black women's literary production. The notion of intimacy becomes an important feature of the black female novel and the development (or lack of) intimacy between the black couple is what will doom or save the black relationship. As used in this context, intimacy has two distinct registers. By explicitly examining intimacy in its romantic sense-meaning as it relates to the construction of gender identities and sexual relations in man-woman relationships, intimacy becomes a mechanism for foreshadowing the literary turn towards romance narratives in the 1980s. In its other sense, intimacy also is a way of understanding the psychological frame

working within existing relationship dynamics. In other words, intimacy as a psychological construct prefigures the fascination with female destruction that persists in chick literature and ghetto/urban fiction throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.

We are currently in an age where the decline of national marriage rates has once again been racialized within the twin rhetorics of black female and black family dysfunction. In this account of the national marriage decline, the idea of the single black woman continues to be presented as psychologically damaging to the tradition of black masculinity and as the biggest threat to the survival of the black family as a unit. Thus the black relationship crisis that began in the 1960s reemerges from 2000 onwards as the marriage crisis of the single black woman. Premised on the idea that the current dysfunction of gender politics in the African American community and in its relationship practices is a recent phenomenon coming partly in response to the conservative efforts to universalize the American family from 1960-1980, and partly as the result of the push towards marriage as the corrective for single female headed households (often associated with an image of irresponsible and deviant black female sexuality), black intimacy has always been at the center of the relationship crises. While iterations of the tragic black love appears in African American literature prior to 1965, it gains a unique home in the literature produced by black women after 1965.

From a methodological angle this dissertation will weave together the racialized and gendered negotiations at the heart of black women's literary production in the late 20th century, and interrogate these notions with respect to increasing castigation of black womanhood in dominate social discourses. Black women have been predicting the downward turn in intimacy in their literature as a result of a negative state of black male and female interactions. Black women have embraced genres considered to be traditionally female, and in doing so have published

novels that can be considered more popular than literary, in which the fissures in black intimacy are revealed to be at the root of a national crisis in man-woman relationships in all of its myriad forms.[10] For the first time ever, black men and women were lacking a unifying narrative of racial solidarity, this is a very important point in the transition into a modern understanding of black identity as half of the black population, women, were now aimless without the distraction or sense of satisfaction offered by the community centered work that had been foundational to their participation in social activism and to their very definition of black womanhood since the late nineteenth century.

Many black women continue to resist being contextualized within a cultural narrative of psychological dysfunction and sexual promiscuity, and have been denigrated for seeking more emotionally fulfilling partnerships rather than succumbing to a domestic living arrangement wherein they risk being at the mercy of male pride, and a definition of "true womanhood" that already precluded them. Given these two major literary threads, and the influence that they have had on shaping genre diversification within the popular twenty-first century African American novel, there is a demand to understand the focus on the way in which black female artistry captures the changing views about what it means to have intimacy in a relationship. In popular culture and literature, the black relationship has become (often times somewhat ambiguously) foregrounded as the site of destruction and possible salvation. As a major literary trend, this is pervasive throughout the work produced by black women beginning in the late 1960s. As we

[10] In the traditional sense, popular fiction has connotations of a novel that has reached bestseller status. It also has resonances of class as there is a definite sense of a gap between high and low brow literature that in recent years has been diminished. On the other hand, moving away from the idea of bestseller status, a more apt understanding of the term "popular fiction" should focus on the themes, stylistics, and settings particular to a given genre. More often than not, the popular novel can be further understood as invoking multiple social issues from the present moment in which the narrative is set. Thus, the commonality of all popular fiction is that it is written about the contemporary moment, and may use dialog or characterizations that announce a concentration on the more criminal, material, or violent sectors of urbanity. Furthermore, all popular fiction has narrative elements that intersect across multiple genres in an attempt to appeal to a wide range of audience. This success of the style and appeal is what raises the likelihood of achieving bestseller status.

move from womanist texts to the evolution of genre fiction in twenty-first century African American literature, it becomes clearer that black women have been engaged in a broader discussion on the changing face of black intimacy and the direction of the heterosexual black relationship in light of new definitions of black womanhood-which marks a second major trend in the development of black female literary production. Framing their discussion of intimacy against portraits of the emasculated black man and the controlling black woman, both powerful images which were used as proof that African Americans existed in a dysfunctional culture, allows us to generate a much needed conversation on the role of African American female literature in the twenty-first century, and to begin to denote the ways in which black female literary production has used conventions of women's fiction to counter the myth of a matriarchal black family structure and of impotent black masculinity. By focusing on this underexplored part of black women's writing, I hope to show how popular black literature produced by women can clarify our understanding of black identity.

My dissertation, chronologically positioned to mark the cultural transition that happens after the Civil Rights era, explicitly grapples with the failure of this particular narrative of racial uplift for black women. I explain how, in absentia of a larger political quest, the decline of black marriage is constructed as black women's failure to link their social advancement to a larger narrative of cultural progress or to earlier notions of solidarity. The chronological break down may be rough at times, it is important for really understanding black identity as being a non-monolithic concept that resulted in various depictions of black life. Each chapter examines fiction produced by women deemed to be culturally significant in signaling this transition. In doing so, I advance two central claims. First, the explosion of black women's literary production in the late 1960s responds to this cultural shift by focusing not on marriage per se but certainly

on intimacy and the construction of domestic space, and secondly, I argue that this construct continues to emerge in popular black women's fiction and contemporary culture through the re-emergence of the black marriage crisis as an attempt at containing a new (and actually positive) narrative of black female advancement. Class and social expectation become increasingly entangled with intimacy. So much so, that the professional black woman and the myth of the middle class black romance loom largely in popular black women's fiction.

Heterosexual black intimacy is the constant thread that connects all four of the chapters presented in this dissertation. In the first chapter, "Healing Intimacy: Fractured Black Romance in Toni Cade Bambara's "Talkin' Bout Sonny" and "The Survivor" (1965-1975), there is an expansion on the argument began in the introduction. Black intimacy is revealed to have been a major theme in the post-Moynihan African American culture, one detailed in the emergence of the womanist text and the subsequent strand of black woman's popular fiction. The goal of the analysis is to frame how Toni Cade Bambara's short fiction responds to the implications of the Moynihan report and tackles a cultural moment in which black intimacy is clearly on the decline. Rather than being a source of happiness, intimacy for black women leads to "unknowing" the internal self—developing a fear of emotional contact, and an acceptance of sexual liaisons that are destined to go nowhere. Thus, intimacy becomes anti-political and anti-woman in the sense that it leads to psychological depreciation in women. The psychological depreciation results in feelings of isolation from the wider community, depression, and suicidal tendencies. With these psychological problems being so deeply rooted in expressing intimacy, it is no wonder that by and large black men and women would start to move away from the traditional ideas of relationship commitment, i.e. marriage. While, she may not technically be considered a "popular" author in terms of book sales, Bambara is a key figure because she is the marker in the

division between black women's more "high" literary production and so called "low brow" popular culture fiction. Toni Cade Bambara is an important figure precisely because her short stories stand at the cusp of both black women's understanding of intimacy as a source of pain and also, simultaneously, as the source of the hope for emotional healing.

In these early romance novels, the optimism towards heterosexual intimacy continues. The second chapter, "1976-1986: Professional Black Women and the Hurdle of Success," examines Rosalind Wells *Entangled Destinies* (1980) and Sandra Kitt *Adam and Eva* (1984). In general, romance narratives deepen the emotional introspection into the world of intimacy and since these novels are lengthy as opposed to the short stories explored in the first chapter, more attention can be spent on the psychology of the character's development. Both examples of early contemporary black romance novels utilize the image of the professional black woman as a conceit through which to represent the vision of the black middle class romance. The resurgence of particular stereotypes of black womanhood (specifically the idea of the black matriarch), and their impact on black relationships, are thus framed within a narrative of career attainment and performance. Success in the professional world is depicted as the primary source of competition and challenge to heterosexual black masculinity and in turn, directly impacts the development of intimacy. Marriage is still being prescribed as the ultimate expected outcome for socially mobile black men and women; however, there is no room for new femininities within this patriarchal vision. Likewise, there is no room for the performance of narrow notions of masculinity with the realities of the modern world. By analyzing the first examples of contemporary black romance narratives published through major publishing imprints, it becomes clearer that the much touted "black relationship crisis" is in fact a fundamental reconciliation between the pursuit of intimacy and career related black female ambition.

Black female ambition or success as it will be called from here on out, sits at the heart of the third chapter, "The Upwardly Mobile Woman: Success in Black Chick Lit throughout the 1990s." While contemporary romance literature accedes to the expectancy of black middle class, black chick lit returns to the idea of the professional black woman and begins to break away from the fantasy of the middle class romance. Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* (1989) and *Waiting to Exhale* (1993) explore the connection between class, gender expectations, and romance. In McMillan's fiction marriage is closely linked with status attainment. In both of these works McMillan goes out of her way to show how deeply the idea of marriage as the proper end to a relationship affects black women, and most often impacts the professional black woman. Black female success is shown to disturb the notion of class compatibility as a necessary precursor for intimate connection, one of the major aspects in the black middle-class romance. In many ways an inheritor of the legacy began by Toni Cade Bambara, McMillan's works reveal skepticism towards the notion of a black middle class romance. Her characters run themselves ragged chasing after the professional husband that they believed would be waiting in the wings but when a marriage proposal fails to materialize, they are left carrying emotional baggage that becomes increasingly more debilitating. Black female chick lit reverses the Civil Rights endorsed narrative of intimacy precisely because it promotes a reality and understanding of intimacy that is out of alignment with both black identity of those within the upwardly mobile class and the social realities facing black women in the late-1980s/early-1990s. Black chick lit's preoccupation with intimacy is fascinating as it highlights the value placed on female companionship which sometimes becomes a replacement for the emotional fulfillment not found within romantic relationships.

With the building focus on class, it should come as no surprise that eventually a genre would emerge in which the notion of romance as something reserved for the exclusive pleasure of the upwardly mobile would be challenged. The final chapter, "Urban Fiction, Materiality, and the Reaction against Romance," provides a closer examination of the resurgence of the "ghetto" novel as a post-black feminist genre. Urban or "ghetto fiction," as it is sometimes known, has its origins in the 1960s. It started as a genre that men in the lower-working class associated with as a form of reclaiming the negative identities heaped upon them by America's popular narrative of criminalization. However, in the 1990s, this genre gained new traction with black women. Indeed, this genre has become a hugely successful one where lower class identity and social morality are narrated against a world in which community connection and personal relationships are irrevocably fragmented. Survival replaces marriage as the dominant social force. In the space of the urban setting, women are empowered through a full understanding of themselves as sexual beings and the potential influence that they can exert upon their world. Thus, urban fiction exposes female competition as a step in attaining worthy companionship. Intimacy, and the forming of real emotional attachment, is treated as an intricate web that can easily destabilize the "hustle" of black women. Intimacy is revealed to be charged with potential dangers for women.

Chapter 1: Healing Intimacy: Fractured Black Romance in Toni Cade Bambara's "Talkin' Bout Sonny" and "The Survivor" (1965-1975)

> *…I wonder if the dudes who keep hollerin' about their lost balls realize that they probably surrendered them to either Mr. Charlie in the marketplace, trying to get that Eldorado, or to Miss Anne in bed, trying to bang out some sick notion of love and freedom. It seems to me you find your Self in destroying illusions, smashing myths, laundering the head of the white wash, being responsible to some truth, to the struggle. That entails at the very least cracking through the veneer of this sick society's definition of "masculine" and "feminine.*
>
> Toni Cade Bambara, "On the Issue of Roles"

In black women's literature emerging most directly out of 1965, there is a rather curious turn towards depicting the emotional and psychological development of black women through the ties to their communities, families, and interactions with black men. In the introduction I indicated that intimacy explicitly denotes both the emotional and physical revelations that are inherent in all romantic interactions. In this context, the emphasis is deliberately placed on "romantic" (even though emotional intimacy may also be said to apply to platonic or familial relationships). Propriety, sexual exploration, and pleasure are at the heart of the shift taking place in mid-20th century America broadly, and very specifically work as a major force behind black literary, artistic, and cultural production in the period spanning from 1965-1975. Toni Cade Bambara takes a deep and critical look at black relationships at the height of this period and signals the possibilities for a healthy dialogue around intimacy and romance. Given the moment in which Bambara is writing, and the ways in which critical conversations have segmented around her contributions to black feminism, she is a unique figure during this moment in black women's literature. Bambara signals a major turn in the conceptualization of modern black romance and intimacy by suggesting that the psychological development of intimacy between men and women was derailed in significant ways after the release of the Moynihan report.

Conversations on black intimacy are one constant element in Toni Cade Bambara's work that is often overlooked, but contribute greatly to what becomes the contemporary black romance novel.

Born Miltona Merkin Cade in 1939, in New York City, Toni Cade Bambara published the first literary collection of writing by black women; a work appropriately entitled *The Black Woman* (1970). The epigraph to this chapter is taken from Bambara's contribution to the anthology, an essay that delves into gender politics during the civil rights era. If Bambara's non-fiction engaged these issues, then her fiction made them its core. She depicts heroines who are often political activists, and in addition to serving the wider black community, these characters also deal with various domestic problems. Her narratives are structured around the fissures, between both an older and a younger generation, and black men and women, which occur in the name of liberation and equality. Her epigraph, especially, makes obvious the increasingly disharmonious spirit of social partnership in the late 1960s between men and women. As a major theme, this discontent is brought to the foreground of early black feminist texts. In Bambara's case, the publication of *The Black Woman* placed her at the forefront of a literary renaissance in black women's writing. Between 1970 and her death from colon cancer in 1995, Bambara edited two anthologies of writing and two film scripts. She also published poems and essays, two novels, and two short story collections. At the time of her death, Bambara was working on a second novel. This second and most critically acclaimed novel, *These Bones are Not My Child* (1999), was posthumously edited and published by Toni Morrison, her longtime friend. Morrison's intervention in Bambara's project shows not only the bond of friendship and respect that existed between the two but also the closeness of Bambara's work to influential developments of African American literature, especially to the development of black feminist literary canon and popular black woman's fiction.

Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Toni Cade Bambara are united as not only contemporaries, but as advocates of different forms of black feminism/"womanism."[11] Their conceptualizations of black women in relationship to black men shape male/female relationships within the world of their novels. While the subject of the ever-changing black relationship has been historically explored and critiqued in the work of Walker and Morrison, Bambara's oeuvre pushes the topic in a different direction. Bambara's work could best be understood as the link in the breakdown of black intimacy and the attempt to force black women to abide by conventional narratives of femininity/domesticity. Toni Cade Bambara is perfectly situated between the emergence of a black feminist canon and the move towards popular black women's fiction that emerges in the 1980s. In many ways, Bambara signals the complicated and sometimes contradictory impulses of heterosexual romance. [12]

Celie's rejection of Mr., and men in general, for example, suggests not only that he and black men like him are destroying the possibility of a "happy" home, but also implies that the simultaneous existence of emotional intimacy and carnal pleasure for women can only be found in a lesbian context. In Walker's novel, Mr. is only able to find personal redemption by letting go of the masculine anger and feelings of hurt pride that had been handed down to him from his father's generation and acknowledging his participation in Celie's sexual oppression. In comparison, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) focuses on the embodiment of oppression for female slaves in particular. Sethe's rememories of life on the plantation, even the killing of her child, are deeply woven into the final image of her then-husband, Halle. The rape of Sethe reveals to both of them the full ramifications of his inability to protect what has been most

[11] Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) gives four possible definitions for womanism. As used throughout this piece, womanism can be understood as meaning: "A black feminist or feminist of color."

[12] This particular angle is also presented to a lesser degree in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982).

precious to him, his wife and his family. Halle cannot "be a man" while still being legally recognized as someone's property. For Sethe, this failure becomes deeply embedded into her consciousness and drives her to commit infanticide, to try and un-see and to forget the symbolic horror etched into Halle's butter covered face. Morrison and Walker both demonstrate how the scars left by slavery have affected the notion of intimacy for both black men and women. It may be argued that Toni Morrison's work, which is as noted for its circularity as it is for borrowing from gothic tropes and literary devices, is seen in the narrative when Morrison forays into the mythical and or magical with her excursions. However, Toni Cade Bambara's works directly speak to how the asymmetrical reconstruction of both history and sexuality remains pervasive in African American culture and continues to affect the development of all forms of black intimacy; the romantic kind being the most obvious place in which this is shown.

This distinction is important because the forces that have shaped black feminine identity have been markedly different from the set of restrictions that have informed white feminine identity, given the cultural and historical spaces that they occupied in post-WW II era America. Bambara's works are explorations into the psychological barriers between men and women and the role that these personal issues play in undermining healthy black relationships in the wake of the Moynihan report. In his report Moynihan painted black women's distinctly "unfeminine" patterns of behavior; non-submissiveness to male authority, employment outside of the home, and visible participation in community organizations and politics, as the chief cause of black men's inability to emerge out of a system of oppression. The declining economic situation of the black family was blamed on the alienation of black males from a leadership role within the

family.[13] In short, the so called "black matriarchy" had repressed black men so much that they no longer knew how to be active within a familial setting. The Moynihan report, riffing of the work produced earlier by black sociologists such as E. Franklin Frazier, suggested that not only was there a black matriarchy, but went so far as to describe this matriarchy as oppressive and anti-black male. According to the myth of black matriarchy, black women maintained social order by deliberately keeping black men in a social and economic limbo.

Moynihan's report, at least as I read this work, is using what is framed as a "legitimate" intimate study of African American culture as a national warning against the dangers of female liberation and social advancement. However, the intended target audience for his message is most clearly other white males. This is one facet that has been neglected in the way scholars have responded to this seminal work. If we understand the target audience for this work as really being white males and the goal of this work as an attempt to curtail the spread of the feminist movement (mostly composed of white college-aged women) then one important point about the reception of this text in African American culture becomes clear. Moynihan's report landed in the middle of a literal and figurative minefield in terms of the intraracial conversations taking place between black men and women during the same moment. Without the presence of these intraracial conversations, this document would have simply become another in a long line of sociological narratives that pathologize black intimacy and the black family. The Moynihan

[13] In *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* Moynihan makes assertions about the Black family by first pointing to the failure of the Black male to adapt to civilized (coded through white familial normalcy) expectations of both achievement and family obligation. In this approach he explains that "the slave was totally removed from the protection of organized society" (15). This thus retarded the Black male's moral sense, keeping him childlike. He then suggests that since slavery Black women have worked to actively keep Black men out of a position of power with their own households, further insuring that Black males stay within a state of moral decay.

report emerged at a moment that allowed it to strike a nerve, and even after 1965, it echoed in the development of black relationships.[14]

Moynihan's report seemed to be the final seal on the figurative coffin of black intimacy.[15] New conversations of how "the black woman had gotten out of hand," abounded. Almost overnight, the iconic inner strength that had carried the black family through slavery became a threat to its stability. The black woman became "… too strong, too hard, too evil, too castrating. She got all the jobs, all the everything. The black man never had a chance" (Wallace 11). This re-characterization of black womanhood played a significant role in undermining black male/female relationships. The persistent representation of black relationships as "bad" or "dysfunctional" has since become normalized in the American imagination.[16] In short, despite the obvious shortfalls of Michele Wallace's argument in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super Woman* (1978), her central point was accurate, "This report did not create hostility. It merely helped to bring hostility to the surface" (12). Black women became the enemy of black men everywhere, and the relationship crisis began in earnest. The decreasing rates of

[14] As Robert Hill and Bonnie Thornton note through their critical preoccupations, Moynihan assumes that a normal family should be headed by the male and that the American white family represents "normalcy." Thus Moynihan's report has a distinct reprimand against the failure of black males to be men. He begins his assertions about the black family by first pointing to the failure of the black male to adopt to civilized (coded through white familial normalcy) expectations of both achievement and family obligation. In this approach he explains that "the slave was totally removed from the protection of organized society" this thus retarded the Black male's moral sense, keeping him childlike. Moynihan goes onto explain that the system of slavery has been more readily seen in the black male situation and psyche.

[15] However, what becomes evident through Rita B. Dandridge's essay, "The Race, Gender, Romance Connection," and through a consideration of Francis Smith Foster's *'Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Marriage and the Making of the African American* (2010), with its emphasis on historical documentation of the survival of love (romantic attachment) and marriage in the early 19th century slave culture, is that there was a clear gender divide already at play in the early overall African American experience. This divide is what would ultimately continue to destabilize black intimacy.

[16] Bonnie Thornton Dill's "The Dialectics of Black Womanhood," suggests that Daniel Patrick Moynihan's perpetuation of stereotypical images of Black women results from his unquestioned acceptance of a linear historical model of Black progress from Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1930). These images isolated Black women as the biggest threat to the black family.

black male employment, education, and the simultaneous increase of imprisonment rates, contributed to "a brain shattering explosion (that was heaped) upon the heads of black women, the accumulation of over three hundred years of rage" (Wallace 12). The year 1965 became important precisely because it demarcated a transition away from the tendency towards solidarity and support around issues affecting black people in general. With no major national priority taking precedence over the tumultuous feelings fostered between black men and women throughout the Civil Rights movement, the late 1960s was a moment in which black women finally began advocating on intraracial issues concerning their relationships with black men. Black women were discontent with what they felt to be a lack of respect and tenderness in their personal relationships. As black men struggled to define themselves as men, they turned towards white American values. In doing so, black men attempted to define themselves within the same gender frameworks at work within white American households. Their definition of masculinity became intricately connected with weakening the roles that black women had played outside of the home. Thus, the image that had been created around the "independent" and "strong" black woman of the late-1960s was also read as symbolizing the emasculation of the black male. The idea of black women as needing to be "soft" in order to be read as feminine, led to a political and cultural impasse as far as the idea of the "black couple" was concerned.

Generations later, black Americans are still struggling with how this affected the way that they related to one another. Moynihan's report signaled a major transition in how black men understood and processed historical wrongs. The experiences of pain and abuse suffered under and immediately in the wake of slavery, became less of a point for the articulation of shared cultural trauma and instead became held up as the originator in a series of capitalistic

frameworks that would continue to negatively impact the lives of black men living in America.[17] The suffering and exploitation of black women under these same regimes was eclipsed by the rhetoric of black male pain. Black women became a foil for much of the misplaced rage against ongoing racial tension and injustice. After all, what could the "Black woman" know about black male pain or the struggle to be seen as human? What could she know about being a man? The conclusions drawn by black men in response to these broader metaphysical questions would change the way that black identity was constructed in response to gender difference and the increasing threat represented by a feminist/womanist agenda.[18]

By the late 1960s, the black political scene had become a masculine culture that forced racial unity by ignoring and suppressing the needs of women who also participated in Black Nationalist campaigns. In turn, a segment of black women were being increasingly isolated from domestic, social, and political power. The changes did not stop there. According to sociologist Robert Hill, in the wake of the Moynihan report there was a change in the very structure of the black family.[19] The internal dynamics within the family unit moved from egalitarian to a male authoritarian model of domesticity: thus, representing the broader turn towards cultural and political dominance for black men. Against the cultural push for advancing solely black male power, black women writers began petitioning in other arenas, most notably in the political essay

[17] The self-authored text defined respectively as slave narrative and domestic fiction, as genres, manifests the exact nature of this split as distinctly gendered in what takes primacy in the telling. Charles Heglar's *Rethinking the Slave Narrative: Slave Marriage and the Narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft* links the American mythos of "self-made man" to the slave narrative of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* (1845), in conjunction with this mythos Heglar places Douglass's Narrative within a particular tradition of narrative practiced by Early African fugitive male slaves (paraphrased 23). Heglar also points out that Douglass's narrative highlights the dangers of emotional involvement to the African American body, particularly the perception that emotional ties create their own feelings of bondage.

[18] In Paula Giddings' *When and Where I Enter* indirectly discusses this notion in more depth.

[19] I am referring to Hill's *Strengths of Black Families.*

and literary narrative. There was a surge in black female authorship spanning the 1970s. Toni Cade Bambara became one of the foremothers of the black feminist movement and a chief historian in gathering the writing that emerged during this period.[20]

To this day, Toni Cade Bambara remains one of the most underrated authors of the twentieth century, perhaps because she did not produce novel after novel, as some of her more widely known contemporaries did. Sticking largely to the medium of the short story, Bambara tackled many issues standing in the way of what she called black wholeness/healing. The decline of intimacy in black relationships routinely threads its way through her oeuvre as an "illness" that prevents healing. However, scholars of Bambara's work tend to speak of the connection that she makes between the lack of intimacy and illness only in relation to her first novel, *The Salt Eater*s (1980). Essentially, *The Salt Eaters* is an expose into the idea of the broken and dysfunctional black couple that had gripped the public mind in the wake of Moynihan's (and many sociologists that followed on his heels) report on the state of black intimacy. There is very little direct critical acknowledgment or appreciation into how her short stories actually prefigure many of the tensions that run throughout and become the foundation for the main narrative at the heart of *The Salt Eaters*.[21]

In two short stories from *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), Bambara probes the emotional havoc created between black men and women. In "Talkin' Bout Sonny" and "The Survivor," the social reality of the black couple from the 1960s to the 1980s and the romantic backlash from the

[20] See Beverly Guy-Sheftall's contribution to *Savoring the Salt: The Legacy of Toni Cade Bambara* (2007), "Toni Cade Bambara: Black Feminist Foremother."

[21] I am fully aware that Bambara has stated before that *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is really just an expansion of a story she published in *The Seabirds Are Still Alive* (1977), "The Organizer's Wife." However, her concentration on themes of healing as being intrinsically connected to intimacy building remains a central focus. In fact you can track the development in the idea from one collection to the next, and then eventually into the novel that she finally produces. Doing this here would not be appropriate but as someone who has read all of her published work, it strikes me as odd that there is no critical work exploring such continuity.

Moynihan report are explored. The idea of black women as controlling and manipulative began to dominate the discourse of the early sixties leading to a cultural pathology that continues to affect the formation of black intimacy. In both stories Bambara highlights the gender distrust and development of this pathology in black culture. Bambara marks not only a major thematic turn in black women's writing, but also in the conceptions of romance and intimacy as they became deeply entangled with the pathological depictions of "the black family." Viewed in the context of the sociological discourse of black relationships epitomized by the Moynihan report, these short stories capture the role that race and gender, leading up to and during the 1960s, played in weakening both black solidarity and intimacy. In the quote below, taken from a 1979 interview conducted with Beverly Guy-Sheftall, Bambara announces her narrative preoccupation with intimacy:

> *Temperamentally, I'm much more concerned with the caring that lies beneath the antagonisms between black men and women. There is a great deal of static that informs our relationships, above and beyond the political wedge that has been jammed between us by myth makers of the oppressor class. Whereas other writers, other women, other people, are more concerned with the hurt of it all, the hurt doesn't teach me anything and I'm concerned primarily with a usable lesson.*[22]

Bambara forcedly reminds the reader that this is a story that could be happening anywhere at any time in the present moment. As early as her collection, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), Bambara was attuned to the national narrative of decline and its lasting impact on the development of black intimacy. She is not attempting to suggest alternate historical accounts. This is not because the distant past is obsolete or unimportant, but rather that the future was already being overcast by historical shadows. Bambara crafts her stories with a mix of experimental writing techniques, thus earning her the reputation of being a "post-modernist"

[22] Reprinted in Thabti Lewis's collection of Toni Cade Bambara's interviews, *Conversations with Toni Cade Bamabara* (2012), pg. 15.

writer. Despite being praised as writer whose focus is built around technique, she responds to the overarching cultural narratives concerning race, women, and the people who exist simultaneously at the center and margin of their own communities.

"Talkin' Bout Sonny" and the *Chill* in Black Romance

As a collection, *Gorilla, My Love* is most often cited for its presentation of childhood and adult hypocrisy. While it would be erroneous to suggest that the collection is not "largely devoted to the lessons offered girls and young women within their local community or through representations of the larger black folk community" (Byerman 114), the collection has more complexity.[23] There are many stories in the collection that show the compact yet dynamic intersection between race and gender in the African American community. For example, in narratives featuring Hazel, a voice that returns at various stages throughout at least three different stories, are the pieces with the clearest attention to cultural dissent and gender role reconsideration. As literary scholar Elizabeth Muther explains, Hazel "draws vision and militancy from the wisdom of her black elders, even as she exposes the stress points in her community's relationship to the larger body politic" (448).[24] For example, in the opening story of *Gorilla, My Love,* "My Man Bovanne" (1971), the conflicting rhetoric of Black Nationalism ends up pulling the community apart by limiting and circumscribing the community's definition of "blackness." Indeed, the acceptable codes of masculine and feminine behavior created out of such limited notions are shown to have driven a cultural wedge between the pre-WWII and the post-Civil Rights generations.

[23] Keith E. Byerman's *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (1985) is one example of a critical work that establishes a very specific scope of interpretation for *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) in which this aspect of her work, while acknowledge, often falls to the wayside.

[24] Referencing to Elizabeth Muther's article, "Bambara's Feisty Girls: Resistance Narratives in *Gorilla, My Love.*"

Bambara's work contextualizes intraracial oppression and lays out the stakes of black machismo within the burgeoning trend of African American male victimhood. She does this by citing the reliance of black masculinity on the successful adoption of normalized standards of patriarchy as practiced in white American and European households. Thus, "My Man Bovanne" reflects the changing cultural climate in black communities after the release of the Moynihan report. As with all of the narratives starring Hazel, this story also culminates in both disillusionment and betrayal. While this is most obviously portrayed as a generational gap in cultural mentalities between the depression and eras, Bambara suggests that there are deeper emotional resonances that emerge as a result of this gap. The abandonment of supportive structures led to a misunderstanding of the aims of black struggle and more germane, to the inability to see the role that these support networks will play in fostering the development of a collective consciousness Behind the romantic vision of Black Nationalism, as experienced through both familial and romantic relationships, Hazel testifies to the destruction of the black community because of the obsession with becoming and propagating hyper-masculinity. If the first half pays particular attention to the way that young black girls are socialized into a culture that has no productive place for them, then the second half focuses on what happens to the women these girls become. Hazel's narratives and observations repeatedly link hyper-masculinity to a growing sense of anti-intimacy and pessimism that dominates in the second half of the collection.

Originally published in *Liberator Magazine* in June of 1967, "Talkin' Bout Sonny," features the couple of Betty and Delauney. On the surface, this story is about a couple trying to understand a murder committed by a mutual acquaintance, Sonny. One day Sonny inexplicably decides to murder his wife. While Sonny is the centerpiece that holds this narrative together, he

remains absent from the majority of the story. Betty, as the narrator, moves from observations on Sonny's increasingly erratic behavior to Delauney's resistance to Betty's suggestion that anything could be mentally or emotionally wrong with Sonny. He reads all of her attempts to make him cognizant of Sonny's strangeness as an attempt on her part to manipulate if not outright isolate him from his friends. Through the overlap of these two narratives, a suggestion about Sonny's marriage and the possible cause of Sonny's mental state becomes clearer. Sonny's marriage, much like Delauney's relationship with Betty, has been informed by the gender roles that black patriarchy sought to enforce on men and women. As the very politics of Black Nationalism seemed to shift to privilege the continual suffering of black men, the pain and trauma experienced by black women became invisible. Pain becomes part of a platform that is only speakable in connection to black male bodies and applicable to instances of black male experience with oppression. As Michele Wallace, Bambara's contemporary, noted, "Even as the Black woman continues to see the Black man as historically crippled" (Wallace 16), she nonetheless is a being infused with anger in the face of a growing trend towards the emotional "coolness" of black men. Delauney persists in pushing Betty away from him while simultaneously trying to hold her in place with rhetoric and ideas of a racial collective. It is not that Betty has done anything to be seen as unworthy of Delauney's trust, but rather because she is a woman she cannot be trusted with Delauney's real emotions. Rage is experienced and expressed as a battle between race and gender in the black collective that culminates in masculine anger and in the sometimes wrathful silence of women, which continues to remain ignored.[25] Locked out by the rhetoric against women, Betty is not only relegated to the fringes of

[25] Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) is a precursor of this type of feminine anger, as it is tied to notions of the "good" girl; it is often repressed or diffused before being released. Some scholars have criticized Brooks' *Maud Martha* as being incomplete because there is overwhelming tension which ultimately never gets handled. An

the conversation on Sonny but also isolated by the wider cultural attempt of black men, such as Delauney, to gain empowerment through oppressing the black female experience and voice.

An emotional muffling accompanies the development of black machismo. Ostensibly, this muffling is directly connected to the way in which emotions are abstracted from the core definition of black masculinity.[26] Take for example the interaction between Betty and Delauney throughout the narrative. In between his attempt to narrate the story of Sonny's violent murder of his wife, Delauney derides Betty, calling her a "bottle-tipping vegetable mother" (80) and a "nursery-school-marm" (83). Delauney uses derision to force Betty back into silence whenever her worries or observations begin to get a little too close for his personal comfort. In this short story, there is a complex plot driven by the competing frameworks of silence and dialogue that beckons the reader to contemplate how the language of the time in which the story is set allows Sonny to not only kill, but emphatically compels him to direct that violence at black women. The hardening towards women depicted in "Talkin' Bout Sonny" becomes crucial in understanding why some black relationships became highly volatile. After all, how can intimacy exist without trust? Or compassion shared without moments of empathy? These are the key points for building any relationship that were directly affected by the push of Black Nationalism towards a significantly more patriarchal form of black culture. To various degrees, the emotional

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example of this being Mary Helen Washington's article, "Taming all that Anger Down." Brooks' point about the day-to-day frustrations face by women and particularly women of color, how they often end in this kind of silence, and how that anger more less becomes internalized, remains a valid strategy of coping and response in professional and social spaces. One key difference between this text and the feminist writing emerging post-Moynihan is that there is now an outlet, a community of women who have shared experiences facing these day-to-day tensions, and unlike the twelve years before the publication of Moynihan's report, Black feminine anger was finally becoming okay to publically express.

[26] Richard Majors and Janet Manicini Billson's *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1992) suggests that "the routine donning of cool pose may also condition the black man to suppress and lose touch with all of his feelings" (12). The numbness and detachment of someone constantly existing in this state can easily lead to a psychotic break. Psychotic in the sense that there is a total detachment from everyday reality.

estrangement fostered by Black Nationalist conceptions of manhood does not allow Delauney to think about Sonny's wife as a victim. In the same way, estrangement also does not allow for Betty to truly understand the reasons behind Sonny's actions. Any potential lines of actual communication between Betty and Delauney are severed by his inability to feel for a woman outright killed by someone who should have been her greatest source of support. Betty's growing discontent with always being on the fringes of Delauney's thoughts is compounded by feelings of apprehension concerning her ability to ever get through to Delauney.

The relationship scenario that Toni Cade Bambara utilizes for "Talkin' Bout Sonny" is one that is typical of the moment of the narrative's cultural production. Many iconic black television shows—for example, *Good Times* (1974-79), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), and *Sanford & Son* (1972-1977)—capitalized on social discourse about the rumored decline of the black family. Each show had different class values that subtly affected the way that they engaged with increasingly negative rhetoric surrounding the black household.[27] In *Good Times* dysfunction is often presented in the stereotypical buffoonery embodied in the character of J.J. However, the death of the father figure, James Evans Sr. is one poignant moment in which the gender dynamics are brought to the foreground. As Mark Anthony Neal in his work, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post Soul Aesthetic* (2002) explains, the absence of James from the family is "an example of the presumed connection between patriarchal presence and the stability of black familial relationships. In this regard, James's death placed the Evans family in social stasis" (62). As black family dramas and films start gaining a foot hold on American television, the unstable dynamic of black home life becomes the most pronounced aspect. A cultural

[27] The black family has been demonized for being structured in ways that are foreign to the American idealization of the nuclear family. The Moynihan report had described the Black family as poor, matriarchal, and largely dysfunctional because it lacked a clear patriarchal structure. See Robert Hill's *Strengths of Black Families* (172) for an in-depth outline on how the academy was responding to Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report.

paranoia towards black women which becomes more evident in the comedic indulgence of the dysfunctional family and the blatantly misogynistic commentary in shows depicting various forms of black family are normalized in popular American culture. A show as iconic as the *Good Times* immortalizes the moment when the mother figure, Florida Evans, refuses to break into an overwhelming and public display of grief over the loss of her husband. In one scene they managed to tap into a prominent belief espoused by black men that "some black women are indifferent to and sometimes complicit in the "removal" of black men from the community" (65). Likewise, Bambara's short story captures a deep psychological split that is also reflective of the cultural moment of the 1970s and some of the attitudes towards black women that would later go on to negatively impact the way that black men and women related to one another.

For this reason, another iconic show to consider in terms of the moment of cultural production is *Sanford and Sons*. In the case of *Sanford & Son*, comedian Redd Foxx's character became well known for his tendency to express sexist statements and philosophies.[28] Much like the actions of Delauney in "Talkin' Bout Sonny," Foxx's comments were designed to force black women into silence on issues where he was uncomfortable. What makes both personas uncomfortable is the threat of real closeness with a black woman. Foxx's comments are given justification when coupled with a female character like Aunt Esther. As a character, Aunt Esther is a composite expression of every fear and stereotype that was popular about independent black women. She embodies the Sapphire myth and revitalizes the idea of the black matriarch as an emasculator. Her tongue is sharp and she is exceedingly aggressive and commanding. Her very

[28] There are some primary differences between the three shows that affected their public reception. One of those differences has to do with the family construction at the heart of them. *Good Times* features an intact black family, one with both children of varying ages and a mother and father present. *Sanford and Son* featured an older Black father and his fully adult son, while *The Jeffersons* primarily featured an older couple (and occasionally their adult son, Lionel). According to Robin R. Means Coleman's "Black Sitcom Portrayals: The Good, The Bad, and The Worse" (165), these shows also had very distinct class elements that not only affected the content of the show but their target audience.

presence on the show and as part of the family structure allows for the justification of Foxx's degrading assessment about black women. Repeatedly, Foxx refutes situations and women like Aunt Esther by invoking the name of his deceased wife. Notably, Foxx only invokes her name as a defense in moments when his prowess as the patriarch of the family is being challenged by Esther's probing questions. While Aunt Esther may have never agreed with her sister's choice in husband, she still respects her enough that she will (eventually) stop pushing into areas where Foxx feels emotionally vulnerable. Foxx's anti-womanist statements, correlate to those made by Delauney in "Talkin' Bout Sonny," as examples of the way that some forms of black masculine identity have been created and sustained through an avowal against intimacy.

In the pop cultural and literary productions emerging post-1965 are "stereotypes of the 'alpha male' and 'sensitive with standards' female" (Paizis 30). These archetypes found their way into mainstream cinema, and were used as the base persona of the ideal image of masculinity and femininity. The alpha male, as a man of action, is often the hero rushing in to save the community, to correct the injustice, and of course to defend the honor and dignity of the woman normally at the center of the plot. The sensitive with standards female walks the fine line between being stern without being nagging, and may occupy a position that is traditionally masculine out of necessity and not personal desire. In mainstream cinema and literature, these archetypes guaranteed that women, forced into leadership positions by social pressures, would step down and return to a more socially normal role as a homemaker. With the rise of the blaxploitation film industry throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s, this archetype of the hero and heroine persists, although it is altered by a combination of both hypersexualism and militancy.

The preoccupation with black masculinity is also part of how Delauney is attempting to process Sonny's actions. Sonny's actions, when fed through an existing script of black masculinity, can be neatly rationalized and thus Delauney can empathize without having to really analyze Sonny's decisions. This is because in the paradigm of black machismo embodied within blaxploitation era film, black men are presented as highly reactionary to threats by outside force (normally coded as "the man"), and capable of extreme violence while showing little emotion. On the other hand, black women are treated as highly sexualized and socially degraded playthings, disposable and replaceable at the whims of the hero until he finds the "correct" woman. This woman is usually depicted as being "tough" and seemingly "emotionally invulnerable," and also capable of violence when the occasion arises. However, more often than not, her violence grows out of a wealth of compassion that she has for her community and for her family. Her hardness, her strength, is cultivated so that she can continue to function in the society presumed to have gone dysfunctional because of the outside influence. The hero must be hyper macho in order for the heroine of the blaxploitation genre to reveal her feminine side. Despite all of the trouble and hardship that she has suffered and the mayhem that she may have caused, this figure of the superwoman only wants to create her own home or family. Stories in *Gorilla, My Love*, Bambara deliberately draw on the cultural mythos surrounding the "Black macho" and the "Superwoman." Literary critic Elliot Butler-Evans has even suggested that "a close examination of *Gorilla*'s narrative perspective reveals a disruption of the text's apparent unity in the construction of black female subjects and representations of blackness" through the "demythologizing of legendary and heroic Black figures" (93-4). In the couples that Bambara presents, we see the qualities of both stereotypes being recapitulated in "real world" settings, wherein there is a need for emotionality and commitment in order to create the foundations for a

loving and truly intimate relationship. Both Betty and Delauney speak to a cultural moment in which to be manly was to be ultra-masculine and to be female was to be a perfect (submissive) housewife.

A major difference between the construction of the traditional Western hero and the black macho found in "Talkin' Bout Sonny" is that there are no combative *male*–to-*male* relationships in the latter. The lack of combative black male friendships would suggests that black men are capable of showing great empathy for other black men. This may be due to the fact that there is a comfort and shared understanding that black men no longer felt was possible with black women. As black women rise to sociocultural prominence, men are less able to see them as also experiencing the pain of social stigma. This makes it almost impossible for black men to view black women as subjects who were also at the mercy of oppressive powers. As sympathy is constituted only through friendship, this friendship allowed only for the exchange of sympathy strictly between black males. The system of black patriarchy invalidated not only the political and cultural contributions of black women but also their particular experiences of oppression both in American culture and in their own communities. It is not by happenstance that the vignette starts within the cloistered walls of a bar, and then Betty expands what otherwise is an intimate conversation to encompass the streets of the community. According to scholar Madhu Dubey, "Black nationalist writers [had] named the Black man as 'the number one object of racism,'" thus tacitly agreeing with Moynihan's assessment that the social and economic hardship experienced by black men was because of what was viewed as the complicity of black women (17).[29] As the "hero" of this piece, Delauney resists any sort of empathy he may have for the "enemy" and instead tries to find a point of identification with Sonny's actions.

[29] Madhu Dubey's *Black Women Novelist and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (1994).

The reaction of Delauney can be partially understood through the implicitly established rules of acceptable black patriarchal conduct. While physical and sexual abuse can be tolerated as necessary for establishing control over the household, outright murder is different. There are no cultural grounds that establish the acceptability for such an action against a black woman. Maybe this is why Delauney spends a lot of time first discrediting Sonny's nameless wife and then trying to rationalize what she could have done to drive Sonny to kill her.[30] The framing of intimacy through homosocial bonding has both romantic and social repercussions.[31] The inability to extend sympathy or trust across gender leads to increased rates of domestic violence, as we see happening with the murder committed by Sonny and the willfulness with which Delauney attempts to find a transgression for which Sonny would have been driven to murder. Bambara's decision to leave the wife of Sonny both unnamed and largely physically erased from the conversation taking place in the narrative may be one of her most subtle and calculated moves.

As Ronald N. Jacobs and Philip Smith explain, "Romantic narratives provide the basis for a civic culture based upon communitarian virtues of service and commitment and a powerful utopian moment of mission" (68).[32] In essence, a romance, whether it be a narrative of social advancement or of the promise of romance between individuals, can only exist if there is trust.

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[30] Despite the fact that there are no such cultural rules, I think that it is fair to say, based on the recurrent and often uncommented upon on motif in canonical African American literary tradition, that a common link between domestic homicide and its general acceptance, This seems to be especially accepted in cases in which the wife or female lover has been unfaithful. I believe that Delauney hints that it is something of this nature that forces Sonny over the edge. To expand on this point, while Black women are portrayed as viciously attacking the partner in the affair, rarely are they actually driven to go after the spouse. Instead, all of the potential for violence turns inwards as they lapse into a depression.

[31] I am referencing the racial/cultural elements of male kinship more aptly discussed in bell hook's *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), particularly her argument that "is important to examine and name the connection between the sixties' militant black male embrace of patriarchal manhood and its concomitant violence and the more recent passive acceptance by too many black men of the notion that their manhood requires them to be predators, to be natural-born killers, or to symbolically represent themselves as such" (52).

[32] See their article, "Romance, Irony, and Solidarity."

Without a shared point of interest, a common vision to unite a couple or a community, then there will be no progress for anyone. The mission for black equality became predicated on the submission of Black women to a monolithic racial and cultural identity. Because of this, Bambara's short stories may indeed reflect "a world where the black man resents the questions put to him by the black woman" (Nubukpo 26). This is a world straddling the line between sexual and social intimacy. Ideals rarely inspire intimacy, and without intimacy (and a healthy dose of respect) romance becomes an increasingly unreal prospect as trust becomes a major issue between men and women. The political and the personal could not be separated from the quest for a unified platform for blackness; otherwise the public and private needs of women would be sacrificed. In "Talkin' Bout Sonny" the breakup of racial and social solidarity between black men and women happens mostly because of the inability to form deep emotional connections across gender.

Black male "cool," a term most often discussed as part of the historical evolution of black masculinity, must also be dissected as a sociological concept that has defined contemporary man-woman relationships.[33] Betty experiences the "cool" posturing in black machismo every time she tries to communicate or express her concern about Sonny's behavior. An example of this occurs after a failed attempt at hustling teenagers at the basketball court, when Sonny suddenly freezes in the middle of what would have been the game winning jump shot. As Betty describes, "all of a sudden he just froze and his face tightened up like the skin had become bones, and this tremor came up out of his socks and caterpillar up the calves to the thighs" (81). Sonny's fit had rendered him immobile and he was carried off court. As Betty explains later on, "Sonny said I was a jinx and proceeded to pick his sneakers apart. First, off came the bicycle patches; then out

[33] For example, see Richard Major & Janet Mancini Billson's *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (1993) and Lynda Dickson's "The Future of Marriage and Family in Black America" (1993).

came the laces. He ripped the sneaker to shreds" (83). The way in which Sonny's whole body froze and then his actions afterword, struck Betty as something not only odd but also potentially dangerous. Equally dangerous, was the fact that, "No one batted an eye" (83) at Sonny's behavior. Delauney rebukes Betty's observations, going so far as to suggest that she is being overly nagging and concerned. Deluaney paints Betty as an interloper into the realm of black masculinity. It is not that Sonny has not shown potentially concerning behavior before, but that Delauney and his other friends wish to perhaps protect Sonny's "weakness" from those not in the group. Delauney expresses this to Betty through the language of the cool.

One way that we can understand the effect of the cool pose is through its "uncritical acceptance of patriarchy to live in the past, to be stuck in time. More often than not they [black men] are stuck in the place of rage" (hooks 60). When Betty's commentary emotionally hits too close to home, Delauney tries to provoke an equally emotional responsive point by verbally abusing and insulting Betty. To expand upon hooks' point, cool posturing allows the infiltration of violence into what remains of the intimacy between black men and women, as intimacy accompanies a struggle for domination in the private sphere.[34] In the story, Betty is consistently being shut out because of the perceived inability of women to understand black men. For example, Delauney has no trouble understanding Sonny's pronouncement that, "Something came over me" (79). This "something" is a black cloud that symbolically confronts the specifically African American couple, and it often ends in the physical victimization of women by black

[34] In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) hooks isolates the moment in which black males adopted so called "benevolent" patriarchy as the moment in which black males adopted Western ideas of the male-female relationship as hierarchal and reminiscent of a master-slave dyad, that reflects, as hooks asserts, "a large majority [of] black men took as their standard the dominator model" (4). More precisely, "When slavery ended these black men often used violence to dominate black women" (4), it was the infiltration of violence into what remained of the intimacy between African American men and women, that had become expressed as a struggle for domination that spans well into the 21st century.

men. [35]In trying to explain his own relationship to this "something" that spills over Sonny, Delauney emphasizes that not only is this "something" a part of the black male condition, but that the spilling over into their intimate relationships is also natural.

Followed to a logical conclusion, the innate "something" necessitates that black women be the first ones to bear the burden of male distemper, given that successful black women had become constant reminders of what black men could not access in the social, economic, or political sphere. Implicitly, the logic of the "something" that comes over black men in Bambara's short story demands that black women be hurt to make up for years of pain and emasculation experienced by men. It also demands that women should be punished for succeeding where a man could not. Delauney turns back to Betty and asks her "you understand it, don't you baby? I mean 'Something came over me' comes through to you, don't it?" (79). In this moment Delauney is asking her to understand why Sonny's wife, and by extension Betty, must accept not only the punishment from black men but the very right of male dominion over the household. For the relationship to work, the strength of black women must be tempered. It would seem to suggest that only by becoming silent, submissive, and allowing men to reclaim the authority denied them by both American history and society, could the black male/female relationship work. When Betty does not immediately respond to his question Delauney says, "No, I guess not. You too dammed dead, that's what" (80). Delauney's quote underscores what he sees as the central disconnect between himself and Betty, and by implicit extension between black men and

[35] As a tool originally developed as a coping stratagem for male survival under the regime of slavery, the "cool" completely abdicates the self from displays of emotionality and attachment. While there is plenty of research to suggest that as a society at large we train our young males to "toughen up," and glorify in the "natural" aesthetic of a man who never expresses his feelings, burying them deep inside of himself, the particularity of the situated African American history recreates an idolized figure of masculinity in the space of the displaced, giving birth to a figure for whom emotion is synonymous with both death and bondage.

women. Black women have become immured to pain, particularly the pain experienced by black men.

As more black female writers emerged during the 1970s, it became clearer that "the outstanding thematic concern of black women's fiction in this period was the sexual division between black men and women that can potentially disrupt the racial unity projected in Black Nationalist discourse" (Dubey 20). Black women who wrote or in any way publically signified their discontent with the Black Nationalist treatment of women and women's rights were largely figured as "race traitors" and "man haters." In "Talkin' Bout Sonny," Betty, as the embodiment of the long suffering trope of black womanhood, narrates the story as an interior monologue in counterpoint to Delauney's more vocal attempt to piece together the rationality behind Sonny's actions. Betty's response to Delauney's explanation for Sonny's murder is to insist that Delauney not only knew Sonny's wife but really liked her as a person. She states: "Delauney, she was real nice. You liked her" (84). By pointing this out, Betty has subtly asked that Delauney stop treating Sonny's wife as a conspirator in Sonny's downfall and instead treat her as a real human capable of experiencing pain as well. This is noteworthy because of the subtlety with which Bambara presents both the repression of black women's voices within a culture influenced by Moynihan and the growing discontent that women were experiencing in both the political and personal arena that was their lives.

Throughout the short story, Betty remains quiet unless directly questioned by Delauney. Betty's silence, unlike the muffling mentioned earlier, is the political corner that Delauney's demands have rhetorically shoved her into. Betty's moments of quiet are the moments when Delauney seeks confirmation for his rationalizations of the murder that Sonny commits. He wants Betty to justify Sonny's, and by extension his, right to take their rage out on black women.

Because of the voice that Delauney has, he exists in the very present state of Black machismo, while Betty's silence allows her the space to disconnect from Black Nationalist ideology. Betty first tries to tackle the central problem in her romantic relationship, the lack of emotional intimacy, as a concern for Delauney's type of fathering. By displacing her own feelings of unease onto Delauney's children, two young girls being raised without their mother, Betty is then able to reconnect the emotional needs of the girls to her own by indicating that "Maybe Delauney's shrugging off attitude only applies to his basketball buddies" (82). As Betty explains, "It was probably concern for Beverly and Arlene more than for Sonny that made me wonder about Delauney's unconcern" (82). Even as Betty gives a noncommittal sign of her understanding of the "something" that comes over black men, she is still not in agreement with the idea that Sonny's wife was somehow complicit in her own death. If Delauney could disavow all of the positive feelings he had for this woman who was victimized not by some general institution, or by some anonymous white male, but by a man that should have understood her best, what does this mean for his intimate relationship with not only her but his daughters? Delauney's inability to picture Sonny as anything other than a victim of his wife and society begins to affect the way that Betty sees and understands her relationship to both Delauney and the larger black male culture that came to prominence in the 1960s.

"Talkin' Bout Sonny" is not simply about the gender inequality in some aspects of Black culture but the complex emotional ties that characterized black male-female social interactions in the latter half of the 1960s. Bambara's choice to present the stabbing without any premeditated context other than the suggestion that "Something came over me" is a maneuver that becomes necessary to make clear that this "something" in Sonny also correlates to a force that operates in Delauney. The force described by Delauney is "A cloud of evil. A fit of nastiness" (80). This

"nastiness" is symptomatic of the turn and unleashing of black male rage, not onto an opponent represented in institutionalized racism, but onto black women who have (according to Moynihan at least) been active agents in socially oppressing black men.[36] Sonny's wife, who remains both specified and voiceless, comes to represent the "general" treatment of black women within a Black Nationalist frame. The consequence of black male sexism was that it created political disunity between men and women and became the force that, ironically, has come the closest to actually destroying the "black family" by destroying the possibility of trust and intimacy, both of which are linked to any sense of stability in a relationship.

However, from start to finish there has been nothing typical about Betty and Delauney's romance. Rather than creating a hero wherein "the incongruities of the features of his rival, either by a combination of strength[s] and weakness[es] or by the suggestion of disharmony […] suggest deviance" (Paizis 89), Bambara draws attention to the similarity of Sonny and Delauney. The classical Western hero is usually understood or denoted through his antithesis to the characteristics of his rival. In contradistinction to this idea, the black romantic hero of Bambara's story, Delauney, defines himself in a positive relationship with men who would otherwise be his rivals through black female submission. Delauney's inability to muster sympathy for Sonny's wife, paired with his identification with Sonny at certain points, haunts Betty and the reader by the end of the story. Even as Betty is physically and emotionally beside Delauney, she remains outside of his network of close ties, forcing her to constantly question what role she is to play in a serious relationship and whether or not her presence matters. While the ending of "Talkin' Bout Sonny" remains ambiguous, the glossed over fissures and breaks in their relationship, some

[36] William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs published a sociological study entitled *Black Rage* (1969). In the "Marriage and Love" chapter they more explicitly discuss the issue of social rage in context to decision making in intimate relationships.

of which I have already gestured towards, suggest that their relationship will not end well. In Delauney's attempt to bring rationality to Sonny's "nasty fit," he resorts to immediately "blaming the victim" for somehow being complicit in her own death. In doing so, he therefore makes her more accountable for her own murder, even as Sonny is still literally painted with his wife's blood. Delauney charges that "Maybe that was the most beautiful thing that Sonny had ever done in his life, killing the bitch--" (84). In terms of the plot-positioning of the man-woman relationship, we should read this in concert with Betty's assertion that "she was real nice. You liked her" (84). This image is fixed in the readers' mind long after turning the final page.

This is a final scene that cannot be forgotten. In various novels, short stories, and essays that have come since "Talkin' Bout Sonny" was first published, similar images have repeatedly appeared in black women's writing.[37] By the 1980s, critics of black women's writing maintained that these "pathological" novels over sensationalized black domestic life.[38] To summarize, the more prevalent criticism being leveled at black female writers by both black male critics and authors was that they were collaborating with the rest of society in oppressing black men.[39] Their representation of black males as criminal, sexually depraved, and abusive or neglectful towards the family was thus taken to be the proof that black feminism/"womanism" had indeed been a

[37] Halle from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Mutt Thomas in Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), and the abstracted men of Ntozake Shange's choral poem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) all reproduced the psychological violence that destroys the Black couple. In the case of Toni Morrison's and Gayl Jones's novels the critical interpretations primarily discuss the engagement with history.

[38] This was the argument more publically launched by Ishmael Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986) and taken up by Trey Ellis's *Platitudes* (1988) as part of his attempt to critique what he called the "new cultural aesthetic." Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2002) continues this critique of the cultural appreciation shown Black women's literature, highlighting just how long-lived the gender opposition to the boom in Black women's publication of what can be called urban or "ghettoized" novels has proven to be.

[39] There are many African American male scholars and authors who have responded to Black female text as negligible and insidious in this fashion, chief among them has been Ismael Reed. Reed publishes *Reckless Eyeballing* (1986), an attack on not only Alice Walker personally but on Black feminism as whole.

corruptive influence to the black male-female relationship. Cultural criticisms from both white and black audiences have reductively interpreted the outpouring of incest and victimization narratives as an attempt to further alienate black men. The overwhelming portrayal of violence against women, and against black women especially, although present in earlier black women's texts, became a touchstone in women's literature spanning from the 1970s to the 1990s. The surge of these narratives of familial abuse from women, largely black, also made the 1980s literary moment one that became known as the decade of incest survivor narratives.[40] Narratives by black women authors have created a space for stories that challenge the dominant notion of racial solidarity or even gender centric identity within black culture. The silence that surrounded these "in house" issues showed the complete breakdown between men and women's communication and further resulted in the acceptance of their being a national black relationship crisis.

In "Talkin' Bout Sonny" Bambara manages to ensure that rather than attempting to shame or denigrate black masculinity, the toxicity and divisiveness that result in attempting to gain social normality by silencing black women is made the focus of her work. This very toxicity is framed as the mysterious "something" driving Sonny to murder, and causes Delauney to attempt to fill in the logic motivating Sonny's actions. Delauney's staunch defense and Betty's passive resistance reveal the emotional fragility of the black couple. Inundated with messages that continually seemed to be advocating a turn in violence against women in the face of depression and continual barriers to social access, it is no wonder that the perpetuation of the

[40] The early to mid-1980s was marked by a war of memory; until the late 1970s incest was something that had no forum in which to be discussed. However, Diana E. H. Russell's *The Secret Trauma: Incest in The Lives of Girls and Women* (1987) became one of the first major works to address incest as a national epidemic. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges' *Telling Incest: Narratives of Dangerous Remembering from Stein to Sapphire* (2001) considers the periodization of incest's national emergence in America through the intersecting frames of both race and gender.

black relationship crisis would gain national steam. This violence would culminate in women's writing during the 1980s as a narrative engagement with the memory of survival.

Gender, Trauma, and "the Survivor'

Black women's literature provided a political forum to discuss their personal concerns about the black community during the late 1960s. Writers focused especially on issues that were relevant to their physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being. Black women wrote about what it felt like to be punished for being born female. Bambara's "The Survivor" capitalizes on the commonness of violence directed at black women in the late 1960s and early1970s, and probes the more troubling cultural acceptance of domestic violence as an innate right of black men. In "The Survivor," Jewel is an actress who is forced to put herself back together after the death of her husband and director, Paul. Conflicted about his death, Jewel returns home, seeking spiritual and emotional healing from the wounds inflicted on her by Paul and their oppressive marriage. In conversational snippets and in the choice of their careers, the image of their marriage comes into focus. Neither Jewel nor Paul were able to recover from the personal traumas that they suffered; as a result they both became used to the idea of pain or suffering as individual and therefore un-sharable experiences. Ultimately, this trauma enforces the sense of estrangement between the couple. "The Survivor" questions what happens when estrangement forces a couple to develop independent of proscriptive gender roles.[41]

In a manner similar to and yet distinct from Toni Morrison's writing, Bambara plays with the reader's expectations by constructing nonlinear narratives. For some stories she opens with a

[41] In the *Gorilla, My Love* collection most stories have prior publication in magazines such as *Vendome, Black World, Redbook Magazine*, to name a few. However, I have not been able to find a prior publication for "The Survivor." This leads me to believe that this short story was first published within this collection.

scene that is pivotal and then backtracks to reveal the feelings that led up to the moment. These feelings run deep for the characters, often being the result of years of tension that finally boil over, snapping us forward to the pivotal confrontation. It may be argued that Morrison's work, which is as noted for its circularity as it is for borrowing from gothic literary devices, as seen in the *Beloved* and *Jazz* narratives when Morrison forays into the mythical and or magical with her excursions. Bambara forcedly reminds the reader that "Talkin' Bout Sonny" is a story that could be happening anywhere at any time in the present moment. She is not attempting to suggest alternate historical accounts. This is not because the distant past is obsolete or unimportant, but rather that the future is already being chased by the shadows raised in the here and now. Often praised as a post-modernist writer, she responds to the overarching cultural narratives concerning race, gender, and the people who exist simultaneously at the center and margin of their own communities.

The opening of "The Survivor" prepares the reader for an exploration of some of the deeper psychological problems undermining black romance. Jewel compares the intimate exchanges between the black couple, the physical and psychic trauma of domestic intimacy, to an invasive surgery where "the coal miner with the Cyclops eye dumped hunks of her, the best of her, ruby quartz and reeking down the drain" (100). The dream-like quality of this story becomes confusing at times because Jewel's narration slips between pain-induced euphoria and a type of post-surgical recall. Jewel is someone who has become used to being partially anesthetized. She begins the story with what seems to be an abortion (even though she starts out by identifying it as a tonsillectomy) and ends the narrative giving birth. In between there is no clear sense of chronology linking the narrative together. However, the beginning and end of "The Survivor" are worth pointing out because it is from out of these two symbolically contradictory moments that

Jewel formulates her understanding of gender roles. She explains this as scripts in which "wives were the ladies found tied to scuttled boats, at the bottom of the lake" (100); the commonness of violent disturbances becomes the pervasive element in Jewel's analysis of the sexism in her marriage. She continues by stating that, "Husbands were men with their heads bashed in, doused with alcohol, stuck under the driver's wheel, and shoved over the cliff" (100).[42] During Jewel's summation of what a marriage is, she remembers a punch to the face that she received after stabbing her husband's picture. For Jewel, it is this punch—one of many, she insinuates—that shows the black patriarchal phenomena that organizes everyday man-woman interactions. Most especially, this punch symbolizes the disruption of intimacy, and increased potential for violence. In these physical altercations she is subjected to the restriction imposed by both her marriage vows to her husband and a strong sense of racial loyalty.

It is not by chance that the moment that signals the true end to Jewel's relationship with her husband is the one when she is most embodies traditional values and feminine behavior. Jewel describes one scene in which Paul returns home gushing blood from his throat. The moment, as Jewel recounts, is so surreal that for a moment it is hard to tell if this is a memory or a hallucination. She faints at the entrance of her husband, though more pointedly at him clutching at the wound on his throat while gurgling. The return of his "gurgling" functions as signifier of the "nothing said but not forgotten," the price for her alignment with what has been

[42] As Stephanie Coontz explicitly examines in her article dealing with 1950s nostalgia the "American Family" (1999), "Wives routinely told pollsters that being disparaged or ignored by their husbands was a normal part of a happier-than-average marriage. Denial extended to other areas of life as well. In the early 1900s doctors refused to believe that the cases of gonorrhea and syphilis they saw in young girls could have been caused by sexual abuse. Instead, they reasoned, girls could get these diseases from toilet seats, a myth that terrified generations of mothers and daughters. In the 1950s, psychiatrists dismissed incest reports as Oedipal fantasies on the part of children. Spousal rape was legal throughout the period, and wife beating was not taken seriously by authorities. Much of what we now label child abuse was accepted as a normal part of parental discipline." While time is not clear-we know that Bambara works reflect a commitment to investigating intimacy as it was actually lived, thus the depiction of black marriage life explored in the work of Bambara is then not so hard to understand as it is connecting to a more common though still unacknowledged aspect of domestic life for women.

considered a traditional feminine virtue. Jewel's adherence to these gender virtues ultimately threatens her husband's life. The overly feminine side of Jewel becomes a wall "in his blood stream keeping him from coming to her with her, keeping him from her" (102). The sound of Paul's gurgling haunts Jewel, punctuating the silence between her and Paul ever since this moment. The gurgling becomes a symbol for the inability to express sentiment, either positive or negative; throughout the course of their relationship, this quietness has an effect on both Jewel and Paul.

As the narrative unravels, it seems fitting that Jewel has moments of "coming back to herself." In Jewel's post-traumatic and therefore fragmented memories of times with her husband, in her "coming back" the reader senses both mourning for and dislocation from the protection that maintaining traditional gender roles would normally provide. Jewel does not spurn marriage and family, but the cost of staying in her marriage on her individual self becomes increasingly higher. Jewel's narrative begins to resemble a feminine version of the "something" that takes over Sonny, as both are moved to action (or inaction) by demands unleashed from a repressed psyche. To expand, as is the case in "Talkin' Bout Sonny," the title character's physical absence from the narrative does not immediately register as significant. The murder is told retrospectively, we know that Sonny is in jail awaiting trial. What we come to understand about Sonny is presented indirectly; we are given a story about Sonny mediated through the voice of his closest friend, Delauney. Despite their closeness, Delauney still cannot fully articulate what it is that would force Sonny to murder his wife. It is only through Betty's inner monologues that the paradox of having deep emotional ties with a person who uses the very rhetoric of masculine identity to construct "woman" as the enemy is highlighted. The inherent combativeness of this construction is exactly what stands in the way of her relationship with

Delauney. The “something” that comes over Sonny may be the metaphoric switch from the unconscious to the conscious desire to protect himself from the emotional intrusion of a woman whom he has been conditioned to think of as dangerous to his selfhood.

Throughout “The Survivor,” Jewel struggles with trying to remain a figure of womanhood copied from traditional white middle-class values. It is fitting that Jewel is an actress and her husband a director, since she constantly tries to perform the role of the supportive woman that her husband desires. Because their last few months together were peppered with arguments over the child that Jewel is carrying--her husband wants to abort it, and she argues to keep it-- their would-be family was already off to a rocky start. Their baby adds extra tension to their fragile marriage, a child that Jewel observes “wasn’t in the script” (114). As an actress, Jewel has to be dedicated to delivering a performance that is not only plausible for an audience but that satisfies the demands of the director. In this case, Jewel’s husband placed physical demands on Jewel’s body that—because of her pregnancy— she could not withstand. At the mental level, Jewel’s occupation allows her to negotiate how she is subjected to objectifying gazes, a balance dependent upon maintaining distance from her surroundings and avoiding introspection into her own life. However, the pregnancy demands that she become more aware of herself and of the situation into which she will bring a child. The professional abstraction of sheer role play no longer satisfies her growing emotional needs. She grows frustrated with Paul’s inability to remain the man that had initially attracted her.

While Sonny might have deliberately murdered his wife to maintain his masculine identity, Jewel’s femininity depends on her being seen by an audience, and by Paul. Jewel’s dependence on Paul stifles her once she cannot accommodate his physical and emotional demands. She feels guilty because, until the moment when he actually walks through the door

with his throat slashed, she had been visualizing his metaphorical death as a part of the emotional struggle of trying to sustain their relationship. While Jewel's husband does not actually die that night, her fantasies of his murder implicate her just as much as the person who wielded the knife that slashed his throat. Jewel's guilt, combined with the attempted murder of her husband, becomes a marker in her failing relationship; her inability to respond to the sight of her husband gurgling could have cost him his life. Jewel knows, or at least suspects, that her husband is aware of her emotional withdrawal from their relationship. The stabbing of a pin into his photograph may have raised his suspicions about Jewel's fantasies, given his extreme reaction to the scene. Ultimately, what kills love in this relationship was the fact that Jewel had been "paying years of penance as he forgave piece by piece" (104). Jewel needed forgiveness not only for her inaction that night but also because she was guilty of wishing for his death in the first place. She feels as if she did not do enough to save him from his self-destructive tendencies, tendencies that had him struggling for life on their kitchen table after having his throat slashed. Both Sonny and Jewel have similar moments of coming to themselves with the blood of their significant other on their hands.

The night of the car crash Jewel left a rehearsal feeling "disgusted [;] she had ripped off the dress right on the spot, trying to explain about the tyranny of the cloth she'd been forced to wear as though it was the dressmaker's fault her spine was paralyzed" (109). The unexpected and unwanted pregnancy interferes not only with the production of the film that the couple was in the midst of making, but also with her husband's ability to direct her. Her pregnancy becomes a mechanism of resistance to his directives, allowing her to act out of character. Both literally and figuratively Jewel refuses to continue being silent and complacent for him, hence the extreme discomfort and disgust with the dress that is tailored to force her into resubmission. Or as Paul

suggested: “It was driving her crazier than she already was, and it was ruining his work” (109). Thus, Paul levels a final harsh criticism from which Jewel is not able to recover. Because of the guilt from her husband’s previous near-death experience, and her survival of the car accident that finally does end up killing him later on, the stress on Jewel’s body and psyche doubles.

What remains most pronounced in both “The Survivor” and in “Talkin’ Bout Sonny” is the impossibility of intimacy. The psychic pressure being built around gender roles creates irreparable damage to the black couple’s relationship. Often, they lose the ability to see one another as individuals rather than living extensions of popular rhetoric concerning men and women. Jewel confirms the dependence on gender roles to define the black couple with her statement that, “Matter of fact none of this was in the script they gave me” (114). Jewel’s marriage has only functioned as an extension of the racial-gender phenomenon that haunts Black intimacy. Although she was alone in love before Paul’s death, the guilt/shame that she feels as she prepares to give birth without him is immense. She was not supposed to have to contemplate what life would be like on her own, what it would be like to function independent of the scripts given by her husband. Jewel becomes like the head of a camera, panning in and out of focus as the narrative slips back and forth between her imagination and the events leading up to Paul’s death. The ten years they spent together is a collage of memories and sensations, most of which are ambiguous or outright unpleasant, but which in the wake of his death are driving her towards insanity—insanity because even when she hated her husband the most, she still loved him. The rigidity of gender roles and the trauma that they can do to a relationship are enforced by Paul’s final words to her. She will be reminded of her failure to become the expected vision of black femininity that he tried to capture in their last film until the time when she is able to overcome

his death. By the end of "The Survivor," it is clear that what Jewel really has survived is the loss of traditional expressions of love and the infiltration of violence into the romantic space.

The Revival of Intimacy in the Black Romance

The release of the Moynihan report contributed to the mid-1960s becoming the focal point for a gender war between black men and women. Issues of control and agency became an increasing danger of the pursuit of traditional ideas of intimacy. Women's autobiography and literary narratives published after 1970 often seemed to focus on how to reconcile intimacy and trust between black men and women.[43] Within these political narratives, black women shaped not only their responses to Black Nationalists' rhetoric but also to changes in their personal relationships with black men. A struggle exists in these narratives between individual female sexuality and ingrained ideas about romance. Romance, or at least the hope for intimacy, is often depicted as being antithetical to the development of a womanist/feminist consciousness. Yet, the black romance novel simultaneously developed as a testing ground for women's sexual agency during the height of women's literary development. While I will discuss more about the romance novel in the second chapter, I would like to shift the focus here towards a consideration of Bambara as a link between high modernist womanist literature and black popular women's fiction.

Thus Bambara's work, given both her literary and activist backgrounds, does not suggest that black romance is impossible or unsustainable in the "real world." Rather, her short stories

[43] To some degree, I think that this is a common thread in a lot of black women's writing coming out of this period. The most direct example of this is Elsie B. Washington (aka "Roslind Wells"), journalist and romance writer of *Entwined Destinies* (1980) and *Uncivil War: The Struggle Between Black Men and Women* (1996). The *Uncivil War* is a chronicling of the very publication gender war happening between black men and women. She focuses on black celebrity figures such as Mike Tyson and Denzel Washington, as polarized examples of how intimate black relationships have been framed by the rhetoric of America's obsession with black masculinity.

"Talkin' Bout Sonny" and "The Survivor" are examples of narratives primarily about the black couple and the state of black romance. Marriage and the ideas associated with a formal union do not help to resolve black women's feelings of gender oppression. In fact, regardless of the formal status of the couple, black relationships are shown to be almost pathological in the way that the process of psychosexualization has restricted their development. Works, like those produced by Bambara, implicitly suggest that the further we move into state-sanctioned or officially recognized couplings the more likely the attempt to establish a patriarchal order is shown to explode in various forms of violence against the self and domestic partners. Traditional gender roles become naturalized into the relationship; in the process marriage becomes another possible form of oppressive institutionalism and stagnation. In iconic films produced in the mid-1970s, such as *Coffy* (1973) and *Mahogany* (1975), the "modern" black romance is often depicted as ill-fated because of the emerging influence of black feminist/womanist politics. Peppered with expressions of disdain from Black and white conservatives, newspaper headlines printed throughout the 1980s and 90s also emphasized black romance as 'ill-destined.'[44] Black feminism was often cited as the primary cause for the declining health of the black relationship.

Black women who rejected rigid gender roles were publically linked to the downfall of the black family following the Civil Rights Movement. Still, far more troubling was the connection made between black women who rejected male power over women and the disdain for romance and intimacy. Despite the damage of estrangement and vilification by Moynihan,

[44] This sentiment was particularly politicized in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* (1968), and in the family values rhetoric surrounding welfare, and finally in the publication of a series of dating self-help books which centered on suturing the "wound" on romantic intimacy left by Black feminism. Also, see Shahrazad Ali's *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman (1989).*

the black romance novel developed and then flourished.[45] Toni Cade Bambara carved a space for herself between the development of the black romance novel and black women's political narratives. Bambara's short stories spoke not only to the interests of some black women with womanist/feminist political agendas but also to the cultural and sexual pragmatism that was a source of conflict for the fledgling second wave of white feminism. It is precisely because of her investigations into the intimacy issues surrounding the modern heterosexual black couple that Bambara's short stories are worth analyzing in conjunction with the growing tension between sexuality and gender politics. Her short stories, unlike the quote taken from her essay, balance the chastisement of black patriarchy with an abiding hope that intimacy can still be nurtured between black men and women. Romance does not have to be an oppressive or disempowering mechanism. Instead, romance can become a form of salvation for black men and women.

Harlequin, Mills and Boon, and Silhouette set the cultural standards when it comes to discussing the genre and plot convention of the American romance novel. However, since its inception in the 18th century, the romance novel has advanced a very Western and explicitly white middle-class view of courtship and the role of women. The standard plotline of these traditional romances until the mid-1980s was that a young woman overcomes her reluctance to marry by meeting the right man. A man's fitness was proven through his miraculous ability to rescue the heroine from the evil machinations of the world, a world in which she was duly unsuited for surviving alone.[46] In its early incarnation the romance plot would develop around

[45] Romance novels are a type of formulaic fiction. The formula, or a defining set of characteristics of a genre, is generally used to refer to fiction that is "highly standardized, repetitious literature" as well as being a "reassuring escape and entertainment" (Jensen 16).

[46] I am referring to both the common trope of the romance novel discussed by romance/mystery writer Jayne Anne Krentz in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*: *Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance* (1992) and to the modern contextualization of the romance novel after 1950 found in George Paizis's *Love and the Novel: The Poetics and Politics of Romantic Fiction* (1998).

the rightness of a man to partner with the heroine. The romance narrative depended on there being a weak and vulnerable young woman to be won, the woman being a new territory to be claimed and shaped to his liking. For these reasons the romance seemed an improbable genre for black women novelists to embrace. Yet, Toni Cade Bambara's "Talkin' Bout Sonny" and "The Survivor" anticipates the development of black romance narratives with regards to the post-Moynihan culture. Her exploration of sexual autonomy within intimate relationships was a precursor of one of the defining features of black romance published after 1970: the sexual and emotional growth of the heroine.

In both of Bambara's stories, women have been emotionally abandoned. Jewel, for example, was abandoned slowly over her ten-years of marriage. Paul's death was the official end to her flirtation with romance. On the other hand, Betty was never married to Delauney, though she was deeply invested in their relationship. Delauney's inability to be as emotionally vulnerable to Betty also creates a situation that mirrors Jewel's. Both women have been left in a form of unrequited love, as the truth is that they never stop loving their significant others despite the hurt and confusion that these men have caused them. Their unique position allows them the opportunity to wonder about the roles they play in their relationship, and to pursue a way to change those roles. Unlike the traditional narrative development of a romance plot, these questions are centered explicitly on female experiences with men. The gender script for the black female heroine during the late 1960s in African American sociopolitical rhetoric often stressed being both nurturing and supportive; in essence the idealized feminine partner was someone who was a mixture of both weakness and strength. However, it is these same qualities in both Betty and Jewel that are ultimately rejected by their significant others.

For example, in “Talkin’ Bout Sonny,” there is a sense that the central couple, Betty and Delauney, initially got together because of physical attraction, but later the narrative takes on the surrounding emotional depth and issues accompanying an unrequited or one-sided love. More precisely, the story tackles the feelings of being a woman alone in love. Betty not only stays with Delauney after coming to the seemingly arbitrary realization that he should not be the authority figure in her life but also because of a not-so-secret desire to understand the thin line that separates Delauney’s public and private posturing. Betty is neither a hapless girl seeking to be swept off her feet nor a prize to be forcibly taken. Rather, Betty wants to be an equal partner in her relationship with Delauney. Through her increasing involvement with Delauney, she comes to want more emotionally from him and their relationship. She is, however, still not certain about what role in their partnership. Put differently, she does not know what type of woman she needs to become so that Delauney will begin to see her as something more than a nagging annoyance. Her attempts to fit the roles expected of a supportive Black woman are met with both hostility and criticism from Delauney, the irony of which is that while Delauney has preconceptions of who Betty is and who she should be, he does not know what exactly he wants or needs from her. This does not escape her notice.

Her increasing annoyance with Delauney’s uncaring façade—exemplified early by Delauney’s refusal to acknowledge the change in Sonny’s behavior, and later by his implied suggestion that maybe Sonny needed to stab his wife---are a large part of Delauney’s refusal to break the intimacy of “the male bond” for a greater “romantic” intimacy with Betty. Even as Delauney’s silence works to maintain his friendship with Sonny, it ultimately forces Betty into an emotional corner. While Betty becomes slowly more assured of herself independent of Delauney, Delauney refuses to mature past the stereotypic notions of black women and the

possibilities that they bring to a relationship. This puts their relationships at a standstill but allows Betty to start to delve into the type of woman that she wants to be. The stagnation crisis with their intimacy also allows her the space to get comfortable with being her own woman first and foremost. It is a drastic change in the authoring of self that must occur in order for there to be a shot at forming true intimacy, because romantic intimacy is about sharing all of the self with your partner: hence why male estrangement and refusal to accept black women's attempts at self-construction have been so damaging to the formation of intimacy in relationships.

Intimacy has to be established for any relationship to work. Marriage does not alter this fact, as is demonstrated in the case of "The Survivor." Personal growth continues and can be motivated by drastic changes in the situation of the couple, whether it is a big cultural or political alteration or a minor decision. Paul's opposition to his wife's attempts to re-fashion herself—and become more than an object trapped between the audience and his camera—are met with a denial enforced with physical violence. As upset and confused with Betty's growth as Delauney may have been, or as sympathetic as he may have felt towards the plight of Sonny, he himself was never physically violent towards Betty. This difference in plot is a major gesture towards the possibility of strengthening black male-female bonds by repairing intimacy. In the case of "The Survivor," however, years of violence have eroded the possibility of reconciliation. Violence is a major element that cannot be overcome easily, and when added to a domestic situation where a woman is dependent on a man, physical violence creates intimate conflict like that first described by Jewel in the opening paragraph. A home becomes an uncomfortable and inhospitable place--and your loved one the enemy. While Betty and Delauney may be headed for a much needed breakup, they can become a couple again at a time when they have both matured more. This point, a chance at happiness after some emotional and social development, marks Bambara's

work as the point of departure for examining not only gender roles but the sustainability of black romance. Even as Bambara pinned stories, such as "The Survivor" where there is no chance of reconciliation between the couple, she still clings to the idea of black intimacy as a healing force.

The romantic elements in the African American romance genre are more than just an engagement with fantasies about the perfect relationship. Contemporary black romance novels are about creating pockets where there is still hope that notwithstanding the specific day-to-day challenges of the sociopolitical and social cultural historic trauma that continue to inform African American lives, positive and healthy relationships can still develop.[47] Gwendolyn Osborne attests to this general sense of optimism when she notes that:

> The reality of a dearth of available straight black men for straight black women is a disconcerting and painful issue before us. For a long time we have lived with the idea of the strong black woman, who by implication, can do without a romantic relationship if she must, but the truth is that she would rather not (Osborne 42).

In black women's literature emerging most directly out of 1965 there is a rather curious turn towards depicting the emotional and psychological development of black women through their ties and relationships to communities and interactions with black men. Critics, such as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, have painted this trend in black women's literary tradition as being part of "a dialectic of identity," in which black women:

> …speak/write in multiple voices—not all simultaneously or with equal weight, but with various and changing degrees of intensity, privileging one parole and then another. One discovers in these writers a kind of internal dialogue reflecting an intrasubjective engagement with the intersubjective aspects of self, a dialectic neither repressing difference nor, for that matter, privileging identity, but rather expressing engagement with the social aspects of self ("the other[s] in ourselves"). It is this subjective plurality (rather than the notion of the cohesive or fractured subject) that, finally, allows the black woman to become an expressive site for a dialectics/dialogics of identity and difference. [48]

[47] Gwendolyn Osborne's editorial, "How Black Romance—Novels, That Is---Came to Be," that appeared in the Black Issues Book Review, Jan/Feb 2002.

[48] This quote was pulled from Mae G. Henderson's essay "Speaking in Tongues." *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective.* Google books, 134.

Henderson's criticism of novels produced by black women in the immediate decade following 1965 imagines a community of writers that are consciously invested in writing as both a marginal subject and as a part of a growing community of female writers. My intervention into Henderson's argument is that aside from a fascination with the way that black female literature circumscribes through the act of conversation the performance of subjectivity, so too is it illustrative of a growing disconnect between the sexual revolution that emerges in connection with the Feminist movement, and how new understandings of the black female subject informs modern black relationships. On one level this is made clear through the repeated thematic representations and contrasts of women's roles within the black community pre and post-Civil Rights era. Another, and less thoroughly explored level where this is made clear, is in black women's literature through the conceit of the intimate relationship. Intimate relationships are the one place where the psychological ties of emotional and physical closeness (i.e. intimacy) as a result of shifting cultural values and attitudes, can be examined. Simply put, what Henderson describes as a "dialect of identity" is in fact a reckoning with new and old framings of black female sexuality, and with the insistence of sociological theories that maintain that the black couple (and by extension the black family unit) is inherently dysfunctional.

Since its emergence in the 1980s, the African American romance novel has remained both a strong and culturally relevant genre as it allows for various pathways and models of black masculinity and femininity. Also, it envisions a different "happily ever after," one that confronts both the interracial and intraracial trauma residing from the 1960s. Happy-endings are not necessary because there are no quick fixes to a gender war that has become so ingrained into the fabric of black culture that we continue to underestimate its impact on black relationships. Even with the great accomplishments and acknowledgements given to Bambara, as cultural and

literary critics, we have not yet plumbed the depth of her short stories, nor do we fully understand the broader thematic connections that her work makes.

Chapter 2: "1976-1986: Professional Black Women and the Hurdle of Success"

Romance and other genre novels are almost invisible in the critical scholarship on the African American novel. This oversight is particularly troubling given that a large percentage of book sales are represented by novels published in popular genres such as science fiction, mystery, and most important for this chapter, romance.[49] This is a critical oversight, because chronologically speaking, romance, or historical romance at least, has a long standing tradition in American fiction and in the African American cannon. Rita B. Dandridge, in her work *Black Women's Activism: Reading African American Women's Historical Romances (*2004) explained that since the 19th century black women have made literary contributions in the form of the historical romance. Dandridge posits that the black historical romance was the epicenter of black female activism taking shape throughout the mid-to-early 19th century. Examples of black women in historical romance would include narratives such as Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) and Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892). Both authors have captured the critical attention of major 20th-century African American literary critics and theorists such as Claudia Tate, Rafia Zafar, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Houston A. Baker. However, the continued contributions of the modern historical romance genre (this is chronologically delineated as romance novels set in a period prior to WWII but published from 1989 and onwards) and the contemporary romance novel (the term contemporary, as per the genre constraint, may be applied to any romance novel

[49] "The sale of romance novels, which reached a billion dollars last year, accounts for nearly half of all paperback sales in the United States—more than mysteries, science fiction, and Westerns combined. Industry estimates say African American consumers make up a third of that total," (Gwendolyn G. Osborne, *Black Issues* Book Review, July-August 1999).

that is set in a timeframe that is post-WWII) have remained underexplored terrain in the body of criticism surrounding the African American novel in general and the development of black women's literature specifically.

Contemporary romance fiction and its place within African American literature have been ignored by scholars until now. In this chapter, I seek to situate the late-1970s through mid-1980s as a definitive moment in which black feminist criticism and literary production engaged in a conversation on both the definition of the "new black feminine" and how this femininity is best represented. As such, I present two culturally important authors in the world of emerging black women's popular fiction. Both women have played a significant part in the development of the contemporary black romance novel. I suggest that the first romance novel, *Entwined Destinies* (1980), most explicitly articulates the black feminine subject by drawing upon the signals and tropes surrounding black respectability. Most notably as it pertains to the black feminine, this novel engages with the widespread idea that a woman's pursuit of a career is at odds with the development of real and stable black relationships.[50] In this context the author plays with the idea that the development of black feminist consciousness must lead to a wholesale rejection of intimacy. The second novel, *Adam and Eva* (1984), published just a few years later, goes a step forward, and embraces sensuality as a vital characteristic defining the new black feminine subject. To this end, both novels interpret the crisis surrounding the black relationship as one that is steeped within paradigms of gender performance that trouble

[50] Robert Hill, in *The Strength of Black Families* (1972) suggested that "Recent census data indicate that three-fifths of the women heading black families *work*, although over 60 percent of them are poor" (9). Black women, even when married, work more often than married white women, "about two-thirds" more likely to work (11). Labor is a major source for contextualizing the structure and mythologizing of the black family because even when both the husband and wife work they bring a combined salary that is less than their white counterparts, in 1969 married black couples brought in a median of $7,782. Compare this to what white couples with only one worker brought in, $8,450. Ultimately, Hill suggests that the black family has been demonized for being structured in ways that are foreign to the American idealization of the nuclear family but that nonetheless has a degree of adaptability in the performance of roles and given the economic situations that are reflected.

traditionally accepted narratives of black identity. The first contemporary black romance novel negotiates ideas of the black feminine and intimacy in the relationship crisis. Bluntly, the success of working class black women became positioned as a clear and present threat to black masculinity, and the idealization of the traditional patriarchal home. Black female success is represented as derailing the development of intimacy between the black couple.

On the Eve of the Contemporary Black Romance Novel

From a literary historical point of view, the trope of black female success as derailing black intimacy is tied to perceptions of black womanhood that are deeply rooted in popular culture. The production of romantic narratives occurs simultaneously with the rise of black female literary production and overlaps with the emergence of alternate mainstream feminist discourses. Black romance novels reference these cultural moments and produce a distinctly racialized format for black women to play with the varying agendas generated by intersectional identity. To be more specific, contemporary black romances juggle race, criminalization, stereotypes, sexism, and questions of what it means to be a 20th-century woman in the eyes of both the black community and American society at large. As Alice Walker suggested in a 1973 interview, "even black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a black family—or between a man and a women—is less important than one that has white people as a primary antagonist" (72).[51] While Walker is referring to the intraracial reception of black women's literary works more broadly throughout the 1980s, her remarks also register the general gap in the responses to white-focused versus black-focused texts. At the same moment the black female renaissance of the 1970s was marked by Toni Morrison's

[51] Alice Walker, *The World Has Changed* (2010) Google books.

ascendancy and Alice Walker's popularity, other black writers were creating texts that rivaled the books produced by Harlequin and Silhouette. In many ways, the contemporary black romance emerges at the nexus of these particular identity negotiations.

In the decade following, intimacy (this time as a part of a continuum of sexuality) remained a subject threaded within black feminist theory and criticism, and in the progression of black women's writing. As a cultural issue, the black relationship crisis connects to the wariness of black men on the issue of black female advancement. In this case, advancement is corroborated by the sharp increases in educational attainment, employment, and the degree of social power that black women seemed to garner in rapid succession during this decade. Only after careful examination of the relationship crisis in context, can the critical gaze then understand the significance of the literary intervention being made by black women into the conversation around intimacy in the form of the contemporary romance novel. This foray into literary pop cultural history is not without precedent. In the previous chapter I highlighted the ways in which black intimacy suffered from gendered-based psychological fracturing from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s.

Perhaps it was due to the diminishing view of women's rights as a natural part of the fight for racial equality represented in the mainstream Black Nationalist Movement, but Toni Cade Bambara engaged and reached different narrative conclusions on black relationships than some other high post-modernist black female writers.[52] In either case, Toni Cade Bambara's collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) opened the doorway for the development of a tradition of black women's writing that takes up the issue of achieving a balance between independence and community-and, more directly, insists that intimacy in the heterosexual black

[52] The fight for reproductive rights being one of, if not the major point, on which black men and women united in the pursuit of civil justice and emotional health.

relationship is still a real possibility and necessity for attaining that balance. Gloria Naylor's work is an interesting one to briefly contrast with Toni Cade Bambara's as both engage in the idea of black intimacy at the psychological level. Naylor frames intimacy as dangerous to the state of continued happiness for black women. Naylor's work relies on the premise of romantic intimacy as being inherently anti-womanist, while Bambara's work is preoccupied with the creation of intimacy that grows directly out of the specific rhetoric of solidarity and collective black consciousness of the 1970s that surrounds the moment in which she was writing.

In high black post-modernist female literature, the impossibility of the heterosexual black union continued to be a major theme well into the decade spanning from 1976-1986. Conceptually, high post-modernist black women's literature responds to an imbalance between gender expectation and actual romantic union with what seems to be a firm assuredness of the impossibility of *functional* and *loving* heterosexual black relationships. For example, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), like Toni Cade Bambara's *Gorilla, My Love* (1972), are texts that coalesce around the place of relationships in the African American community. The story of Lucielia Turner and Eugene, a young couple in the midst of fighting over the future of their relationship together, encounter a tragedy when their infant daughter—who was just beginning to toddle—chased a cockroach into an uncovered electric outlet with a fork, and ended up electrocuting herself to death. This comes after Eugene has already pressured Lucielia into aborting what would have been their second child together. Repeatedly, women are depicted as paying the ultimate price for sexual intimacy. In this case, Lucielia sacrifices both her daughter (unintentionally) and unborn child (intentionally) for a relationship that continues to only bring her deep pain. Unmoored by either community or family ties, Eugene signifies the risk of male flight in the black heterosexual union. With the death of their daughter he is finally

able to flee the community and the woman that he has envisioned as holding him back. In this context, romantic intimacy is negatively associated with black women's emotional health as the relationship carries a heavy premium to maintain.

As a concept, black intimacy becomes a critical focus that coincides with the emergence of black feminism as an accepted discourse in academia. Despite the motif of a troubled black couple, Bambara's work points to a general optimistic outlook on heterosexual black intimacy. The turn towards a narrative of crisis in regards to the black relationship continues to gain national traction within magazines and media outlets. The most surprising of these outlets are, of course, the ones that had a targeted interest in an African American readership. Moving into the decade spanning from 1976-1986 the optimism for an emotionally and physically healthy relationship between black men and women takes a sharp and bleak turn in literary production. At a similar moment, there arose a quieter, though no less persistent narrative of black intimacy as a site of healing. Whereas high post-modernist forms of black women's literature (such as Naylor's work) are embraced and largely identified with black feminist consciousness, popular black women's fiction remained under the critical radar. Bambara's work sets up what will become a long dialogue on intimacy taking place between popular black women's fiction and the black women's literature that receives critical praise and institutional recognition.

Thus, Toni Cade Bambara and her contemporaries, through their respective short fiction and novels, portrayed the motif of failing black intimacy. Bambara links the failure of intimacy directly with the post-Moynihan moment in which black women and the betterment of their position within American society was pushed onto the political backburner. Black women's writing exploded around intraracial tensions concerning the silence and denial of black women's pain. Thematically and artistically, these conversations set the stage for a literary movement that

has increasingly depicted intimacy as destructive. Arguably, this movement becomes more obvious in women's writing produced later on during the height of the 1980s. In this regard, the contemporary black romance continues to reflect a deep ambiguity towards intimacy.

African American communities at both the middle and working class levels were strongly in support of the family values rhetoric of the 1980s, coinciding with the emergence of the contemporary African American romance novel. Despite this, the interest in the black feminist movement continued to grow from grassroots community levels to the national, critical, and highly institutionalized world of academia. Although the so called "black relationship crisis" had dominated social and academic discussions since the 1960s, the Reagan era (1980-1992) populated with a mixture of black ascendancy and decline narratives, placed the construction of gender roles, family values, and sexuality in a stark light. Key figures, literary artists, and critical scholars such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and bell hooks are often explicitly cited as prime examples of how feminism had endangered the construction of black family values. While modernist craftswomen like Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, and Alice Walker presented romance and marriage in works like *The Bluest Eye*, *Corregidora*, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, their attitudes toward black heterosexual romance were less that of domestic bliss and more focused on the sometimes violent conflict, repressive cruelty, and moral elitist disdain of married couples. These portrayals reflected the earliest preoccupations with a black relationship crisis, but they were not the only versions of black marriage/romance that were circulating.

Contemporary romance, defined in terms of its chronological orientation, is applied to any novel where the focus is on the development of an intimate relationship set in a timeframe

that extends from any historical period taking place from post-WWII until now.[53] Contemporary black romance negotiates both the ideas of the black feminine and the relationship crisis in a modern American context.[54] During the late-1970s and early-1980s the romance industry underwent a major upheaval, the romance industry which had always been uniquely reliant on the demands of its consumer, saw an increased demand for a new heroine. This heroine, imagined largely in response to the spread of the feminist movement, should be someone more relatable to the average woman, more "worldly" in the sense that she is sexually experienced and not sheltered from the world around her. As a result, the heroine became older-late twenties instead of late teens, and the focus of the romance novel shifted away from anxiety over the loss of virginity and marriage. Instead, "there was an increased emphasis being placed on female sexual responsiveness and physical interaction between the hero and heroine" (Jensen 61). The plot lines also shifted towards what we might call a "problem" novel which, "range from personal troubles like unhappy childhoods or previous disastrous love affairs to social problems like political repression or ecological issues" (Jensen 64). This upheaval forced the romance industry to recognize "the modern woman" and in doing so allowed for the simultaneous rupture of voices at the margins of the romance industry's targeted audience. Minority and homosexual/lesbian romances broke the invisible wall of the publishing industry. Published by Dell under the Candlelight Romance imprint, penned under the name Rosalind Welles, journalist

[53] According to the RWA (Romance Writers of America) "women make up 91 percent of the romance readers," making it a genre centered on the desire of women to have fantasies represented that speak to their psychological and emotional needs.

[54] In 2012, romance novels generated 1.438 billion dollars, and are projected to generate at least 1.350 billion in 2013. The sheer numbers attest to the popularity of the romance genre. Currently, I have not been successful with finding information that looks exclusively at the buying and readership trends of African American (or other women of color). However, it is no stretch of the imagination to suggest that romance novels represent a major portion of annual literary sales, and a vast corner of the pop cultural market. In fact, it was reported as making up 16.7 percent in the *Business of Consumer Book Publishing* (2012).

Elsie B. Washington's *Entwined Destinies* (1980) is considered to be the first contemporary romance novel to feature a black couple.[55] Similarly, Sandra Kitt's *Adam and Eva* (1984) became the first romance novel, featuring a black couple, published under the Harlequin romance press.

Entwined Destinies and the Advent of the New Feminine

Harlequin and Candelight Romance were in the midst of a publishing battle over the new market potential represented by a minority audience at the start of the 1980s, when Rosalind Wells appeared. Rosalind Welles, known primarily for her efforts in journalism, would produce only one romance novel before her death on May 5, 2009. Hailed as the ur-text for the contemporary black romance novel, *Entwined Destinies* invokes the plot elements from the 19th century sentimental novel. For example, the protagonist (Kathy Goodwin) is orphaned at young age. The daughter of socialite parents (her father was an United States Department counselor/Ambassador stationed in South Africa), Kathy is set to inherent the trust fund left by her parents upon reaching the age of twenty-five. After the death of her parents, her unmarried and childless aunt temporarily takes care of her before sending her back to boarding school. Frankly, these elements of the heroine's background can be alienating for the modern reader, and do make getting into the novel a little challenging. Having been raised abroad, Kathy works as a lead investigative reporter for a magazine. When the novel begins she is on assignment in London (of all places) to cover a multinational oil conference. It is during the course of work that Kathy first encounters the hero of the novel, Lloyd.

[55] Technically speaking, despite its status as a romance novel then, in today's market this novel may be more readily classified as romantic women's fiction, a secondary field of writing that has been identified and subsequently defined by the Romance Writers of America as, "a commercial novel about a woman on the brink of life change and personal growth" (The Women's Fiction Chapter of the RWA). The key point between romance and romantic women's fiction is that the latter allows for the possibility that the romance will end tragically.

Work has a very important place within the moment of this novel's literary production and directly influences the way that the main characters interact. Work outside of the home, in addition to being the primary bread winners for their family, has been painted as most emblematic of black womanhood. Black women worked not only as educators, or domestics, but as field hands, factory workers, and farmers; positions that demanded physical strength and exposed women to the "rougher" and more "coarse" language and peccadilloes of working class men. By and large, the extreme demands of manual labor on a body and black women's historical position as a body that has constantly been deployed in harsh working conditions had de-feminized black women in the American eye. Indeed, the idea of the strong independent black woman had gained cultural saliency throughout the 1970s. One of the slow but ongoing changes to the positions available to black women after the 1980s was the increase in positions as librarians, doctors, lawyers, secretaries, professors, the financial security afforded by such a position, a position that seemed to have created a class of black women who could afford to raise children without male involvement or influence.[56] As these are traditionally positions that demand an intellectual rigor that women in general and black women in particular, were especially still thought to be incapable of possessing, the employment of black women in these forms of the public sector enforced the notion of the independence of black women as depending on the political and social failing of black men.[57] The slight national increases in black female

[56] Note the use of the qualifier "seemed." In "A Response to Inequality: Black Women, Racism, and Sexism" Diane K. Lewis explains the actual wage difference between black men and women or the years 1963, 1970, and 1974 as increasing from $1,739 to $2,334 by 1974. Thus, dollar for dollar, "black women earn[ed] 57 percent of the [total] income of black men in 1963 and 74 percent in 1974" (351). Furthermore, despite the educational strides of black women, "black men, as they have moved into the public sphere, have been more often found then women in the more prestigious and better-paid professions of medicine, law, science, and college teaching" (353).

[57] One of the more interesting side notes in Janice Peterson's "The Feminization of Poverty" was the realization that "Between 1969 and 1978, however, the number of poor families headed by males (male only and husband and wife families) dropped from 3.2 million to 2.6 million" (329). In their place female headed families arose and accounted for (roughly) one half of all poor families by 1983, an increase of 36 percent since the 1970s.

employment in white collar public service areas, in the wake of the black feminist movement, would continue to be the primary source of estrangement between black men and women.[58] This is because as black women were gaining and making strides, the prison complex saw a dramatic increase in black male incarceration. These two inverse phenomena have become coupled in the way that the relationship crisis is represented in recent popular news media.

One subtle and rather interesting note of the novel is that Kathy and Lloyd are people who have succeed in breaking racial and social barriers. In the course of this novel race is conspicuously absent from any point of personal reference. Neither of them has any financial worries nor do they encounter any racism. In short, the romance of Kathy and Lloyd is stripped of any of the systemic and institutional pressures that normally would also affect a black couple. In fact, very little about either Kathy or Lloyd as a couple or as individual people who are working in positions of creative and financial authority is constructed as being challenged, or even vaguely connected to any sort of unrest shaping the majority of black American possibility for social class ascendancy. By removing the systemic and economic pressures, the novel is able to draw attention to the pervasive gender based stereotyping that undermines black relationships.

While a definitive time-period is never quite established, they both are in career positions that are marked as being distinctly non-working class. Both characters are also in positions that call upon a linguistic ease and poise as they interact with dignitaries and representatives from the Dagombian village.[59] The Dagombian representatives are important as they signal the primary

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[58] Celebrated political Scientist, Martin Kilson's essay, "E. Franklin Frazier's Black Bourgeoisie Reconsidered explains that "by 1980 some 14 percent of black women held professional/technical jobs compared to 17 percent of white women, whereas 8 percent of black males held such jobs compared to 16 percent of employed white males" (121).

[59] Ghana is located in the Western part of Africa, sandwiched between the Côte d' lvoire and Toto. The Dagomba refers to an ethnic group located in the Northern region of Ghana.

point of interest for both Kathy and Lloyd. Kathy's eventual goal is to become a news correspondent covering the political and cultural development of Africa. Lloyd, in his position as oil executive, is deeply invested in retaining the contract for his company to begin drilling within the Dagombian village. The novel does remain what seems to be oddly politically conscious on the issues related to independence building within an African nation fighting against ill treatment while under apartheid, and hoping to profit from the educational subsidiaries that the oil company will channel back into the village.

As the first example of the contemporary African American romance novel, *Entwined Destinies* links the genre to the changing roles available for black women in professional settings. Almost from the opening line, the novel privileges the notion of work and women's contributions within a professional setting as a central theme. This theme is intricately woven around the development of Kathy and Lloyd's relationship. Kathy meets oil executive, Lloyd Craig while in the midst of her assignment. In traditional romance narrative fashion, the attraction between Kathy and Lloyd is expressed through the exchange of gazes. Kathy visually consumes Lloyd, creating a running catalog on the sharpness of his features and the deep baritone of his voice. But Kathy also sees what she explains repeatedly as "coldness" that seems to be specifically aimed at mocking her. It is not clear whether Lloyd's distaste is towards her personally or towards her choice of profession, Kathy works as a reporter for a magazine. The general distaste towards Kathy remains ambiguous until she approaches Lloyd with the intent of making him a potential contact for her article on the oil company, then it is clear that Lloyd has a low opinion of female reporters.

Another element that is especially striking about this novel is the pains that Rosalind Welles takes to present Lloyd as a source, or authority figure. Lloyd is presented as a man who

worked his way up through the company chain and has successfully been overseeing operations in various countries for his company. It is Lloyd who literally takes center stage in the press conference, becoming the focal point for the press. Kathy's request for a follow up interview, particularly her assertion that "you seem to be quite knowledgeable" (19), intentionally throws down the gauntlet as she implies that he may have simply been very well prepped behind the scenes by a representative who actually knows the ins and outs of the contract and its impact on the local African community. In turn, Lloyd quips with "*If* your editors give you the go-ahead, and *if* you continue to think me quite knowledgeable, by all means, give me a call" (19). Lloyd responds to her slight against his professional acumen with one of his own against hers. There is a sense that she has not had to struggle as much to make it in her profession as he has had to do in order to climb to the top in a business centered profession.

Even though Kathy seems to be overwhelmed at times by her response to Lloyd's charisma, she never actually seeks anything outside of a business relationship. At this point, rather than being a novel that expressly deals only with romance as a general topic, the romance shaping up at the center of this novel is the background to Kathy's pursuit of career development. Although Lloyd never follows up on her invitation to a professional meeting in which to discuss his role within the company and the impact of the proposed oil deal that he has been negotiating, she continues to participate in the editorial meetings for her magazine and to develop potential story ideas. It is during the investigative process of one such story that Kathy eventually encounters Lloyd again while in the midst of making contacts at a cultural gala with the Dagombian representatives.

While Kathy never comes right out and identifies herself as being a feminist, the label is stuck to her by many of the other characters because of her career-mindedness. An example of

this occurs when she is first introduced to the Dagombian representative, Joseph Olu. Upon hearing about the work that her father had done as an ambassador Joseph states that, "A diplomat's daughter, eh? So you are only masquerading as a journalist" (56). Of course, Kathy responds by taking him to task and simply stating that. "My father was a hard-working career officer for the United States Department of State. It was not a glamorous job. And I am a hard-working journalist, not masquerading as one" (56). Joseph repels Kathy by first only being initially interested in her for her physical beauty, and then by suggesting that she has a special depth or quality because she was the daughter of an ambassador. In both cases, she is being appraised by Joseph as someone potentially worthy of his amorous attentions only because of his shallow perceptions of her. It is clear to both the reader and Kathy that Joseph is meant to be the potential rival for Kathy's attention; however, given his first interactions with her, we also know that this will not come to any fruition.

Continuing with the narrative set up in which another character has the potential to interrupt the couple, Lloyd attends the gala with the goddaughter of the Dagombian kingdom, Evelyn Sese. As a secondary character Evelyn actually plays a really interesting role. Arguably, one could perhaps simply overlook the role that female competition plays in this novel as being a trite left over from the genre demands of American romance pre-feminist movement. However, both women represent a continuum of traditional views on black women and their marriageability. Having avoided the marriage that was arranged for her by her parents, Evelyn has been working as the secretary for the Dagombian Ambassador. After initially dismissing Kathy and her role as a professional woman by suggesting that she covers "recipes and the sort"… "Fashions, household hints…?" (64), Evelyn attempts to get public approval for her dismissal of Kathy and her career from their mutual point of interest, Lloyd. Kathy notes that,

"Evelyn smiled at Craig [Lloyd's last name] as though she was sharing a private joke with him" (64). For Evelyn, the seriousness with which Kathy invests in her career, her ambitious for further advancement in an area of journalism that was still predominately male orientated, is an automatic un-feminizing move. Evelyn is dismissive of Kathy from the moment that they meet precisely because she thinks that a serious career-orientated woman cannot possibly be interested in pursuing a relationship. Or, even if she was, men do not want a woman whose career is overly important to her, and whose earning potential allows her to have financial control over the household. Her attempt to involve Lloyd in the shaming of Kathy is meant to further enforce just how "unsuited" and "ill-equipped" Kathy is to be Lloyd's partner.

The competition between Evelyn and Kathy continues to evolve into a discussion on African versus Western centric understandings of the role of women. In a discussion with Kathy, Evelyn comments that "Thank goodness our women are still willing and happy to continue their long-held role as center of the family and society" (102). Working women, particularly those that are pursuing career paths that are not considered the type that a lady should be interested in, are read as abandoning the family. In Evelyn's specific reply is also the implication that African American women, in advancing into professional careers, have also abandoned or at least forgotten the essential desires for a stable family. In this sense, Evelyn is suggesting that African American women, such as Kathy, have actually forsaken the dream of marriage and family. As she goes on to say in response to Kathy's rebuttal that African women also work, "When they work, their children are beside them, or are swaddled on their backs. They are not coldly turned over to daycare centers" (103). Work outside the home is represented as being a source that can only alienate women from embracing their full feminine potential, and causes estrangement from their children as they are forced to often leave their children in the care of strangers. Even when

left with grandmothers or other close family members, Evelyn still views this as abandonment as the mother is not the primary caretaker for her child.

In Evelyn, Rosalind Welles has posited the primary arguments made by anti-black feminists both male and female. In Evelyn's statements is adoration for the supposedly "traditional" African roles of women and men, something that had accompanied a wave of Afrocentricism during the late 1970s to early 1980s. This wave is a counter discourse to the national attention garnered by black feminism. Of course, more often than not, the roles envisioned within Afrocentric discourse are built around a strict division of labor that has very little to do with the reality of a traditional African household. As Kathy's rebuttal would go on to explain, plenty of African women are also forced to work outside of the home. However, what both Evelyn as someone born with a high social standing in her village, and Kathy as someone born in the upper-middle class, fail to accurately comment upon is the similarity between the typical lower working class woman in both Africa and America.

Evelyn goes on to explain that her interest in Lloyd comes from his resemblance to men within her own village. She finds Lloyd attractive specifically because "He knows what it is for men to be masterful, to be leaders. And it is the woman's place to stand at his side. Not to struggle to stand in front of him" (104). Evelyn taps into one of the greatest inhibitors for the development of the black couple in contemporary America, the fear that black female advancement comes at a price to black male pride and employment possibilities. Evelyn advances the idea that pursuing career options wherein black women would be in position to take over the bulk of the financial responsibility for the household, is a direct challenge to black men's authority within the home and family structure. Evelyn is incapable of reimaging a world where the black family can continue to be supported and loved by both working parents.

Rosalind Welles' decision to have a foreign-born black woman advancing these antifeminist and anti-advancement accusations against African American women avoids the trap of recreating a novel that simply pits black men and women against one another. Chronologically, it is important to note that this novel is produced at a moment in which the idea of the black relationship as somehow imperiled by the development of feminist sensibilities is gaining cultural steam in America. It is crucial to the plot of the novel that Lloyd is not the one to make Kathy confront these arguments head on. Both Kathy and Lloyd are prideful and stubborn regarding their career aspirations, therefore, any relationship that either one enters into will automatically be derailed. In Kathy's case, this is something that has been emphasized as her seriousness towards her desired goal will not allow her to settle for a man who cannot also embrace that aspect of her. Nor should she.

Throughout her conversation with Evelyn, Kathy is increasingly disturbed not only by Evelyn's position on the issue of working women, but the insinuation that Lloyd is also of a similar stance. To conclude this scene, Evelyn explains to Kathy that "Our views —mine and Lloyd's—are identical. He says that he has had his fill of career-minded women, women who are always eager to run away from the husbands they worked so hard to capture" (104). Evelyn foregrounds a conversation on black relationships that is both timely and necessary but never actually is portrayed between the hero and the heroine directly. By placing this conversation in the context of female competition for a potential spouse, Rosalind Welles creates a novel that strikes at both the issues getting in the way of contemporary black relationships and simultaneously allows for the development of a relationship between two ideologically opposed people. In addition, she creates a dialogue between black women on both sides of the fence

regarding the place that feminism has in how they think about their daily lives, and exposes a lot of the ambiguity that black women felt around being identified with this particular label.

In a previous paragraph, it was mentioned that Kathy and Lloyd never actually have any discussions about their developing relationship, nor about what they both look for in a potential significant other. The closest that they come to broaching such a discussion between themselves is in the revealing of the marriage that their parents had. Lloyd finally reveals a bit about his dislike for career women:

> "My mother," he began earnestly but bitterly, "was a career woman. But, no, she wasn't just your ordinary working woman. She was a radio journalist—a pioneer in her day because she was the first black and the first woman to have a regular weekly show on the station, in addition to doing newscasts" (127).

This revelation is central for understanding Lloyd's interaction with working women such as Kathy. What follows swiftly after this tale is a narrative of a boy and his father forgotten by their wife/mother. In his accounting of his parent's marriage, Lloyd mentions his father's drafting into World War II, coming before he could complete his college degree in engineering, as the start of a series of events that would lead to him being stifled in his employment options. This is critical for understanding the wider schema undergirding the black male and female relationship crisis, because he directly connects her advancement with his father's decline in career viability. His father ends up as a civil servant in Philadelphia, while his mother was forced to find work to supplement the family income. His mother lands a job and works her way up from secretarial position at a radio station to being a news journalist. Lloyd harbored such a resentment against his mother's advancement that he admits "it has given me a certain….a certain harsh attitude towards career women" (127). Lloyd has developed an intense fear of

abandonment and is scared of black female advancement as it threatens not only his ego as the assumed provider in most patriarchal imaginings of heterosexual union, but what he perceives as his role as the levelheaded and logical one in the pairing. A career minded woman is one who is always "calculating," and in Lloyd's thinking, family is just one more roadblock in her plans for career conquest.

The vision of the relationship painted of his parent's marriage by Lloyd is one in which the family is destabilized by the career advancement of the mother.[60] Harkening back to Evelyn's conversation with Kathy, the mother is at the center of the family for Lloyd. For him, marriage is one in which a working woman is a threat to the very notion of family stability. Kathy eventually does respond to Lloyd with her statement that, "My mother never held a job, but she did have interests outside the family— interests that she put after me and my father" (129). Kathy was raised in a two-parent home and had parents who had a healthy marriage in which both partners supported each other. Kathy grew up with parents who were active inside and outside of the home and still able to provide her the comfort of a stable family. Despite her career ambitions, Kathy has never precluded the possibility of marriage as a part of her life plan. Rather her general reaction is that marriage and work are not mutually exclusive occurrences. Kathy advocates the idea that a marriage between two successful black people can be just as loving and fulfilling to both parties as a relationship in which the female partner limits her sphere of influence to the home and family.

As a first example of the African American romance genre, this novel has a lot of plot holes, lurid descriptions, and troubling moments. Leaving aside the complete and rather quick

[60] In terms of positioning, Lloyd seems to fall firmly within the system of belief espoused by revisionist family values. According to sociologist, Judith Stacey "Revisionist argue that the presence or absence of two married biological parents in the households is the central determinant of a child's welfare and thereby society's welfare" (55). Typically this argument is used to indicate why single motherhood and giving birth out of wedlock are two of the major issues that have socially retarded the progress of African American communities.

disappearance of the other potential love interests for both Kathy and Lloyd, I would now like to turn towards a consideration of the actual scenes of intimacy. Previously I mentioned that Rosalind Welles' writing borrowed a lot of its vocabulary and narrative construction from 19th century women's writing (as the American romance in general has). One quintessential trait of the hero is a darkness that is supposedly brought out at the height of his passions for the heroine. This darkness is typically expressed through the violence in language, and the threat of physical violence—usually in the form of rape—to the heroine's person. Preceding the first real moment of actual conversation between Kathy and Lloyd is a scene of tender lovemaking between the two. The physical closeness allows for Lloyd to finally let down his guard enough to allow Kathy to see the insecurities that continue to plague him in the wake of his parent's divorce, and cause the doubt that he has regarding his ability to cope with a relationship with an ambitious career woman such as Kathy.

What follows is one of the most awkward and perhaps unintentionally cold scenes in the novel. The intimate moment between the couple is interrupted by a phone call from the Dagombian representative, and chief rival for Kathy's attention, Joseph Olu. Kathy rushes out without a thought after hearing this rather traumatizing account of abandonment by Lloyd. This sets the prelude up for the next time that the two encounter one another, Lloyd takes Kathy home from a another social event and Kathy invites him. In her flat, Lloyd starts a heavy petting session in the living room. Kathy rejects his advance and Lloyd responds with, "I'm one of your new sources too. Like Olu! And this is how you get your news, isn't it?" (151). Lloyd's insinuation that career women use their sexuality as leveling tool against their male counterparts is further compounded by his additional statement that, ""It's no different for any of you women journalists, is it?" He gripped her tightly, and the bitterness of his voice hammered at her. "My

mother was the same! And it nearly killed my father"" (151). With that accusation left in the air, Lloyd grabs Kathy and carriers her to the bedroom. Only after he has stripped off her clothes and his does he really look at her face. Unlike the moment of tenderness shared between them earlier, there is no trace of pleasure or enjoyment on Kathy's face. Instead, he finds only shock, tears, and real emotional pain. Lloyd finally comes back to his senses but Kathy is unable to look at him, unable to reconcile "the way that the embraces that she had dreamed of turned brutal and hurtful with the night" (152). Lloyd is a man whose deep-seated feelings towards his mother and working women drive him to simultaneously push Kathy away and struggle to keep her by his side at the same time. If tenderness did not seem to be working then perhaps the adoption of forcefulness would. After all, as far as Lloyd has seen modeled in his parent's relationship, career women are strong minded and do not appreciate a "weak" man.

Lloyd's attempted rape of Kathy signals both the corruption of physical and psychological intimacy; in addition this scene establishes the rejection of the move towards a more positive embracement of sexuality by black women. The rape scene comes only after the couple has already engaged in an emotionally intimate sexual encounter, one abruptly punctuated with Kathy's errant shift away from Lloyd's building of post-coital intimacy. This scene was frankly disturbing, even more so because there is no resolution to it. Kathy and Lloyd never actually discuss his attempted rape. Instead, Kathy withdraws into her work until the time when her aunt comes to visit her in London. Kathy's aunt is the only person that Kathy discusses Lloyd's actions with, this is of course weeks afterwards. By this point, it is clear that Kathy has been traumatized and deeply upset by the event. Kathy reveals that while she does still have feelings for Lloyd, the event is too raw for her to try and reach out to him. Kathy's aunt encourages her to think about what she really wants, if her relationship with Lloyd is worth saving, and if so to

forgive him. Kathy is still weighing the issue when she has a close call involving a bomb; in the wake of this equally as traumatizing event, Kathy and Lloyd are quickly reconciled. As a reader, this is another major plot hole that makes one wonder why stage such a scene in the first place if there is no healing to be achieved? This scene suggests a growing connection between violence and sexuality that is often intermingled for black women in their personal relationships.

In the reading of *Entwined Destinies* one will find a curious arrangement that best embodies the line between popular fiction and the texts from authors that have become recognizable as the core of the black feminist cannon. The central tension of this novel, the development of a relationship between a black hero and heroine, engages with the idea of barrier between the sexes, one whose effects emerges most clearly in light of the Civil Rights movement. *Entwined Destinies* gesture towards these issues by placing relationship development in the context of professional advancement, and rejecting the idea that a woman must choose either or. However, this novel also rapidly aborts the conversation about the place of black female sexuality within the paradigm of new possibilities. Throughout most of this novel, Lloyd has been a curious physical absence, mostly surfacing in Kathy's thoughts in passing conjunction with social events. It is a decidedly odd move on the part of Rosalind Welles, nee Elsie B. Washington, to incorporate a successful black male hero who in many ways remains threatened by the prospect of losing his place as the traditional provider if he stands next to an equally successful black woman. The tension, perhaps because of its very nature, does not have a simple ending. In response to the attack by Lloyd, Kathy withdraws from the sense of pleasure and enjoyment that she used to find in her work. She shuts down emotionally, and decides to repress her feelings of violation in order to attain the marriage—implied but not depicted at the end of the novel— that she has been distantly hoping to achieve. For the first romance novel this is a

remarkably ambivalent narrative, but it is one that accurately reflects the tone towards black heterosexual relationships and black women concurrent with its moment of literary production.

Black Female Sexuality and the Romance Novel

The decade spanning from 1976-1986 marked a significant transformative period for women's fiction. Famed for its insistence on maintaining plots of thinly veiled rape and female sexual domination, the romance novel presented a major transformation in the way that female sexuality was being imagined. In her seminal work, *The Romance Revolution* (1987), Carol Thurston delves into the more detailed and divisive aspects of the contemporary romance. Thurston asserts that: "Much of the fiction for women, from the time of the medieval romance to the eighteenth-century seduction novel to the nineteenth-century women's text and continuing even in twentieth-century modern gothics, has been characterized by the schizoid portrayal of the female persona" (36). She traces the manifestation of this persona through regency, gothic, and erotic historical novels leading up to Harlequin as the cultural and literary model that best captures this duality. The overarching narrative of women's sexuality continues to be linked with the advent of the birth control pill. America slowly moved further away from believing in importance of maintaining virginity—and the pill ensured that women could exercise some control over when they had children instead of being at the mercy of their body's biology. These changes in sexual possibility lead to the demand for a more realistic heroine in romance literature. As the quote from the first ever Romance Writers of America Conference, in 1981, summarizes, "The heroines are older and more mature, the hero no longer gets his ultimate thrill from being first—and no more rape" (Thurston 46). The power of women as a shaping force in the romance genre became more evident as Harlequin, who by 1983 had not changed its patented

formula of borderline if not outright rape and sadomasochistic male-female relationships, saw a huge drop in sales and a return rate of over sixty percent in the total of purchased romance novels. Harlequin re-launched with the American Romance line, followed by the Temptation line in 1984. Yet one of the most significant changes to the romance industry, the one aspect in which Thurston mentions but does not delve into, is that for the first time the existence of the romance of nonwhite (and in some cases non heterosexual) couples were finally acknowledged as having a legitimate place in popular culture.

By the late 1970s waves of criticism repeatedly signaled out the current state of the black family as a prime example of the dangers of upsetting traditional power relations within the domestic home. Imbued within the mission of conservative politics to reclaim the American family from dysfunction, this collective ideology was known as "family values." Specifically, conservative proponents of family values rhetoric invoked the idea of the "welfare queen" as a woman who replaces the fiscal responsibility for any children that would normally be assumed by a legal and contractually binding marriage with a husband, with a dependence on state aid. The image of the welfare queen has sexual and racial valiances deeply rooted in antebellum depictions of the black female as "lascivious," "hot blooded," and sexually aggressive. In her work, "Embodied Public Policies: The Sexual Stereotyping of Black Women in the Design and Implementation of U.S. Policies," Serena Maurer explains the relationship between black female sexuality and the pathological model of interpretation. Maurer makes evident that "This mother is designated black through an assumed racialization of sexual and reproductive deviance."[61] Adding to Maurer's summarization of the image of the "welfare queen," is a complete racialization of female sexuality, in this case, black female sexuality as incompatible with a

[61] Mauer originally cites this from a 1998 study conducted by Thorton Dill, Baca Zinn and Patton.

patriarchal assertion of family. The very potential of a black woman's sexuality is deemed criminal and the unregulated births that may result out of any sexual liaison in which she engages is held in contempt of so-called "moral" society. The trope of the black welfare queen, which remains a highly charged political evocation, would continue to haunt the discourse emerging out of the black feminist movement during the 1980s.

In her seminal essay, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Female Sexuality," Black feminist and historian, Evelynn Hammonds suggested that, "public discourse on the sexuality of particular racial and ethnic groups is shaped by the processes that pathologize those groups" (259). Of course, Hammonds directly links this into a wider discursive silence surrounding black female sexuality (more explicitly queer black female sexuality). [62] Hammonds is tapping into the idea of "cultural dissemblance," what can be described as a conscious dissociation between the historically pathologized body and the "dirtiness" associated with being read as sexual. Hyperaware of public conduct, black female critics from 1976 through 1986, continued to deal with the stigma via association with the image of the black welfare queen. Ironically, sexuality has always been the taboo for black women wanting to enter into a serious dialogue over the issues pertaining to women's oppression as a series of events experienced upon the body. Indeed, the silence on black female sexuality would ultimately be broken in a wave of correspondence between the public, black feminist scholars, and black male scholars following the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas trial.[63] It could be argued that prior to the Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas

[62] See Darlene Clark Hine's 1989 essay, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Midwest."

[63] In 1991, following the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the United States Supreme Court, the accusation of sexual harassment filed privately by Anita Hill months prior to the official nomination, was leaked to the public. The court case was landmark in demonstrating all-encompassing cultural silence that engulfs black female sexuality. As Anita would go on to give description after description of the types of highly suggestive and inappropriate commentary that would be exchanged in private between herself and the accused, the one question that would continue to be repeated is "why did you continue to work for him?" Over and over the accounts surrounding both

case, black female writers and creative texts such as Gayl Jones with *Eva's Man* (1976) and Toni Morrison with *Sula* (1973) made explicit forays into the complex ideas and biases surrounding black female sexuality. Even in these texts, sexuality occurs in a microcosm in which racial and gender violence meet to create a nexus of bitterness and anger. Time and time again heroines are twisted and then led down a spiritually and psychologically unhealthy path, such as the case with Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* discussed in the introduction of the chapter. The advent of the contemporary black romance novel represents a break from what had become an almost culturally pathological reaction towards black intimacy and female sexuality.

The question of womanhood and sexual desire in a context that intersects with race demands attention be paid to the sexual fantasy and wish fulfillment that grew out of the attendant cultural realities. The reality for the African American woman before 1980 was that society both outside and inside black culture sought to subjugate her into a traditional conservative framework of domestic labor. This is in addition to shaming her for failing to meet the guidelines for femininity with its roots deeply indebted to the mid-19th century cult of true womanhood, a movement whose very definition was deliberately set up to exclude black women from ever being considered as "real" women. If the mainstream white feminist movement featured women who were rebelling against the idea of family and traditional marriage because they wanted sexual freedom and economic independence, then the rise of the black feminist movement can be seen as an attempt at redefining femininity. Black women were simultaneously fighting for the recognition of their multiple identities as women, a multiplicity that included being mothers, tomboys, fighters, feminine subjects, and for social and political representation

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the defensive examination of Anita's testimony and in the trail and the critical rebuttals that resulted in the wake of this case, suggest the underlying sense that Anita Hill must have been receiving some perverse pleasure out of exposing private exchanges in a highly public arena. Anita was framed as being a prime example of an "uppity" black woman on a power trip, and out for revenge against the black male.

on issues wherein these multiple subjectivities intersected. They wanted the right not only to speak for themselves but also to be respected as valuable individuals who could do more than "lie prone."[64] As black women are constantly defined by demeaning social frameworks, the definition of desire and womanhood for black women—on terms that they can accept—is a key component erupting at the heart of the contemporary black romance narrative.[65]

Rosalind Welles' *Entwined Destinies* introduces the idea of black sexual intimacy as a space where violence lurks as one of the possibilities affecting the relationship. However, Welles acknowledgement of this element of sexual experience has no room to grow into a productive discussion on intimacy. Instead, this moment—placed as it is near the end of the text—loses its true impact as it is dismissed by Kathy's rather abrupt forgiveness of the act. Because romance plays to women's fantasy, in this case, Kathy already has the career but would not mind being married to someone who is also equally settled in their life, to attain the fantasy she makes a choice. She chooses to be with Lloyd and trust that they will be able to work out all of their personal demons peacefully. Please keep in mind that this is considered to be the first contemporary black romance novel, and that it is written at the height of the negative backlash against black feminism. Welles's romance novel emerges at a moment when black women were still struggling to address intraracial issues, such as intimate partner assault and violence of a sexual nature, in private as well as in public. Welles inability to imagine a situation in which Kathy could address the attempted rape with Lloyd without inciting further violence or losing the possibility of a marriage is plausible given the cultural history at the moment of literary

[64] "The only position for women in SNCC is prone," is a now infamous quote from 1967 revealing the deep sexism that ran underneath the rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement first spoken by Stokely Carmichael at the height of the media's spotlight on black women's contribution to the Civil Rights movement.

[65] For a more explicit handling on these formations please see Lisa B. Thompson's *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (2009).

production. Published just four or five years later, Sandra Kitt's romance novel, *Adam and Eva* explores more of how a troubled relationship may begin to recover.

Sexual and Mental Health, Recovery in *Adam and Eva*

Sandra Kitt began her career as a trained graphic designer and illustrator and then became a collection specialist and managing director for the Richard S. Perkin Collection in Astronomy and Astrophysics at the American Museum of Natural History.[66] Unlike Rosalind Welles, Sandra Kitt has had a long and successful career in romance writing. Kitt once stated, "I love exploring our differences as men and women, our vulnerabilities, our strengths, how we become emotionally or sexually attracted, how we deal with conflict, and how we decided to connect with one special person" (78).[67] Kitt delves into the psychic chasm of intimacy formation itself. *Adam and Eva* is just one of three almost simultaneously submitted and published novels.[68] Beginning with the title alone, Kitt troubles the notion of an ideal couple untouched by the day-to-day struggle for communication between men and women.

In Kitt's *Adam and Eva*, the reader is introduced to the heroine, Eva Duncan. Eva, the legal secretary and law clerk at a law firm in New Jersey, goes on a six-week vacation in the Virgin Islands. While there she meets Adam Maxwell, a marine biologist and navy-employed civilian. Both characters are recovering from deeply traumatic pasts and emotional wounds.

[66] This fact comes from her biographic note mentioned on her author page, and also explains the interview that she conducted for AALBC.COM with Neil deGrasse Tyson, then Director of Hayden Planetarium, at the American Museum of Natural History.

[67] This exert was taken from an interview published by Paula Woods in her article "Isn't it Romantic?" See *Essence*, July 1987.

[68] Kitt explains this in the interview, "Sandra Kitt: A Matter of Hope," posted on *All About Romance: The Back Fence for Lovers of Romance Novels* website. The interview was conducted on September 11th, 2000. When she decided to publish she contacted Harlequin and submitted two manuscripts. The third manuscript, which would become *Second Chance at Love*, was eventually published by Doubleday.

Adam is still recovering from his divorce and the subsequent geographic distance between himself and his daughter, Diane. Meanwhile, Eva is quietly trying to recover from the extreme grief and depression that swamped her in the wake of having lost both her husband and daughter to a house fire. Eva meets Diane on the plane ride down to the Caribbean, and she becomes somewhat attached to Diane in that moment because she is around the same age and reminds her strongly of the daughter that she lost. Once Eva settles into the house that she is renting she discovers that she is on the same island as Diane and her father. Initially, both characters are emotionally unstable, and are avoiding serious romantic relationships. However, Diane, Adam's daughter, becomes the center point connecting both Eva and Adam. For better or worse, both heroine and hero are brought to the point of emotional recovery by the appearance of a new love interest.

Eva pays a lot of attention to bodies. She is self-conscious, for example, about how her body responds to Adam's masculine presence, so much so that she thinks, "only in that instant that Kevin, her husband, had been so much smaller a man" (20). The casual emphasis stressing both the seeming strength that radiates from Adam and also on the way that she herself is affected by his presence points to the possibility of a sexual lack in her marriage. In response Eva initially retreats from this new sexual awareness. However, even as Eva retreats from the threat of sexual reawakening, she is confronted with the very explicit and superficially sexual ongoing affair that Adam maintains with Island native Lavona Morris. As a character foil, Lavona highlights Eva's denial about her sexual attraction to Adam. Lavona's figure announces the cultural and imaginative preoccupation with the curvaceous and inherently sensual black female body. In Eva's description of Lavona as having a "very full and rounded chest straining against a red sleeveless blouse. A navy blue skirt hugged her supple hips and buttocks" (33) lies some

wistfulness. Because of her grief over the deaths of her husband and only child, Eva's depression has robbed her of any extra fat and curvature.

Just beginning to recover from her ongoing trauma, Eva is not simply agonizing over Lavona's closeness to Adam. Rather, she is envious because Lavona symbolizes the epitome of black female health. She constantly refers to Lavona's very presence as "womanly," indicating both the physical sensuality and the emotional vitality that is highly attractive to the opposite sex. It should carefully be explained here that what seems to be at play is a deliberate attempt to undermine the idea that a thin body is automatically indicative of health and sexual attractiveness. Eva's thinness, and thus the cause of her insecurity with her own sexual attractiveness, emerges out of a moment in which she was experiencing great emotional pain. Her body carries all of the memories associated with this trauma and thus she is unable to view her body as anything remotely attractive or feminine. The state of Eva's body conditions her to think of herself as "non-desirable" and therefore as "nonsexual." Adam represents a threat to this idea because he makes her aware that she is still a sexual being, a facet of herself that she has been attempting to bury with her husband.

As Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation* (1984) explains, "a significant change in contemporary romance formulas occurred in the early 1970s" (10). Unlike the persistent and demure protagonist that characterized a lot of the Victorian and early 1960s romantic fiction, the 1970s brought in a heroine who was able to actually enjoy experiencing sex. That these changes correspond to the sexual liberation movement is not incidental because "the formulas of the romance confront the concerns of many women in culture, and, as they do, their outlines partially illuminate women's socialization and experience" (11). Even though *Adam and Eva* is just five years removed from *Entwined Destinies*, there is a pronounced and clear evolutionary move

away from the sentimental themes that appear throughout *Entwined Destinies*. As was mentioned previously by Carol Thurston, beginning around 1984 there was a revolution in the development of character possibility. No longer constrained by a repressive dynamic in which female sexual desire must be denied or at least buried, Sandra Kitt's novel becomes an exploration into the reawakening of a woman from the sexual pause in the wake of her husband's death. Indeed, the reader is clued into the instantaneous sexual attraction that sparks between the heroine and the hero almost from the first meeting "She didn't realize that she was staring, awestruck by a face that was not exactly handsome, but certainly strong and masculine" (18). One may argue that this is simply evidence of one of the primary plot devices in the typical romance novel. However, her description of Adam's physicality ignites such a frenzied sexual passion within Eva that she compares it to the only other sexual experience that she has to pull from, her marriage with her now deceased husband. While no precise mention is made of how long it has been since the death of her husband and her meeting with Adam, (she does mention going to work as an attempt to escape the grief and sense of loss that she suffered) it has been at least two years since his passing.

Until now, the only relationship that Eva has had has been with her husband who Eva identified with a sense of "stability," "security," and a certain level of what seems to be predictability. In contrast, Adam represents the unknown, or for lack of a better term, the "dangerousness" of change and intimacy in a new romance. From a psychological perspective, one could argue that Adam presents a very real sense of danger to Eva's psyche because he shocks her into awareness of a life that persists in the wake of death. In this case his physicality forces her to make sense of her new feelings of sexual attraction. As she suggests, "he [referring to Adam] frightened her. She wasn't sure exactly how or why yet, but she knew that every time

he came within two feet of her, her knees began to shake and she felt her body tighten protectively" (38). Unconsciously, Eva's body is sending physical signals that alert Eva to her readiness for a new sexual relationship. Eva is reluctant to accept that she may be ready to move forward with her life, and she is uncomfortable with a male who comes across as aggressively as Adam does via his interactions with her up to this point.

Even as Eva is unsure around Adam, his aggression (or hyper masculine attitude) invites a new fantasy of intimacy in Eva. In her fantasy Eva pictures how the aggression of Adam would play out in the bedroom. She invokes an image of a woman "faceless, bodiless. She could only see the incredible virile, enticing potent form of the man. He would be all consuming, not holding anything back, demanding much" (39). As a trope, this type of fantasy has been commented upon by Tania Modelski in her work *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982). Modelski points to the connection between so-called "women's narratives" and changes in mass cultural production. She states that this type of fantasy can be understood as a moment in which "…the heroine of romance, as we shall see, turns against her better self, the part of her which feels anger at men, the critic turns against her own 'worse' self, the part of her that has not yet been 'liberated' from shameful fantasies" (4). Rather than turning against herself, Eva's fantasy depicts a blossoming into an individual capable of moving from being the object of the sexual male gaze to the gazer, the one with the power to define. Eva is responding to her own subconscious desires, not the projected desire of anyone else. As such, despite her earlier commentary concerning being "fearful" about Adam's hyper masculinity, she is actively imagining a partner capable of responding to her desires. As part of this, her attraction to Adam stems from her perception of his hyper masculinity as translating into inherent sexual capability.

Academic feminists have shown a resistance to acknowledging the contemporary romance novel as a part of the larger attempt to author and liberate the female self because romances directly tangle with the difficult and often contradictory experiences of intimacy for heterosexual women. Reflecting on why she was so apprehensive around Adam, Eva comments that "Kevin [her former husband] had not asked much of her in their physical relationship. She was simply supposed to be there when he needed her. She had always willingly complied but she did not have to do anything" (107). Eva had never been an active participant in the actual lovemaking, only a passive recipient. Although she describes it as "pleasant" and "nice," Eva very carefully points out that the act itself was centered on her partner's needs and desires. There was no sense that female pleasure or desire could actually enter into the conversation. With Adam, she fears that she will be forced to be an active participant. As she also states, "She had never known tantalizing passions or burning desire before" (108). She envisions a sexual encounter with Adam that will force her to be assertive and communicate exactly what it is that she wants sexually from him. Still not use to having that sort of power, Eva is timid about simply giving voice to what will help her to achieve intimate pleasure. This is quite a monumental moment.

Feminine sexual desire in romance novels prior to the 1970s took great pains to present an innocent heroine whose intimate needs could only be fulfilled through the model of masochism. Part of the perverse pleasure stems from being allowed to share in the violence of being pressured and sometimes forcibly indoctrinated into a heterosexual union. While by and large this thread has persisted into modern novels (Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series and E.L. James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* series being prime examples), the romance novel has steadily moved towards prompting a perspective on sexuality that is woman-centered. As such, instead of

a moment in which masochistic feminine desire is being highlighted, Eva's fantasy gestures towards a powerful act of liberation. This fantasy highlights what romance critic Kay Mussell has described as a change to the very way that the heroine responds to her own growing realization of sexuality. More readily, "sex scenes dramatize the heroine's acceptance of her repressed erotic impulses, which she can only acknowledge when the hero evokes her sexual feeling" (21).[69] Eva is in a sort of stasis caused by grief and loss. Adam's appearance into Eva's life makes her finally acknowledge firstly, that her sexual desires did not cease with the passing of her family. Secondly, she also realizes that developing feelings for and towards someone who is not her husband is normal.

The moment in which Eva's recovery is complete is announced by the removal of her wedding band. Until that moment Eva had been wearing her wedding band as a show of eternal faith to her deceased husband. As Eva removes the wedding band, "She looked at it long and hard. Tears blinded her vision, making the gold shimmer, before rolling down her cheeks" (94). The removal comes after she finally allows herself to acknowledge that she does not feel guilty or sorry after exchanging kisses with Adam. No longer hampered from moving on by any lingering feelings of commitment to her husband, Eva finally allows herself to breathe and experience pleasure. However, that is not to say that she is able to let go all at once. She still has some reservations concerning Adam and his attitude towards women in general. While she may be ready to move on he seems to continue to be stuck dealing with his past hurts. Most notably is what he deems to be a woman's ability to change swiftly from career orientated to family centered. Even though Adam is attracted to Eva he is still suspicious of her, and believes that she (and women in general) are attempting to trap him into the role of a traditional provider and

[69] See Kay Mussell's *Fantasy and Reconciliation* (1984).

father figure. Considering that he is also a man with a young female child, some of his sourness towards black women begins to create barriers in the emotional availability that he displays concerning his daughter. This may be a rather startling and interesting point to see appearing in fiction that bills itself as being romantic, but keep in mind that romance literature in and of itself is a study of intimate development. In a character such as Adam, Sandra Kitt gestures towards the rising sentiment of distrust between black men and women, and more obliquely she address the primary tension surrounding the widening rift between black men and women in light of the black feminist movement. Up until this moment I have been probing this novel in terms of its consideration of emerging black female sexuality, however, this novel also foregrounds the residual anger fostered in the wake of the 1970s that continued to hang over the black couple throughout the early 1980s. In this case, Adam's anxiety has to do with not knowing what role that he and other black men should have in a world were black women are seeking to both be career savvy and domestic caretakers.

Whereas *Entwined Destinies*' narrative force stems from the definitive lack of the hero's presence, *Adam and Eva* consistently makes the hero of the novel, Adam, a very real and physical masculine presence. As mentioned previously, Eva spends a lot of time rhapsodizing on the actual physicality of Adam as a man. In some respects, this is in sync with the interpretation offered by Anne Cranny-Francis's *Feminist Fiction* (1990) on the romance genre as a collective. Cranny-Francis argues that romance fiction is a "part of the process of negotiating new social meanings, a new understanding of female social roles. Romantic fiction might be part of the process of renegotiating female subjectivity, even if it also, at times, constructs and reinforces patriarchal discourse and bourgeois discourse of class" (187). While Eva's construction of her feminine self is tied into notions of a ladylike containment of sexual impulses, Adam's

construction of a masculine self is deeply entrenched in traditional notions of father as central provider. As Eva comes to understand her sexual self, Adam also goes on to confront his own issues with the vulnerability that undermines his hyper masculine self. Adam‘s distinctive voice announces the idea of relationships and intimacy as a series of traumatizing events for black male ego. In the context of the black romance novel, Cranny-Francis's argument does not attend to the particular culturally specific anxieties being aired in the African American romance that shape the way that women's fantasy and the imagined conversation on the development of intimacy plays out throughout the course of the novel. Adam's rather negative attitude towards Eva grows out of a sense that she (and by implication other black women) represent a threat to what is implied to be a shrinking space and appreciation for ambitious/career orientated black men.

As a narrative move, this is presented as a prime motivation for Adam's initial rejection of Eva's continued presence. In many ways Adam is keyed to respond to anything that he perceives as a slight made against him by any black woman with anger. Adam frequently vents what is at times a very blatant and misogynistic diatribe whenever he feels emotionally cornered by Eva. An example of this occurs after Eva has asked Adam to be gentler in how he responds to the needs of his ten-year old daughter. As his daughter only gets to see him for two weeks out of the year, she can be rather disruptive when she sees his interactions with Lavona. Eva assures Adam that this is not because of any fatherly inability on his part, but rather because his daughter, Diane, just needs the constant reassurance that when they meet his attention is primarily directed at her. Adam's response to Eva's comment is to complain about her instinctive drive to create what he calls "domesticity." Domesticity, for Adam, represents the greatest trap that a career-minded man can fall into because it shifts his attention away from attaining

advancement and directs it into securing a place within the home. Underlying much of the tension that Adam has with Eva is that she is an independent woman but still emotionally approachable and caring, what he reads as feminine; the feminine aspects of her character make Adam uncomfortable because it reminds him of his ex-wife. For Adam, this resemblance carries over in Eva's seeming ability to "unman" him in matters concerning family and homemaking. Relationships, or deep emotional entanglement means leaving himself open for potential emotional manipulation by his female partner. Adam's resistance to Eva is underscored by a larger paranoia towards intimacy.

Adam and Eva brings explicit attention to the trust issues and abandonment fears that black men may be suffering from and the effect that this has on their ability to connect. Adam specifically goes on to suggest that "I really doubt that women want to be independent. You'll play at being alone and running your lives, but the bottom line is you're all looking for someone to take care of you" (85). Adam has already suffered through one failed marriage, a marriage in which he felt that his wife had manipulated him by pretending to support his dreams of doing marine-based research but then pressuring him to settle down and commit to a job that will keep him within reach of his family and her. As Adam continues to argue with Eva about Diane's care he says "When the novelty wears off and you find you don't want to be alone, that you want a home and children" (85)…."And then when the man's not everything you want him to be, you give up on him. Make him leave…go looking for someone else" (85).

Anne Cranny-Smith and Tania Modelski would point to this example as a moment in which the obviously misogynistic and demeaning treatment of the hero is meant to be overlooked by the heroine. One of the major blind spots in how they engage with the contemporary romance novel is that they treat it as a stagnant genre that continues around the trope of marriage as a

place in which male boorish behavior is tolerated and then ultimately reformed by the heroine. Admittedly, this has been a prominent trope in heterosexual romance novels that are focused on an imagined couple that is Caucasian. His statement and actions are somewhat understandable (not forgivable) because they are coming directly out of his experience with a previous hurt. If anything, this moment in black romance stresses how men can also carry corrosive emotional baggage into new potential relationships.

Unlike Rosalind Wells' depiction of Lloyd, Sandra Kitt's development of Adam's psyche avoids delving into Freudian territory by blaming bad behavior on the absence of the mother figure. In fact, Adam embraces the idea of a working or career-minded woman. His wife was initially supposed to be pursuing her own career in biology. The problem with women that Adam has develops when he thought he had found a partner who understood the equally deep investment that he had in his own career aims. When the ambition of his wife shifted from career advancement to family, Adam was unpleasantly surprised by what he saw as a rather abrupt change in his wife. It seemed abrupt to him precisely because despite having changed her mind while they were still dating, she never informed Adam until after they married and he had reached a pivotal moment in the pursuit of his dream career. As a character Adam is different from the Harlequinesque romantic hero, the ones who often seem set and unwilling to compromise. The birth of their daughter was Adam's attempt to provide his wife with the family that she had finally informed him that she wanted from him. Adam is not resentful of a woman choosing to work. Instead, the rapid change in his wife's life goals after getting married, the movement from a career focus to family, seemed to him like a premeditated trap. His partner's goals had changed and rather than letting him know she had forced him into a place where he had to make a decision, choose either work of their family. Unwilling to give up on his research

and to commit to a job in which he would routinely be unhappy, Adam loses his wife when she files for divorce. His biting replies to Eva's often gently worded advice underscores Adam's vindictiveness and disgust towards what he perceives as women who pretend to be interested in their careers but really pursue work in order to meet a potential partner to take care of them. Adam speaks in part from the position of someone who has been greatly burned by his partner's shift in ambitions, but also as a man who uses one example of a failed relationship as the primary barometer for all of his future interactions with women. This effects the development of an intimate relationship between the couple in myriad number of ways.

Black intimacy suffers from gendered psychological fracturing arising out of a specific fear of masculine emasculation. This fear became an overt part of the rhetoric, in addition to culture around much of the activism that was taking place from the mid-1960s until the mid-1970s. Black feminism cohered around the overwhelming national silence across public and internal politics that degraded and oppressed black women's spiritual, mental, and emotional growth. In the decade following, intimacy remains a major subject threaded within black feminist theory and criticism, and in the progression of black women's writing. As a cultural issue, the black relationship crisis usually is directly connected with cautiousness on the part of black men on issues affecting black female advancement. Narratives of black female advancement inspired great distrust as it is psychologically keyed into a deeper fear of black male abandonment. In this case, advancement is corroborated with the sharp increases in educational attainment, employment, and the degree of social power that black women seemed to garner in rapid succession during this decade. *Ebony*, and *Essence* are prime examples of how the national idea of the imperiled black romance was presented in the period spanning from 1976 to 1986 for cultural consumption, as both commercial magazines published recurrent articles

during this time frame probing the psychological break between men and women, in the wake of the black feminist movement. Both popular publications seem to be pointing towards the black feminist movement as the key trigger in the rift between black men and women. Explicitly, they repeatedly invoke a conservative discourse around black womanhood and female sexuality, in addition to repeated ads that play on a nostalgia for a traditional family structure from the 1960s until the 1980s. The focus of the articles published during this timeframe dealt with maintaining the black marriage. Black feminism continued to be signaled out as a key player in the movement of modern black relationships towards the state of pathological dysfunction.

Rather consciously, black heroines in contemporary romance novels are often coded in ways that are meant to completely obliterate the public conception of the modern black women that emerged out of the conservative family values rhetoric that spanned throughout the 1960s and 1980s. Similarly, romance narratives present heroes who consistently challenge the notion of the black male as a childish or an emasculated figure. The major connector for both *Entwined Destinies* and *Adam and Eva* is that they insist on black male heroes who are presented as commanding and outwardly self-assured individuals. Men who have accomplished much professionally, their charm, presence, and sheer abundance of confidence are the initial draw for their female companions. However, underneath that confidence remains someone who has been emotionally unwound by the women who were closest to them before eventually being abandoned. For both of these characters trust is a commodity that, initially, they simply do not have.

Intimacy requires both trust and communication in-order to flourish. When the tools necessary for developing intimacy fail, the potential for violence rises to the foreground. As the first example of the black contemporary romance novel, Rosalind Welles' *Entwined Destinies*

makes explicit the connection between a failure in intimacy and the potential rupture of violence. In the case of Lloyd, that violence is explicitly coupled with the tenderest expression of affection between two people in an intimate relationship, the act of making love. Rather than tenderness sex becomes a mechanism for expressing deep psychological pain and imparting fear. However, *Entwined Destinies* suggests that intimacy can be established by confronting the root cause of distrust and shows that the black relationship is still salvageable. Real intimacy can be achieved with a lot of effort and honest conversation between the two people involved. With her vacation period over, Eva returns to her home back in the United States. Having left Adam back in the Caribbean with little expectation that she would ever see him again, she is pleasantly surprised when he tracks her down. Adam and Eva discuss the possible future of a relationship between them, the sacrifices that each would be making, and reify their commitment to maintaining a healthy and whole relationship.

The romance novel, recalling Toni Cade Bambara's fiction, preserves some of the optimism regarding black romance and intimacy that continues into the 1990s. African American romance presses, Kimani and Arabesque respectively, exploded in mid-1990s. They went on to launch various imprints that published novels aimed at more specialized markets (for example Christian, erotica, historical, and interracial). As the popular market for African American novels expanded, so too did the complexity of female characters and their relationships and understanding of themselves within public and private circles. With more women breaking through the career glass ceilings, class status became more important. To expand, class status and level of attainment became more important for understanding barriers to black intimacy in the 1990s.

Chapter 3: The Upwardly Mobile Woman: Success in Black Chick Lit throughout the 1990s

In the previous chapter, I explored the rise of the contemporary black romance novel and the intersecting conversations occurring between popular fiction and black feminism. Affected by these conversations, intimacy remains fraught with volatile tension, and black women are made to feel as if the only way to grasp happiness is by making a hard decision between career success and romance. As an example of this, consider *Ebony* and *Essence*, two magazines that have long played pivotal roles in transmitting black feminine cultural values and aesthetics. *Ebony* and *Essence* underwent a subtle change as they ventured away from their dubious if not completely negative views on the need for feminism within the black community, to accepting and recognizing the increased roles as leaders that black women held within the community and also within the entrepreneurial business, medical, and legal sectors.[70] The transition is worth noting because the readership primed and cultivated by *Ebony* and *Essence* branched out into a reading area that has since become known as black chick lit. This was a readership of women that wanted to see stories that spoke to their particular situations and experiences with black intimacy in light of attaining the post-Civil Rights era requirements for a successful relationship, upwards class mobility. Class and new definitions of the black feminine would continue to collide.

> *When you look at the interpersonal relationship between black men and women there certainly is that additional layer of success, and is it necessary that you are going to find an African American man that is on the same level as you are, and does that determine whether or not your relationship will be successful? So, the readers of Essence magazine have told us that they are continuing to move forward in their careers but are having*

[70] Marilyn Milloy's article, "The New Feminism," though published in the September 1997 edition of *Essence* discuss what has been a growing change in the attitude of black women towards the dual conversations of racial and gender biases—that in the 1990s finally signaled a move away from the posturing of the 1960s, which reduced domestic violence, rape, and even incest in black relationships to systemic problems of oppression.

> *difficulty finding someone that may necessarily be on their same professional level but that is certainly not stopping them from pursuing relationships*.[71]

Following on the hills of the contemporary romance novel, black chick lit questioned the conception of class compatibility as being the paramount determiner of intimacy and relationship stability. Unlike the Harlequin Romance, the outcome longed for by the protagonist of a chick lit novel is not necessarily a companionate marriage. Instead, dating and courtship rituals are important only so far as they allow the female protagonist to reckon with her subconscious motivations and social limiters that are self-imposed. In *Chick Lit and Post-feminism* (2011) Stephanie Harzewski defined the major characteristic of the chick lit genre as "a first person narrative of a twenty something-or thirty something, white, middle- or upper-middle class, never married, childless, Anglo or American, urban, college educated, heterosexual career woman engaged in a seriocomic romantic quest or dating spree" (29). Clearly distinguishable from romance or more "serious" literature by the cover designs, chick lit titles often feature a close up of makeup, clothes, high heeled shoes, or purses—all markers of a woman who participates within the world of capitalism but is not removed from her sense of traditional femininity. While the 1990s have been iconized for its influence on popular culture, this particular period of feminism is an intrinsic element for understanding changes in popular black women's fictions in the 1990s. I contend that much of the chick lit produced by black women, at least immediately following on the heels of the explosion of black romance during the late 1980s to early 1990s, reveals the anxieties of a new generation of women seeking to define themselves within a

[71] Angela Burt-Murray, then *Essence* editor-in-chief, CNN interview.

narrative of third wave feminine subjectivity, and needing to understand their romantic relationships outside of the limited vision of middle class romance.[72]

Terry McMillan's literary career dovetails with the growing need that the *Essence* and *Ebony* readership had to see successful women struggling with romance. McMillan's first novels attempted to capture her own struggle as a woman over thirty with sustaining a relationship. McMillan and many other writers who came of age in the 1960s grew up seeing embittered and or broken black relationships. This has resulted in a subjectivity that continued to shape the way they depict intimacy in their novels. As she recounts of her own parent's marriage, "When I was younger, all I thought about was the fact that he had no right to put his hands on my mother" (24).[73] Seeing the arguments between her mother and father later influenced McMillan's decision to leave the biological father of her child when he first offered her physical violence.[74] Of course, McMillan is known for her rather provocative comments, so this could have been a legitimate sentiment that she felt at the time. Or, it could also have been meant in a more vindictive manner. In whatever case, by far the more compelling argument of the interview

[72] Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* were both on the New York Times Best seller list at the same moment as Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*. In an interview published in the October 1992 edition of *Essence* with Audrey Edwards, McMillan revealed that "Maybe I haven't won a Pulitzer Prize or a National Book Award, but I'm serious about my craft" (118). Apparently, neither Morrison nor Walker congratulated her for achieving best seller status as McMillan went on to state that, "I've dropped them notes over the years congratulating them when their books have come out, and it hurts that they've never done the same for me" (118). In this quote McMillan seems to be suggesting that literary representation and subject matter is one point of tension in terms of artistic recognition among black female writers in particular, that reflects nuances of generational understandings of black feminine identity.

[73] "Black America's Hottest Novelist: Terry McMillan Exhales and Inhales in a Revealing Interview," by Laura B. Randolph. Published in *Ebony*, May 1993, 23-28.

[74] McMillan professes to have still been very much in love with her ex-husband. Soon after the publication and then success of *Disappearing Acts* (1989) McMillan was taken to court by her then estranged ex on account of libel. The court case suggested that Franklin, the main male hero of *Disappearing Acts*, was based off of him. In the same interview previously mentioned, McMillan suggested that her ex-husband was actually responding to a correspondence that she had sent in which she stated, "Look I really don't ask you for anything and out of common decency the least you could do is acknowledge your child at Christmas" (Randolph, 28). Thus, McMillan ascribes the lawsuit as being the result of anger at her for producing a successfully selling work and then having the gall to request that he continue his responsibilities for his son.

conducted with McMillan and picked up in her narratives, has to do with female success as a precursor to a doomed relationship. In this chapter I focus on Terry McMillan's works as novels that pioneered third wave subjectivity in black female chick lit.

Chick Lit and its Roots in Third Wave Feminism

The third wave of feminism, defined in *The F Word: Feminism in Jeopardy* (2004) as centered on the belief that "real social change is achieved indirectly through cultural action, or simply carried out through pop-culture twists and transformations, instead of through an overly political, electoral, and legislative agenda" (88).[75] Third wave feminism is distinguishable from the feminism of the second wave because of its embracement of collective identities and the distinctive lack of a coherent political movement. Instead, closely connected to the "power" or "capitalist feminism" that emerged in the 1980s, this form of feminism has deep connection with materialism and aesthetics.[76] It promoted female empowerment (as opposed to repeating a narrative solely of female victimization) a change prompted by the fact that the late 1980s was a time in which more women began to break through the glass barrier and into top positions. As a cornerstone, the move towards female empowerment embraced a subjectivity in which class could finally be recognized as a significant contributing factor in determining the chances for a successful relationship. The movement into the arena of chick literature as a new genre by black

[75] This was taken from Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner's *The F Word: Femininsm in Jeopardy* (2004).

[76] Cris Mazza in her article, "The Perversion of a Genre," discusses some of the major conceptual changes that happened to chick lit after the publication of her and Jeffrey Deshell's two anthologies *Chick Lit Post-Feminist Fiction* (1995) and *Chick Lit: No Chic Vics, On the Edge, New Women's Fiction Anthology* (1996). The original brand of literature known as chick lit was decidedly darker in its use of humor and in the themes in which it touched upon. Mazza suggests that the glam and materialistic vibe now associated with chick lit erupted in the genre through the British book industry. However, in contextualizing the moment of production, my argument is that the genre explosion also owes a great deal to the idea of female empowerment through financial independence.

women's popular fiction in the midst of the 1990s indicated a growing awareness of class and materiality as taking the place of true intimate development.

Materiality, both as a symbol of the internalized success narrative and as signifier of the expectation that accompanies the move into the professional working class, continues to play a major role in black chick lit. As noted by Lisa A. Guerrero, "Much of the wild popularity of these novels can be traced to the reality of readers—young women who, after reaping the benefits of the opportunities secured for them by the fights waged during the preceding decades, found themselves in the virtually uncharted territory of being professionally powerful and relationally adrift" (89).[77] Chick lit speaks to a generation of women who grew up defining themselves more-and-more by their class status, a status which could objectively be evaluated by their material possessions. Black women were no less affected by this turn towards class identification. For women in their early and mid-twenties these material objects appealed not only to those who were already aligned to particular narratives of class aspiration—chiefly through hard work, education, and owning some form of business or property—but also to women who were struggling to make it out of the lower/poor working class. Thus, in these novels the shoe is not just a shoe; it is a symbol of mobility and financial independence. In both subgenres marriage and even courtship are the byproducts of the attempt to maintain independence—often the romance plot is set at the exact moment in which the protagonists are on the edge of being engulfed by their obsessions with materiality and financial gain. Thus, chick literature as an emerging popular genre for black female writers must be understood in part as a growing awareness of class consciousness.

[77] The quotes mentioned above are taken from Guerrero's article, "Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves." *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young.

In addition to the class components of the chick lit genre, the protagonists of chick lit often go through a period of "serial dating." The phenomena of serial dating in chick lit advances a notion that suggests that dating without the ultimate intent of marriage is a necessary moment in women's lives that will help them emotionally develop. Chick lit, bolstered by third wave feminism's focus on inclusiveness, sexual positivity, and rhetoric of female empowerment, remains a genre that is primarily recognized and critically investigated as a narrative that exclusively (as is the case with Harzewski) engages with white female sensibilities. This may partly be because of the visibility given whiteness by the bulk of authors within the fictive world created in these stories, resulting in what Deborah Siegel describes as "modern day Elizabeth Bennetts seek[ing] their Mr. Darcy's while chronicling in messy detail their sexual exploits, foibles, and dissolution of romantic ideals" (154).[78] Siegel's point is illustrative of the way that women of color and the lower class continue to be erased within a wider conception of feminism. Therefore, another defining characteristic to keep in mind about third wave feminism and the intersection with chick lit is the cultural movement towards reclaiming feminine sexual positivity—a position that moved to acknowledge the erotic self as a natural and healthy aspect of identity— without the guilt of what has become known as "slut shaming." The acceptance of serial dating and the accompanying accumulation of female sexual experience signaled a major cultural shift in attitude towards the idea of women and their roles in relationships. Women were no longer simple objects affected by the movement and interactions of men; instead, they were now being viewed as active "players" in the dating/relationship game.[79] This was an expression of feminine power that black women were not able to fully embrace, because of both the

[78] See Deborah Siegel's *Sisterhood Interrupted: From Radical Women to GRRLS Gone Wild* (2007).

[79] I am suggesting that there is a break away from the model of romantic/psychological interactions described by Eve Sedgwick in her book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

repressive silence on black female sexuality and through years of teaching that the experience of female pleasure was somehow sinful, until the early-1990s.

The third wave of feminism was a "more sexually and racially diverse movement than its predecessors" (90), meaning that it was a moment in which the racial division that had marked the second wave of feminism finally started to collapse as feminism became a slightly more universalized concept. Class, regardless of race, becomes a central point of identification. In terms of the development of the African American novel this leads to a bifurcation along class status that results in the emergence of both chick lit and ghetto fiction. This chapter studies chick lit and the impressions left by early black female writers of the genre. While it is well known that chick lit was once viewed as "revolutionary" feminist literature, there has not been a lot of consideration for the presence of non-white voices in shaping this new feminine face. As an example of this, even though Deborah Siegel critiques what she calls the "sexual bravado" of third wave feminist, her definition of feminist continues to prioritize white womanhood. Without giving consideration for the way that women of color both domestically and abroad have also been participants in third wave feminism and chick lit as extension of this participation, both Harzewski and Siegel remain willfully blind to why and how nonwhite women would chose to engage with chick lit. Siegel does this by obscuring the fact that women of color also participate in the third wave and the consumerist culture in which third wave feminism is deeply entrenched. Meanwhile, Harzewski completely focuses on a literary history of chick lit that ignores the presence of any nonwhite author at the time of the genre's emergence. (For example, the insistence that chick lit emerged during the mid-1990s with *Bridget Jones' Diary* (1996) because of the explosion in the televised form of chick lit that it sparked, completely effaces literary work authored prior to *Bridget Jones Diary* taking up similar themes and topics of the working

woman. In which case, work produced by both Pearl Cleage and Terry McMillian had already proven that there was a market for this type of writing).While chick lit centered around a white female protagonist may indeed demand a reconsideration of what sexual positivism looks like and its place within female empowerment, black chick lit (for example) can be said to be a bit more pointedly focused on the intersection between the narratives of the "successful woman" and black female identity during the 1990s. Conceptualizing black chick literature in this way provides the occasion for considering the early works of a very successful black popular fiction writer such as Terry McMillan.

Terry McMillan grew up in the midst of the changes brought about by the second wave of feminism. McMillan's work is shaped by both a black feminist consciousness and the attitude of the post-integrationist moment. Born on October 18th, 1951, McMillan was part of a wave of black female writers who emerged in the late-1980s.[80] This generation of women would encompass the work of female authors such as Pearl Cleage, Connie Briscoe, Mary B. Morrison, and Tina McElroy Ansa, to name a few. She is a part of a generation of writers whose thematic concerns and preoccupations are deeply affected by questions of black feminine identity. As far as literary production is concerned, generationally speaking, McMillan is decidedly outside of the coterie of black female writers that were nurtured by Toni Morrison during her tenure as a Random House editor. Yet, the thematic concerns of her work continue to flirt with a broader spectrum of thematic issues at the heart of the black feminist/"womanist" movement. These concerns, largely over black femininity and black relationships, continue a tradition found within early womanist fiction (the discussion of contemporary black intimacy). *Disappearing Acts*

[80] See biographical/bibliographical section on Terry McMillan in *The Icons of African American Literature* (2011), edited by Yolanda Williams Page.

(1989) and McMillan's breakout bestseller, *Waiting to Exhale* (1993) have come to epitomize the relationship realities facing successful black women.

Disappearing Acts, Success, and the Upwardly Mobile Class

In the last chapter, I discussed the sharp rise in the number of black women who were attaining bachelor degrees and rise of the professional black woman and her emergence in the early 1980s. By the mid-1980s one of the most salient stereotypes of the educated black woman was that now with her theoretical access to better employment opportunities, she was more focused on pursuing money rather than maintaining relationships. Indeed, the black rumor mill would persistently spread the idea that black women who were in the middle class had begun to spurn lower and working class black men. Coming in the midst of America's first move towards reality television, the daytime talk show, the idea of the professional or upwardly mobile black woman was denigrated from within African American culture as an attempt to re-ascribe the matriarchal power propagated during the mid-1960s.[81] Popular magazines such as *Essence* and *Jet* had published article after article on the presumed eternally single state of the college educated/professional woman, though they often couched the single state of this particular segment of black women in terms of the decreasing availability of black men due to imprisonment and increasing high school dropout rates.[82] Often criticized as being too demanding and controlling, Terry McMillan's characters demand a reconsideration of the

[81]A highly potent moment of this is encapsulated by the emergence of Shahrazad Ali (*The Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman*) which appeared the same year as *Disappearing Acts* (1989). In addition to various appearances on television shows (*Sally Jessy, Geraldo*, and *Tony Brown's Journal*) in which she advocated physical punishment as a viable method of correcting the "misbehaving" black women among other misogynist and antifeminist/womanist views.

[82] According to the NAACP's "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet": "From 1980-2008, the number of people incarcerated in America quadrupled from roughly 500,000 to 2.3 million people." As early as the 1980s, the increasing likelihood of black male incarnation was also contributed to the decreasing opportunity of educated black women to find equally educated/class ambitious potential partners.

professional woman, and challenge the notion that her ability for empathy and need of intimacy is in any way impaired by her ambition.

Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* (1989) mingles questions of class and success within a narrative that is centered on the development of a relationship between two people who have been, for lack of a better term, severely burned by love. While I delve into this point later in my analysis, there are other important aspects that must be explored first. For example, class and success are interesting components in what is essentially a story of relationship building and recovery. The female protagonist, Zora, is presented as being of a higher class than the male protagonist, Franklin.[83] This difference is both the source of conflict and the point of initial interest, at least on the male protagonist's part. Franklin is attracted to Zora because he sees her as an inspiration for getting his own act together. This is because despite not being college educated, the male protagonist in this story still dreams of becoming upwardly mobile.

Disappearing Acts announces its preoccupation with the idea of the black relationship as in a state of crisis. The prologue to the novel is divided into two voices, a male and a female, italicized to signal to the reader that what they are reading are separate monologues from two characters who feel as if they have been burned by romantic love. In the first monologue, narrated by Franklin, the anxiety and resentment of black men towards black women in the moment of the novel's cultural production—the late 1980s— is explored. Franklin begins his monologue by stating, "All I can say is this. I'm tired of women. Black women in particular, 'cause that's all I ever deal with" (1). Franklin's bitterness is coupled with the fact that he has two children from his marriage that are still depending on him to support them. However, even

[83] In an interview conducted with Molly Giles for *Poets & Writers* (November/December 1992), Terry McMillan expresses her intent in creating Franklin "all I wanted to show was that he was a really good person with a lot of anger, and I wanted to say, this is what happens to people with anger when they don't have a way to vent it: they take it out on the person they love the most" (38).

as a skilled laborer (doing construction and working on site as a handyman in the 1980s) stable work is hard to find. Franklin's inability to provide for his family makes him deeply angry, and when he was still with his wife this anger was turned towards her. While not physically abusive, Franklin grew to despise his wife's body. Carrying the weight from two pregnancies, each pound that she gained seemed like the ultimate mockery of Franklin's inability to provide for his family. Thus, Franklin resolves to focus only on building up his "constitution" and to ignore women and the possibility of any future romantic entanglements until he becomes settled and financially secure. Franklin's plan to build up his "constitution" is derailed significantly by his instant attraction to Zora.

In comparison to Franklin's opening line, the reader is then moved along to the second prologue/monologue narrated by Zora, in which she explains that "I've got two major weakness: tall black men and food. But not necessarily in that order (14). College educated, and with a stable job as a junior high music instructor, Zora composes music and moves from Manhattan to Brooklyn inorder to take voice lessons. Zora's focus on success is narrated against a series of failed relationships, wherein the men she was dating were trying to get her to both give up on her own plans for the future and accommodate theirs, or only wanted a brief affair and backed off when confronted with her intensity. While Franklin's bitterness stems from his inability to provide and (to some degree) because of constraints placed on him by his own youthful rebellion, Zora's bitterness stems from her inability to find a partner who is equally as passionate about their relationship and actually driven to achieve his own dreams. Without speaking about it to either her circle of friends or to the men involved, Zora has quietly had two abortions prior to meeting Franklin. She is psychologically and emotionally scarred at the moment in which she begins her affair with Franklin, she does not want to have children because she knows they will

make her irrevocably vulnerable. Intimacy, in both Franklin and Zora's monologues, is decidedly a force that has burned and inhibited them from reaching their full potential.

In her article, "Deposing of the Man of the House," Janet Mason Ellberly reads McMillan's work against the dominant force of the intact family. As Ellberly suggests "Her characters are unique women situated in specific histories, cultures, and classes who are partially dominated by and liberated from the domestic ideology of their time and place" (108), meaning that McMillan deliberately picks apart the notion of the patriarchal family. Ellberly points out in her discussion of McMillan's work that black women are often the epicenter and glue of familial relations. When stress and injustice from society begins to erode the confidence with which even the intact black family operates then the self-same epicenter of family relations is often the one bearing the brunt of misplaced male rage with ineffectual social systems. In addition, as Ellberly goes on to state, "her characters allow readers to identify the serious complexity of the patriarchal model that continues to influence gender identity and to limit women's autonomy" (108). For Ellberly, McMillan's positioning of family within a framework of heterosexual desire and impulses reveals McMillan's flirtation with characters that were influenced by the black feminist movement even if they themselves do not outright identify as being feminist.

As women who have inherited the dreams of the second wave of feminism, McMillan's characters are striated along class lines that often overlap and are deeply intertwined with the formation of their subjectivity. This is a point that needs to be underscored. As previously mentioned, McMillan is a part of coterie of writers who exploded in the 1990s. According to Robin V. Smiles, this group of writers presented characters that were distinctly, "post-integration [era], urban settings; upwardly mobile, or middle class, college educated protagonists; and, importantly, conflict that centers on romantic relationships" (348). Adding to Smiles'

observation, the 1990s writer acknowledges more fully the splitting of subjectivity and experiences along gendered and class lines. Middle-class black identity is a constant source of conflict within African American literature in the late 20th century. It has been a conflict largely ignored by the separation of African American literature into stringent dichotomies such as "literary" and "popular," as often the line between the two has more to do with the preservation of common tropes of shared hardship, pain, and overcoming. Black popular literature in the late 20th century seeks to break away from those surface/ historical narratives and to acknowledge the contemporary issues facing African Americans in the present moment. In the 1990s, the gender divide and increasing success of black women became one of the major sources of intraracial conflict. Thus, the literary depictions of successful black women who are upwardly mobile rather than trapped or bound to the traditional placing of the black woman as always financially fluctuating and on the cusp of collapse is rejected as a predetermined reality. While Smiles reads McMillan within a tradition of geographic migration narratives, this analysis will emphasize the simultaneous migration in class and the impact that class can have on shaping black intimacy.

Class distinctions between Franklin and Zora are observed almost from their first meeting. From the moment that Franklin and Zora meet he has been both attracted and repelled by Zora's middle class status. Franklin, working as the handyman in the apartment that Zora has just moved into, asks her about her marital status, citing "it seems awful funny that a single woman would pay this much rent with all this space and live by herself" (32). Franklin is instantly attracted to Zora. As he explains a few pages later, "Zora didn't sound like she was concerned one way or another about what I thought. I liked that shit. And she's the first woman I met in a long time that ain't leaning on nobody" (41). Franklin professes to be drawn in by Zora's independence both as a woman and as someone who is financially able to support herself.

However, Zora's independence strikes a major nerve with Franklin as he feels insecurity with his position at her side. Zora's independence only serves to highlight Franklin's dependence on project availability (as a handy man and as a construction worker) in order to secure work. Given the limits of labor opportunities for black men in construction, Franklin has not been able to attain any of the material markers of success, nor has he been able to support his children as fully as he would like. His inability to provide the material comforts for his children is a source of continued frustration. When he looks at Zora he sees a woman seemingly unfettered by the limits of race or opportunity in her chosen profession.

In the prologue it is interesting that food and sexual intimacy are outlined as cravings that affect Zora's ability to maintain her focus. While only appearing as snippets in the chapter introducing her narrative voice, Zora's relationships with men are depicted as being or quickly becoming too heavy too fast. Including her relationship with Franklin, three of the last serious relationships that she has had has resulted in an unintended pregnancy, underscoring the brokenness of her relationships. As mentioned previously, Zora never actually sought emotional or mental support from any one in her network of friends, nor did she ever raise the issue of pregnancy with her lovers. Likewise in her relationship with Franklin, abortion is raised as an issue that is played counter point to Franklin's building up of what he refers to as his "constitution." As was discussed previously in the first chapter, children were a large part of the narrative of decline for black women. Having sexual freedom while maintaining social mobility can carry a steep price, as we see in how Zora deals with the reality of the upwardly mobile life for women of color. With the feminization of poverty well into the 1980s, and the repeated image of the single black mother front and center, the decision to abort twice and the contemplation of a third time, calls attention to the loneliness and almost desperate clinging of

some black women to professions that would carry them out of the dangers of poverty. From the perspective of genre, both Zora and Franklin are characters that are precariously on the cusp. Zora, in typical chick lit fashion, is identifiable as being a heroine who struggles with relationships.

Furthermore, it is Franklin who obsessively catalogs Zora's material possessions and spending habits, meticulously outlining her sense of financial security as the most explicit sign of her middle class status. For example, Franklin details her book collection as containing: "philosophy, foreign cookbooks, medical books, poetry, and novels—and not that Jackie Collins shit" (53).[84] Even Zora's voice, her talent in singing, is signaled out as a marker of class, Franklin explains that, "My baby can sing, all right. Anybody that can sing a cappella like *that* can sing. Her voice put me in the mind of a few people I really like Sarah Vaughan and Nancy Wilson" (101). In both instances, Franklin is attributing a special depth to Zora that comes from being well cultured and well read, experiences that he disassociates with lower class black women. Rather than simply saying that Zora has a collection of books, he compares it to his own collection, and finds the breadth of subjects that she reads to be a sign of her class because her collection reflects an interest in the "literary" and "scientific." Her voice, unaccompanied and unadorned, sounds record quality, meaning that it sounds polished and well trained. Zora is not simply someone who believed that she had a shot at being signed without actually having the technique or training to back up that belief. Franklin, from the very first meeting until this point in the novel, assesses Zora and her performance of gender in terms of class. Each moment of

[84] Jackie Collins is a well-known authoress who received much acclaim for her novels which, if one were to describe their genre, are a meshing of celebrity gossip and tabloid reporting. Her plots emphasize the dysfunctional side of celebrity.

success that seems to draw her closer to realizing her own goal is on that emphasizes Franklin's failure to perform to masculine expectation and to become closer to achieving his own goals.

As their relationship goes on, Franklin begins to subtly resent not only what he views as Zora's dedication to actually achieving her dream, but the moments where Zora has achieved some modicum of success. An example of this occurs after Zora tells Franklin that she may have a gig as a lead female vocalist for a rhythm and blues band. Franklin, who has just been laid off his construction project and had a series of grueling encounters with his family, feels unable to face Zora and tell her that he no longer has a job. Franklin explains his reaction to Zora's news as: "I *was* excited for Zora, but I just couldn't drum up the enthusiasm. My shit was dragging like a mother fucker, and hers looked like it was about to move up the fuckin' ladder" (118). Franklin's reaction to Zora's news, partly because of the timing, and partly because of sheer jealousy, is filled with the beginnings of his resentment. Initially Franklin's hesitancy to informing Zora of his lack of employment is that: "I couldn't tell her I was laid off, 'cause then she'd probably think this was gon' be a regular thing. I didn't want her to think that even if the shit was true" (111). In his initial reaction Franklin comes across as being more concerned with how Zora will respond to a man who does not seem to be able to provide for her. To Franklin, success is inevitably measured by his ability "to be a man" in the traditional sense. Displaced from the role as primary breadwinner, Franklin feels deep aversion to relying on his partner for support. He is scared of not only the economic advantage that a woman would have over him, but also of being infantilized. Franklin is scared that Zora will see him as being less of a man if he is not able to pay his way in their relationship.

Franklin directly connects this definition of success with the increasingly souring relationship between him and Zora. Franklin was in the middle of listening to one of Zora's

recordings when he realizes that all of her effort is being directed at landing an actual recording contract. He states: “People always change when they get successful, don’t they? Some of ‘em forget who stuck by ‘em all through their little apprenticeship. You gon’ be one of ‘em, baby? You gon’ be ashamed of me when you make it?” (233). This epiphany causes Franklin to reaffirm what he calls his “constitution,” meaning that he begins to realize why having an actual plan to reach his goal is important. He cannot envision himself as equal to Zora because his own aspirations do not seem to be coming any closer to actual attainment. Instead, for every step forward that he takes, he seems to drag two steps back. Franklin can only respond to Zora as though she is an opponent. While Franklin struggles with the role of personal accountability, Zora struggles to identify what exactly her role is in this process. Until now, being a supportive and undemanding girlfriend has created distance between her and Franklin. However, by the time that Zora reveals her new career opportunity to Franklin, he has slowly accumulated a great amount of animosity towards her and black women in general. Franklin’s feelings of depression and anxiety are transferred from his encounters with the women in his family onto Zora and weigh significantly in their relationship.

Franklin’s mother, Jerry, is shown as highly critical of her son. Franklin states at various points throughout the narrative that he has never felt loved by his mother. Franklin, however, knows that his mother is emotionally unstable but he cannot help but continue to compete with his older sibling for her acknowledgement. Citing that his older sister was in fact the most loved out of the three children, Franklin demonstrates a lot of what seems to be unwarranted animosity towards his older sibling. In addition to gaining the majority of affection and respect from their parents, Christine (his sister) also graduated from high school. While she did not continue on to college, she then married a man who could provide her with whatever it is that she may want. As

a result, she owns her home across the street from their parents' house. Christine has attained every marker of status and success without once diverting from the path outlined by their parents. Franklin despises her for this because she symbolizes both the epitome of an upwardly mobile woman and is the constant reminder that his current status resulted from his personal decisions as a teenager. Franklin is prideful and for the most part unwilling to admit that his actions influenced the limitations on his career. This is why he can only respond to signs of Zora's success in a negative manner. In the course of his relationship with Zora, seeing first-hand how much effort moving up in class status takes, Franklin begins to question if maybe he is similar to some of the other men he has known, men who do not actually have a plan for improving their class and economic situation and remain stuck in a cycle of living paycheck to paycheck. Franklin has become rather bitter about the successfulness of the women around, a point that is continually emphasized in his relationship with Zora.

As a meditation on the plight of the successful black woman, Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* reveals the aspect of resentment that is also interwoven with a fear of abandonment. Franklin sees the progress of Zora (and her circle of likewise positioned friends) and their careers as a source of great discomfort and is driven into heightened levels of fear. This is a slightly different representation of the romance hero in the sense that unlike with the heroes from the romance novels discussed earlier, Franklin is very much aware of the fact that he has been pushing women away from him because of his feelings of maternal abandonment. While Franklin continues to assume that his mistrust of black women developed from the lack of emotional connection with his mother, the truth is their social ascendancy actually threatens what he understands to be his role as the provider. Franklin is never able to trust black women who are financially independent while he himself is still struggling. As people who grew up and operate

within two distinct classes, Franklin and Zora's perceptions of gender and family have both been shaped by their class experiences. Differences in class, particularly the mentality towards gender roles in a world in which women are seen as having finally come into their own economically, continue to lead to assumptions that grossly hinder their development. The tie between class and gender expectation is why the 1990s marks an obsession with materiality and feminine identity.

As Franklin becomes increasingly bitter about his inability to fulfilling the role of provider, his anger and disappointment is unleashed on Zora. Zora becomes a target not only because of her physical proximity to Franklin, but also because she is intimately connected with him. More and more Zora becomes a symbolic representation for every failure experienced by Franklin. As he explains: "It ain't that I don't love Zora no more. It ain't that at all. I just done disappeared. I don't know who the fuck I am no more. And that pisses me off "(352). For so long, Franklin's whole masculine identity has been deeply defined by what he assumes is the true and sole role of a man, to be the financial center of the household. However, after the birth of their son, Jeremiah, Franklin's failure in the role of a traditional patriarchal male becomes visible. The steady income that Zora earned from teaching is compromised by her pregnancy, and despite his willingness to pick up the slack, Franklin is not able too. The class jealousy that has undergirded Franklin and Zora's romantic relationships is brought to the foreground. Franklin's jealousy causes their relationship to sour, and he becomes emotionally and physically abusive towards Zora. Ultimately, Zora decides it is better for herself and her child to separate from Franklin rather than stay in an abusive relationship. As *Disappearing Acts* closes out, the possibility for reconciliation is left hanging as a possibility for Franklin and Zora, though it seems a somewhat dim one given that the issues that plagued their relationship remain a central sore point with Franklin. From a literary angle, the ending of Terry McMillan's work is important because it is a rejection of the

idea that women must endure great unhappiness in order to find emotional fulfillment. McMillan's chick lit provides deeper insight into the issues associated with "coupling" that were operating within the restrictions of the expectation found within romance novels.

In the contemporary black romance novel there is a continued perpetuation of the idea that as long as both partners were of the same class, then their relationship would be worth saving. However, the romance novel is as much a psychological profile as it is a fantasy; part of the draw for readers is seeing how dramatized forms of everyday relationship conflicts escalate and then are resolved between two equally yoked people. Because of the prefigured "happy ending" of the romance genre, the contemporary black romance novel presents the stability of romantic relationships as being solely dependent on a joint effort from both the hero and the heroine. In chick lit, there is no assumption that the existence of mere sexual attraction between two characters will be enough to actually forge a sustainable relationship. Defiant in the face of increasing media hype of a black relationship crisis, the contemporary black romance novel delves into some of the challenges facing black intimacy but insists that a "happy ending" for the black couple is still a real and achievable outcome.[85] However, there is one caveat; this outcome is only possible if the couple addresses the deep misunderstandings and emotional baggage that each person carries into the relationship. Because chick lit is looking more closely at romance through the shared lens of class, it allows us to see the how the pressure from outside also begins to affect the development of intimacy. Franklin has a lot of self-esteem and empowerment issues that he must work through on his own before he will be ready for a functional and more importantly healthy relationship with Zora, and Zora has to give herself a chance to fully recover

[85] Anastasia Curwood's *Stormy Weather* (2010) articulates a central challenge of black romance and upwards mobility as: "Even for members of the middle class, financial concerns arose from the expectation that husbands had to be the sole breadwinners. Marital problems often arose when men did not fulfil their economic role, or when wives were too economically independent for their husbands' liking. Then and now, finances and financial trouble were extremely frequent sources of conflict within marriage" (116).

from her relationship with Franklin but also from the accumulated stress and programmed non-reactions to emotional stress from her previous relationships. Zora, like any socially mobile woman often must decide if enduring emotional and sometimes physical pain can actually result in their long term happiness as masculine frustration spills over. As was implied in the interpretations of two of the earliest examples of contemporary romance novels in the previous chapter, chick lit picks up where the romance novel left off in acknowledging an increasing connection between sex and violence. Hence why, *Disappearing Acts* concludes on an ambiguous note. Both characters continue to possess emotional attachment to one another, but realize that neither is ready to restart their romantic relationship. The ending of *Disappearing Acts* suggests that each character needs to do some major spiritual healing on their own before they will be ready to retry their hands at an intimate relationship.

As Stephanie Harzewski explains about chick literature, "While many narratives are truncated by marriage plot conventions, others depict a comfortable but static suburban telos as a potential crisis, with heroines vacillating between the more secure status of marriage and the open ended possibilities of the single state" (29). While Harzewski's definition is most certainly a legitimate way to define the genre as it cohered in the mid-to late 1990s, it does need expansion. Harzewski acknowledges the presence of chick lit written for and aimed at professional women working in urban areas. Her definition of chick lit also makes explicit the racial blinders that accompany this genre and the way that it is critically engaged. Furthermore, the development and influence of the commercial market that surrounds chick lit often encompasses films and television dramas (which are often implied via the ongoing explosive popularity of *Sex and the City*) in addition to actual literary text. By considering the connection between literature and other media, we will be able to better articulate how black women were

specifically poised to make their entrance into the commercial market of chick lit as far back as the late 1980s/early-1990s through the intersection of literature and television.

The 1990s are an important moment in African American female cultural production. It is the decade in which the racial barrier of television production was significantly bridged by a station. The FOX and UPN networks became staples among black and Latino audiences by airing a plethora of black and multicultural sitcoms during primetime/late night hours. The interest of these networks in a black audience was timed with a new branching in the black feminist movement; this was an era when those children who were the daughters and sons of the women from the black feminist movement of the 1970s had finally come of age. Though, a question still remained on what exactly they had inherited from the previous generation of women. In these uncertain moments, an obsession with materialism as a marker of success drove the transformation of the market for popular women's fiction.

One of the most prolific and complex images emerging in the late 1980s and revolutionized throughout popular black culture produced during the 1990s has been the professional woman. By the 1990s, the market for the contemporary black novel, the need for a positive space for women to fantasize about the productive potential of African American relationships, had expanded with the introduction of Kensington Publication's Arabesque line. Still, the fantasy sold within the world of black women's romance novels was consumed in defense against a real and mounting frustration with dating and the paradoxical cultural pressure placed on women to be married with children by the age of thirty.

Celebrating the everyday female professional and striving to take back those traditional markers of femininity rejected by the feminist movement, chick lit became one of the major genres throughout the 1990s. As proof of the importance of this connection, consider the work

produced by Yvette Lee Bowser. Bowser may have gotten her start as part of the writing staff on *A Different World* (1987-1993) and then on *Hanging With Mr. Cooper* (1992-1997) but she has gone on to produce one of the most pivotal shows for thinking about the presence of black women in the chick lit genre.[86] *Living Single*, on air from 1993-1998, encapsulated many of the cultural struggles shaping modern black womanhood in the era of post-feminism. *Living Single* depicts the personal and intimate connections made by four women striving to achieve success in their adult lives. Success, as envisioned by these women, is measurable both in terms of their career and in finding an ideal partner. A lawyer, a magazine editor, an actress/comedian, and a fashionista who opens her own clothing boutique, each woman struggled with their past and how it should define their present. Coming from various lower middle class to poor working class backgrounds, being upwardly mobile without also becoming overly indulgent in bourgeois aesthetics became a major tension undergirding the plot as they attained their goals. Another tension that the series highlighted was the growing notion that black men were intimidated by black female success; more than one of the women's flings ended while she was in the process of attaining a career making milestone. *Living Single* became one of the major cultural touchstones for African American women coming of age during the 1990s and thereafter.

One of the ways that chick lit has attempted to articulate the modern women's feminine subjectivity is by breaking through the societal barrier imposed on female sexuality. This subjectivity is deeply implicated within the world of the successful modern woman. Chick lit highlights sex and the experience of female pleasure as central defining points in the narrative of

[86] In an article published by Michael Schneider in *Electronic Media*, Bower explains some of what drove her to create *Living Single*. She explains, "When I went to `Cooper,' I felt basically like I was being dismissed because I was a female and because I was black," she says. ``And I had never felt that way before. There were certain images that I felt coming up in the `Cosby'/`Different World' camp that I needed to protect. Those of women and those of African Americans in particular. And I wasn't able to do that. And I kind of felt, well I'll be damned if I let these people make me fail in my mission."

the successful woman. Chick lit assumes a positive outlook on the importance of sexuality to feminine identity construction. As a convention of the genre, sexuality and relationships—particularly as they are linked to the mental maturing of the female protagonist—has become one way in which the rhetoric of empowerment has shaped the consciousness of "chick lit." Chick lit exemplifies the recognition and increasing visibility of a turn in advertisement and marketing towards women who are perceived to already be empowered by an awakened feminist consciousness. Enmeshed within a wave of feminism wherein the actualization or translation of feminist theory from decades before, chick lit can be understood via the new sense of feminine identity. *Living Single* not only revolutionized the way that black women were presented in primetime drama, it insisted on expressing a continuum of black femininity.

Within this continuum was also a rather ambiguous contemplation on intimacy and the nature of black relationships. For example: sweet, innocent, and incredibly romantic, brownstone handyman Overton Wakefield Jones (John Henton) and the ditzy Synclaire James (Kim Coles) enjoyed a long courtship and period of dating that predictably ended in their marriage. In the world of *Living Single* Overton and Synclaire embodied most strongly traditional values and ideas of masculinity and femininity respectively. If the Synclaire-Overton couple presented an "old school" attitude towards gender roles and coupling, then on the opposite side there is the highly unorthodox relationship between Max and Kyle. As a character, Max was one of the most emotionally defensive and demanding women in the group of friends. Likewise, Kyle was portrayed as culturally aware and prideful. Both characters are driven and career ambitious, making them endemic of black couples in a modern world where success is at the forefront of everyone's minds. In some ways, the arch of their relationship may seem reminiscent of the plot

from *Entwined Destinies*, however, underneath the humor there is a sense of boundaries and respect for those boundaries that exists between Max and Kyle.

Max and Kyle's interactions with one another more often than not devolved into taking potshots at each other and mean spirited jokes.[87] However, as the first season progressed it became clearer that more than clashing personalities these two were in denial about the attraction that they felt towards one another. In a combination of denial and anxiety concerning how a serious relationship would hinder their growth, Max and Kyle's relationship never reaches the point of stability. In fact, it remains extremely dysfunctional until Kyle takes a position in London for his investment company. Despite their rivalry, and antagonistic reactions to one another, their relationship was also deeper than simple sex friends. The true depths of Kyle's feelings are suggested with his decision to invite Max to accompany him to London. Immediately, Max rejects Kyle's offer both because it implies a level of commitment that she is not comfortable with, and because taking up Kyle's offer would be anti-progressive and out of sync with the image of the independent and upwardly mobile woman she sees herself as. The connection between relationship status and success in *Living Single* is the most prominent thread associated with the emergence of the literary phenomenon in women's writing now being dubbed as chick lit. Another major thread is the positing of female friendships as vital for

[87] In the first episode of season 2, "There's Going to be a Morning After," Kyle and Max finally confront the sexual tension that underscores their interactions. They go on a date and while they both enjoy themselves, Kyle mentions that Max is extremely guarded and emotionally hard to get close too. Max does acknowledge that this is true, but also adds that she is afraid of being hurt. Max comes out and rejects a relationship with Kyle because she is more comfortable functioning within their antagonistic relationship. She makes it clear that she would not know how to handle a non-combative relationship with Kyle, the man who on some subconscious level she acknowledges as being the perfect match for her.

understanding the characters interactions with men and other women outside of their immediate and close circle of friends.[88]

Female friendship undergirds much of the relationship making taking place within the world of the chick lit novel. Female friendship within the world of black chick lit also has a rather important place as it softens and provides depth to the motivations and psychology of the protagonists. As an example, a lot of black chick lit plays explicitly with some of the more negative and demeaning stereotypes of black woman being propagated in the early 1990s. These archetypes can be systematically broken down into character modes that we now know as: "the ball buster/bitch," the "gold digger," the butch/masculinized," and the "dupe." The ball buster or bitch trope dates back to the 19th century, and has been the primary stereotype assigned to vocal or self-confident black women. The "gold digger" is a stereotype used to call out a woman who maintains a relationship with a man solely because he is her source of financial income. Similar to the ball buster/bitch, the butch/masculinized trope also has long been a name applied to women, especially black women, who did work outside of the home or had interest that were simply deemed unfeminine. In the more recent iterations, this trope has also been used to signal the potential sexual-fluidity of a character. Finally, the "dupe" is the character who is portrayed as being naïve or easily fooled. The "dupe" is the type of woman who continues to get caught up

[88] Female friendship is not a recent inclusion in writing produced by women. Female friendship, with and without a lesbian subtext, has been a proclivity in women's writing since at least the 19th century. However, the female companion was expected to be replaced with the male lover or husband by the time the female characters reached adulthood. All of the emotional intensity of 19th century fiction solely began to focus on the domestic relationships experienced by women. Yet, in the 1970s female friendships also became important spaces in which to unburden the tensions within the domestic sphere. Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) is the example most critically explored in terms of the female friendship. As Margret Atwood, in her article "That Certain Thing Called the Girlfriend": Sociologists might have something to say about why black women writers were among the first on this turf: they might cite the prevalence of households headed by women, the necessity of female support systems. Perhaps black women writers were less likely to accept the premises of the traditional novel, because they were more interested in expressing truths about the life they saw around them, truths not available to them in white fiction."

cycles of abusive relationships. Of all the types outline so far, this character is dangerous because there is a limited capacity to recognize and grow from her experiences.

Yvette Lee Bowser's modeling of *Living Single*, that of four close women who are struggling with the growth of their careers and their intimate relationships with men, conceptually echoes the work Terry McMillan has been producing. However, where *Living Single* stresses the humor of most of the romantic encounters on the show, McMillan insists on exploring the emotional toll and scars left in the wake of failed romance. The later adaption of Terry McMillan's popular fiction to film format gave increasing visibility to the plight of middle class black women. Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) became one of the most iconic black chick novels and later films of the 1990s. More so than in *Disappearing Acts*, female frustration and subsequent rage are explored as being the underpinning results of the lack of intimacy and relationship prospects for middle class black women. The novel takes four friends (Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria) and documents their movements between family, men, and careers. All four of the women are in their late thirties, and to various degrees are still in the process of making sense of their current relationship status. If McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* explored class differences as a significant aspect of relationship building in the 1990s, then her follow up novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, suggests the emotional fragility of black women within the middle-class.

Terry McMillan utilizes both the trope of female friendship and these same character archetypes in her writing. In *Disappearing Acts*, because the center point is on the couple, the importance of Zora's friendship with the other women is not brought into stark relief. This is changed in the world of Waiting to Exhale. Rather than a dissection of the intimate lives of a mixed class couple, *Waiting to Exhale* presents a group of women who embody to various

degrees some form of these archetypical characteristics. In doing so, McMillan allows for the exploration of not only female anxiety within the professional class, but also for an understanding of how a lack of relationship intimacy can lead to self-destructive tendencies. Female friendship is important precisely because it provides what is often the only consistent form of emotional support available to black women.

Waiting to Exhale: Sex, Intimacy, and the Successful Woman

In what has become Terry McMillan's trademark style, *Waiting to Exhale* transitions between the narrative voices of four women. The central tension or rather theme uniting these women is the lack of true intimacy with the men that move in and out of their lives. As mentioned earlier, each of these women is in a state of constant flux, and reeling under the pressure to quickly marry and have children. Each character is already in her late thirties, meaning that in addition to the pressure from the family, there is also the not so quietly ticking biological clock that continues to enforce a sense of desperation in at least three of these women. However, the fourth woman, Bernadine, is a reminder that even marriage does not end the quest for emotional connection and intimate fulfillment. In *Terry McMillan: Critical Companion* (1999) Paulette Richards' suggested that in *Waiting to Exhale* McMillan captures the struggles of women "haunted by traditional expectations that they should be at home raising children full-time" (117). However, by making Bernadine's story the anchor that advances the plot, McMillan also seems to question the legitimacy of continuing to hold marriage and childrearing as the epicenter of all female experience.

On one side of this narrative of intimate relationships are Robin and Gloria. Robin steadily attracts predatory men who use her sexually or financially, while Gloria remains emotionally

attached to the man who marked her first adult relationship. Meanwhile, the novel opens with the introduction of Savannah and the pressure exerted on her by both her mother and her sister to settle down in one location and "get a man," even if this means settling for someone who is less than her ideal definition of what an intimate partner should be. Savannah's story on the pressure to get married from well-meaning family members contrasts with Bernadine's narrative, where her husband has just informed her that he has filed for divorce and promptly intends to leave her and their two children. Altogether, the four voices of these women reveal the intricate complexity of black female identities and the understanding of the black relationship in the 1990s.

Unlike with Savannah and Bernadine, Robin is highly over-sexualized. A lot of her sense of self is invested in her sexual prowess, to the extent that she can be in a room with black men from various companies and recognize a large number of them as being people that she has had a sexual encounter with. Robin does not become emotionally invested; instead she uses sexual compatibility as a barometer for romantic compatibility. As the youngest of the four women, Robin is represented as being flighty and naïve. However, her character develops that which is read as naivety. She has a disturbing willingness to accept disrespectful and hurtful interactions so long as it nets her a husband. This is evidenced by her inability to let her major love interest, Russell, go despite how he continues to carry on affairs with several other women while they are romantically involved, and the blatant way that he depends on her for financial support (to the point that she prioritizes taking care of him and falls behind in paying off her student loans).

As a character, Robin is both simple and complex. Arguably, one could claim that through Robin, Terry McMillan presents a heavy-handed attempt at serializing some of the more mundane but serious negative relationship experiences suffered in intraracial relationships by

black women. Russell does embody a list of stereotypic black male traits that run the gambit from pathological lying and sexual/emotional exploitation, to, sleazy deadbeat father. While none of the male characters in this novel are fully fleshed out—understandable as it is a novel which explicitly premises the gathering and healing of four women through the bonds of friendship—the bigger focus should be on the type of men that Robin peruses.

Robin's psychological profile, the presence of a strong father figure with a close father-daughter connection, does not allow for the complete dismissal of her obsession with Russell as purely being an indiscriminate indictment against black men. In a work where male characters are purposely flat, McMillan goes through great pains to incorporate a background narrative for Robin's father figure, who suffers from Alzheimers. From a psychological and social standpoint the inclusion of a father figure is poignantly telling as most patterns of relationship dysfunction in black women have often been suggested to be linked to the presence or absence of a father figure during their formative years. Indeed, one of the most prevalent statistics to have emerged out of family rhetoric is that the lack of an emotional relationship with a stable father figure significantly raises the chances (for boys and girls) that they will be emotionally unstable, or become trapped in a prolonged period of juvenilia.

Instead, one way in which Robin's attachment to Russell should be understood, is as a reflection of how Robin truly feels about herself and what she believes she deserves in her personal relationships. Robin has major self-esteem issues that are linked to the type of relationship patterns that she has fallen into. In fact, her rejection of Michael, a potential romantic candidate, is telling. She states, "When you get down to it, he's a sucker. A chump. He's spent more time and money on me in six weeks than all the men I've known together" (144). Literally, Robin recognizes that Michael is different from the men that she normally dates

but she has become so used to being mistreated that she does not know how to respond to a black male professional who courts and treats her with respect. On one hand, Robin may seem extremely confident. However, this confidence is only around her sexual prowess, so much so she even mentions once being at a work related convention in a room that was half-filled with her former lovers. Robin embraces her sexuality as mechanism for exerting control as it is the only arena in which she feels empowered. Outside of the bedroom, Robin does not know how to have a relationship. Physical intimacy replaced emotional intimacy, and if she and her partner are equally into the sex then she is able to maintain the delusion of being more than a sex object for her partners. Hence why, despite the other areas in which Michael strived in his courtship of her, his failure to satisfy her sexually becomes the major sticking point for her decision to end a relationship that would have provided emotional stability.

Robin and Gloria work in tandem as characters that are on the brink of self-destruction. Where Robin seeks emotional fulfillment through sexual intercourse, Gloria channels her need for emotional fulfillment by overeating. Deeply religious, Gloria does not have indiscriminate sex no matter how much she might desire sex. Gloria has only had an intimate relationship with the father of her child, a man that she had an unrequited crush on in college. While Robin dives into sexual exploration, Gloria often redirects her excess energy into charitable organizations, her business, and her son. In many ways, Gloria's narrative is the saddest of the four women. She never experienced romance or love in her relationship with the father of her child. Just one drunken night of passion, and a lifetime of responsibility for both. Even when they separated, Gloria still held on to the idea that they would remain sexually intimate, and that this man was the only one capable of embracing her and her increasingly plus sized body. His revealing of his sexual preference devastates her not because she is homophobic but rather because it signals that

perhaps there is no one who will ever be able to love her the way that she wants to be loved. Whereas Savanah and Bernadine underscore the deep investment of the middle class marriage in order to attain better social status, both Robin and Gloria embody the psychological anxieties and insecurities of women desperate for the fantasy of the black middle class. Furthermore, they expose the persisting fragility within successful women even as they are surrounded by a discourse of female empowerment.

Pressure and the Successful Black Woman

Returning back to the consideration of genre then, black chick lit, at least as demonstrated within the chronological timeframe of the 1990s, is a decidedly more in-depth response to the propagation around the narrative of the modern successful woman. Not only are all the female characters in Terry McMillan's works (*Disappearing Acts* and *Waiting to Exhale*) middle class, and financially stable, but, they also are not able to find partners that are equal in status and goals. In *Disappearing Acts* the protagonist attempts to make a relationship work with a man from the lower working class; however, the hero, Frank, is not able to cope with being in a relationship where he is not the primary breadwinner. This is further compounded by the fact that the more successful the protagonist seems to be the more unsure he is of his own role within a heterosexual relationship. In *Waiting to Exhale*, we have romance being examined from the dynamics of same class partnership, meaning there should be fewer mitigating social factors that inhibit attainment; however, a stable and functional relationship is still a rare experience for successful women. McMillan spends the narrative of *Waiting to Exhale* pontificating as to why exactly black professional women are holding their breath in terms of their relationship prospects. In the following analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*, much of the focus will remain on

Savannah and Bernadine. They navigate the rather tricky terrain between expectations (their own and their families) and the disillusioning encounters that they have with black men in both the professional and working class.

Savannah's and Bernadine's stories capture some of the tensions faced by black successful women in regards to finding romance. Savannah's sister, Sheila is a minor character; her early inclusion gestures towards the tension between traditional expectations and upwards class mobility. Sheila may be married but rather than being a source of comfort or stability, her marriage is a source of major dysfunction and chaos. As reported by Savannah, Shelia informed her "that my swinging-singles life style doesn't amount to shit, that I run the gamut when it comes to stereotypes of buppiedom because I put too much energy into my career, that without a husband and children my life really has no meaning" (4). Sheila, despite the ongoing emotional wreck of her own marriage, continues to suggest that just by being in the state of marriage she has already reached the pinnacle of female ambition. In short, Sheila draws the attention to the obsession of women with marriage for society's own sake rather than as a step that cements the deep bond between two compatible and emotionally fulfilled people. Unintentional or not, Sheila reveals a layer of condescension towards Savannah's pursuit of a career. Sheila believes that her sister's pursuit of a career has not lead to any potential encounters with men who would be marriage material.

Romance is complicated by the intervention of close friends and family. In the case of Savannah, she has continually met men that might stimulate her physically but intellectually are not able to keep her interest. Constantly being told by her mother and sister that her standards for a partner are too high and that she is being overly demanding, Savannah resents the fact that her family would rather she quickly have children than actually find a partner who can meet her

emotional and mental needs. As the most reflective of the four women, Savannah looks at her mother's and sister's relationships, as warnings of what could happen to women who simply settle for any partner. In the case of her mother, she states "Mama, who thinks she's an expert on everything, hasn't had a whole man in her life for seventeen years" (4). Savannah's sister, Sheila, continues to make up and break up with her husband, and subsequently drag her children in to the parent's dysfunctional relationship. In her description of Shelia, Savannah points out "Sheila's got three kids, doesn't work, and has never lived anywhere outside of Pittsburgh" (4). Both of the women closest to her vested too much of themselves into partners that they simply settled for and are now being burned by their decision to settle for anyone rather than trying to find the one with whom they were the most compatible.

In addition to Savannah's observations of the state of the romantic relationships of the women in her own family, she also reveals much about the state of her own encounters with romance. Stating, "I haven't purred since I met Fred, but that only lasted a week, because the wife he forgot he had came back from a business trip" (6). Savannah goes on to explain, "A long time ago, I asked God to please send me a decent man. And one by one, what I got was Robert, Cedric, Raymond, and Kenneth. Unfortunately, I left out some very important details: like how about a little compassion, some pride as opposed to cockiness, some confidence as opposed to arrogance" (11). Savannah's increasingly embittered meditation on the black relationship is deeply tied into what she sees as a very clear-cut result of both the so called relationship crisis and the explosion of the black middle class in the early 1980s. Unlike the idea perpetuated in the traditional romance, the idea that the ideal partner will emerge from the same socioeconomic class, Savannah's narrative shows a rejection of this idyllic myth of fiscal compatibility. Savannah's partners, the reader can assume given her criteria, have all been men of the same

upwardly mobile class. Yet, the realities of intimate possibility for black men and women, even at a level where financial stability and success have been achieved by both partners, are still widely incongruent with that of the traditional romantic model.

In the first place, black women outstripped black men in attaining status markers such as education by the early-1980s.[89] Secondly, even when not accounting for the likelihood of encountering a black professional male in the course of her work or through shared interpersonal connections. There are other factors directly associated with the echoes from the Moynihan report that continue to impact the way that black men and women understand each other. With the relationship crisis, and its focus on the black professional woman as the epicenter for the assumed dysfunction of the black family, the estrangement between black men and women continued to strengthen. Underneath all of the bluster and finger pointing that Terry McMillan's characters do throughout the majority of her corpus, there is a very real and underappreciated deconstruction of the biggest block to black intimacy, which is frankly the lingering associations of a successful and financially independent woman with that of the emasculator. In *Waiting to Exhale*, all the women at the heart of the story have reached the various levels of success in terms of their actual careers but are left emotionally unsatisfied as they continue to progress. As mentioned previously, McMillan's decision to start the narrative with Savannah is a rather important one as she specifically connects the fall out of the relationship crisis with class aspiration. Take, for example, Savannah's following comment:

[89] This is implied in the breakdown by general profession by Manning Marable. In "From Protest to Politics: The Retreat of the Second Reconstruction, 1976-1982," Manning Marble examines the idea of the black elite. According to him, in 1977 "[o]nly about 50,000 black men and 200,000 black women were employed as elementary and secondary school teachers," furthermore "the numbers of lack medical and healthcare workers were approximately 50,000 men and 116,000 women" (147). Marble stresses that comparatively speaking the black elite is a rather small. He explains that when considered as a socioeconomic group, the black elite "compromised on 7 to 10 percent of the total African American population" (149). Black women were present in profession traditionally associated with middle class status at rates that were almost double those of black men, which only illustrates the challenges of finding a partner that black women in the professional class, such as those represented in the work of Terry McMillan, faced.

> the more successful they are, the more arrogant they are. They've taken these stupid statistics about *us* to heart and are having the time of their lives. They do not hold themselves accountable to anybody for anything, and they're getting away with murder when it comes to women. And we let them (12).

The use of "they" and "us" distinguishes black men from black women. As a linguistic move, Savannah's comment denotes the separation existing even at the professional level. Gender trumps any sense of camaraderie, a camaraderie which would have been built over the struggle to break into the professional and middle class world. The statistics mentioned by Savannah gesture towards the studies done in the midst of the late 1980s obsession with black intimacy and the professional black woman, statistics which suggested that black women were both the sources of their alienation from black men, and similarly the group of women least likely to marry at all. The media began to paint an image of the successful woman as also a desperate woman. Savannah's comment speaks directly to this sense of urgency created around black marriage and the ensuing belief that black women should lower their standards if they ever planned to find a serious partner. Part of Savannah's disgust with the desperation and longing surrounding marriage is that it forced black women to feel as if they had to become complicit in their own devaluation.

Through the mechanism of female friendship, the mental and emotional health of black women in starkly outlined against the pressure to attain the middle class romance. To no small degree, all four of the characters within the world of *Waiting to Exhale* are damaged by their encounters with repeated failures in creating lasting relationships with men of the same class standing and ambition. Also, to no small degree, there is a streak of self-destructiveness that connects all four narratives. While I have discussed this streak most clearly in relationship to

Robin and Gloria, Savannah and Bernadine are inflicted with this penchant as well. For example, Savannah, despite her opening reflections on black women allowing themselves to be used engages in an affair with Lionel. Savannah carries on an affair with him after learning that the only reason Lionel approached her was to regain access to his lost social connections. At their first arranged meeting, Lionel had brought a date along, making Savanah quietly jealous and emotional vulnerable. The vulnerability drives her to accept a second invitation from Lionel, where she quickly realizes his negative personality traits. Mainly, Lionel is so desperate for social contacts that when he hears that her friend is in the process of going through a divorce from her husband who owns a software company, Lionel asks for an introduction.

Sex, Relationships, and Symbols of Class Status

Prior to this moment, Lionel and Savanah had engaged in sexual intercourse. During the act itself, Lionel displays both the aggression and insensitivity towards his partner that he does in asking for an introduction to the man that has been having an affair on her close friend. In Savanah's perspective, the actual scene of penetration is described as: "His hands were ice cold, but he was kissing me so hard I couldn't say anything. The next thing I knew, I felt this big stick trying to force its way inside of me" (118). This moment, read in absentia of the rest of their interactions, seems very much like a rape scene. The carelessness shown towards his partner's pleasure, and his lack of awareness over the fact that he was causing physical pain, in what should have been a jointly tender moment, is not remedied in his attempt oral stimulation. Jumping from the penetration scene to cunninglingus, Savannah says "he started licking and chewing like a wild animal" (118). Rather than immediately telling him to stop, or voicing the fact that she was not enjoying his attentions, Savannah resignedly decides to bear with it. She

would rather deal with the physical pain being caused to her person than voice her own desires. Savanah's suppression of the real feelings and needs that she has makes her constantly antsy and unsure about how to interact with black men. In a latter conversation with Robin, Savanah reveals: "I don't feel as comfortable around men as I do with my girlfriends. And that's depressing. It shouldn't have to be like that" (198). In this moment Savanah is acknowledging a failure to engage in sustained interaction with black men outside of the context of romantic pursuit.

Furthermore, she is also alluding to a deep inability to properly communicate what is most important to the man that she may currently be dating. This aspect is further highlighted by the reappearance of her former flame, Kenneth Dawson. Savannah states that in terms of her romantic expectation, "Kenneth is probably the reason why I expect so much of men. When I was with him, he treated me like a lady. Once you get used to being treated well, you can't go back to bullshit" (206). She also explains that "By the time that I had realized that I was in love with him, I was too scared to tell him" (206). As a result, Savannah broke up their relationship without really explaining the reason for it. Now that Kenneth is "safely" married, Savannah confesses that she was actually deeply in love with Kenneth and was scared that if she said anything it would have ended their relationship. They discuss some of the miscues of courtship, and beliefs regarding fidelity, that had lead their relationship astray. This leads to a sexual liaison, in which afterwards Savannah pushes Kenneth to return to the home and family that he has created with his wife. Kenneth rekindles those suppressed feelings and Savannah is easily seduced into a one-night stand with Kenneth. In doing so, she crosses her personal set of feminine ethics. Kenneth is dangerous to her precisely because he overrides her respect for the stable family-a model where the husband is assumed to be faithful. Savannah refuses to engage

in an ongoing affair with a married man. Despite her vulnerability this is the one point, formed through sympathy with other women made to feel desperate for male companionship, that she is unwilling to disrespect by allowing herself to become a "home wrecker."

This point is further driven home in McMillan's choice to have the primary narrative of *Waiting to Exhale* center on the sudden divorce of a woman who had the ideal marriage and had attained the upper middle-class lifestyle, Bernadine, Savannah's close college friend. Bernadine's narrative opens with her husband's announcement that not only has he filed for divorce after 11 years of marriage, but that he is leaving her to marry a white woman. Bernadine, understandably, is sent reeling into a deep abyss of anger and depression. There are two points that should be understood at the moment of John's announcement. The first is that while Bernadine is shocked that he has already filed for divorce, the marriage itself had been lackluster for a while, with sex being more of an obligation than a symbolic or real sign of their union. Indeed, McMillan writes "Neither desired the other and when they did sleep in the same bed, their backs barely brushed" (24). Secondly, John's affair with a white woman, coming after decades of Bernadine's sacrifices (career and family) is a slap Bernadine's face. It was Bernadine who helped John build up his company in the early years, and who continued to remain beside him even though she herself was feeling stagnant in their marriage.

In the narratives of both Savannah and Bernadine the idea of marriage as an extension of status is magnified. While Bernadine's narrative is more obviously rife with the association of marriage with social status and class, Savannah is subtlety gesturing towards this in her indictments regarding the role that black women play in mediating their own heartbreak. To extend on this idea, Savannah states "They have done one helluva job convincing themselves—and a whole lot of *us*—that we *should* feel desperate, which is why so many of us are willing to

do damn near anything to snag one of them [black male professional]" (12). Echoing back to Bernadine's inability to speak her unhappiness or preferences to her husband, for Bernadine silence became a way in which to preserve the fantasy of the black middle class romance. In Savannah's reality the drive for marriage, particularly as it symbolizes feminine completion or fulfillment, leads women to moral ambiguity. In addition, the failure to attain romance when all other aspects of the middle class dream have been set in place is associated with the unhealthy fixations that spiral within the previously discussed narratives of both Robin and Gloria.

While any woman is entitled to fill upset and betrayed by her husband's affair, Bernadine also is fully aware that her ever class conscious husband likes visual markers of success. While the male characters in *Waiting to Exhale* are not fully fleshed out, Bernadine provides the reader rather crucial insight into who John is as a person. For example, Bernadine recounts the ambition of John in the early years of their relationship as being, "One day I am going to have exactly what they have… They being rich white folks" (30). When Bernadine is fuming about John dumping her in order to pursue a white woman, Bernadine is responding to John's implicit decision that as he has now finally achieved the penultimate success as a businessman, he now needs a trophy wife to reflect his accomplishments. In the world in which John seeks to imitate, black women are not equated with men of power and wealth. For a man such as John, no matter how skilled or committed his wife was to his cause, she too can be "upgraded" in a manner similar to any of his other possessions. Hence, the cold and rather cavalier manner in which he announces his intentions to divorce and replace Bernadine with a woman who is more reflective of his social value.

Now that she has awakened to the existence of John's affair and dissatisfaction with their marriage, Bernadine begins to see fully the obvious cracks in her marriage with John. Chief

among these was John's obsession with attaining a culturally mediated sense of worth, one such as reflected in the celebrity gossip columns. John is constantly seeking validation. As Bernadine explains, "John knew that he clearly had *arrived*, when everything had fallen into place and there wasn't much further he could go— when the routine had become too much of a routine, when even making money became predictable" (27). As Bernadine takes in his announcement of their impending divorce, part of what she has to reconcile with is his lack of a real connection to not only her but the family that they built together. Bernadine and the children are replaceable objects because they only matter as far as they are a part of the middle class dream that John so ardently chases. Now that John has reached a plateau in terms of the recognition that his current family and success could have brought him, he will not attempt to fix whatever he feels has broken in their relationship, as evidenced by his complete lack of regard for the woman that he has spent 11 years with. Pursuit of money and status has overshadowed everything, including romantic and familial ties as far as John is concerned.

While the reader is thoroughly brought into Bernadine's consciousness through the use of the reflective "you," this consciousness goes beyond finger pointing. Rather than simply positioning Bernadine as having the higher moral authority in this case, Terry McMillan brings us back to where Savannah had actually left off in her commentary of the black professional male. Using the *us* versus them to distinguish between the actions of black men and women, Savannah also emphasizes that for as irresponsible and hurtful as men of the middle class may act towards black women of a similar or different class, it is these women who continue to accept mistreatment. In her reconsideration of the state of their marriage, Bernadine's narrative riffs off of the question of accountability posed by Savannah. Mediating between third person omniscient and second person in terms of the narrative voice, Bernadine's contribution to this realization

comes in the form of the various moments in which she could have asserted herself more or challenged John to treat her more as a partner rather than an accessory.

In lieu of real intimacy, the obsession with attaining material possessions is a major theme that emerged to a degree in *Disappearing Acts* but blooms full force in *Waiting to Exhale*. Thinking back on her relationship with John, Bernadine reveals two patterns that assured the erosion of her marriage. The first pattern was John's fixation on the fantasy of the black middle class romance. A tale in which marriage would bring success and from there happiness. In the other pattern, Bernadine's failure to assert herself in her relationship, perhaps as the result of trying to mold herself into whatever John decided was needed in order for the fantasy to remain. Chameleon like, Bernadine studied both bookkeeping and cooking in order to assist John in whatever entertainment or business venture he might begin. Unable to express herself, Bernadine confesses "you took the test and failed two parts on purpose because you did not want to become an accountant" (30). Bernadine goes on to explain that, "John wanted you to look rich, and for the past eleven Christmases and birthdays, every box he gave you was small enough to fit in your palm and you didn't have to guess what was inside" (30). In both her career and in her personal preferences, Bernadine let John continue to hand her anything that he thought a woman of their class should be able to do or wear, and Bernadine continued to receive these meaningless tokens and demands with open arms. Always accepting, never challenging John to actually invest his emotions into their relationship or to develop an interest and connection with their children, Bernadine became the perfect lady of the middle class in order to fulfill John's ambitions.

Thus, romantic encounters in *Waiting to Exhale* are spaces in which tensions of gender are also fraught with class stigma and expectation. In the world of the Harlequin romance novel, the ideal partner can be encountered in the course of work. Usually the male partner would be in a

position of direct or implied authority over the heroine, and would then chase and pursue the heroine despite any objections against work place romance that she may observe. While the contemporary black romance novel gets around the issue of workplace authority by pairing people who do not work in careers that regularly intersect, often they meet outside of the context of work; the black romance continues to preserve the idea that those of a similar class are better suited to one another. In doing so, the black romance tradition invests in a logic in which the access and ability to acquire materials creates the ground for intimacy. Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, rejects this idea. Indeed, this is why a character such as Bernadine, who by all rights should be happy and fulfilled within her marriage, is extremely bored and unhappy but also unable to proactively correct the situation. She had attained the fantasy of the black middle class; a dream a majority of black woman going to college in the late-1980s were being lead to believe via popular culture and the news media that they should want, and as a direct result of having attained this fantasy Bernadine is filled past her capacity with thwarted black female ambition.

After her divorce, Bernadine's rage leads her down a dangerously unhealthy path. She becomes involved in an affair with a married man with the intent of deliberately inflicting emotional harm, and she intentionally distances herself from her children. Bernadine viewed the affair, divorce, and subsequent revenge games as a private battle still being waged between herself and John. When her daughter falls ill with a fever, and she has to rush to pick her up, she finally regains a modicum of control over the post-divorce rage that had taken over her life. Bernadine is unable to productively channel her rage until she realizes that she has been neglecting her children. Even then, she continues to struggles with a deep depression. Bernadine understood marriage as being an investment; when it failed so too did her sense of self-worth as

a woman. The feeling of displacement from the path that she had spent her entire life treading on causes a significant psychic wound. Feeling too much at once, Bernadine retreats into the emotionally numb world induced by antidepressants. Overmedicating allows Bernadine to escape out of the wreckage of both her marriage and her own, deep feelings of hurt and anger. Unable to cope, and still needing an outlet for her frustration with the failure of the middle class romance, Bernadine has a strong sense of bitterness at the sacrifice of the life that she had given up to attain the idealized marriage.

Some scholars approach the African American novel as a medium that is dead or in severe decline.[90] After all (one may argue), African American literature has always been deeply enmeshed with history and nationally significant moments, but until the election of the first black president in 2008 very little was deemed culturally impactful enough to influence the development of the literary form after the Civil Rights movement. However, this argument ignores the focus of intraracial conversations that became more prominent in those years. In the years spanning from 1965-2000 the African American novel evolved, continuing to produce best sellers. Frankly, genre within the African American novel did not simply stop with slave narratives, autobiographies, and social protest narratives. The African American novel rapidly expanded into various areas. Scholarship on the genres and the transitions of the African American novel more fully into the realm of popular fiction remains largely unexplored territory.

[90] Literary scholar, Kenneth Warren rather radically suggested in his provocative survey of the African American novel, *What Was African American Literature* (2011) that the African American novel, tied intricately as it is to major historical and cultural moments, ended with the Jim Crow period. Respectfully, Warren's argument is simply incomplete. While the sociopolitical/historical has been a driving motivator in the development of the African American novel well into the early 20th century, by the mid-20th century the African American novel undergoes a major facelift and this in turn affects the type of novel produced. Of course the primary motivator behind literary development of the African American novel, rather than being completely different is actually a continuation against systemic and grossly offensive mistreatment at the cultural level. In this regard, one could argue that at least up until the signing of the Voting Rights Act (1965) the historical exigency driving the production of African American literature has continued to be at the center of the black novel.

In the previous chapter I announced more strongly the sense of class and achievement that continued to undergird much of the expectations of intimacy and romantic fulfillment for career orientated black women. Black women's social mobility and definition of successfulness, remains rooted deep within an understanding of traditional notions of respectability. Terry McMillan's work recognizes the struggle that many black women who were educated and financially stable faced in the decades spanning from the late-1980s into the early 1990s. The numbers of professional black male workers and who were from the same class simply were not there. As her novels capture, many upwardly mobile black women actually began dating across class and found themselves still having difficulties making their relationships work because of the assumed power imbalance that black women apparently had and wanted over their male counterparts. Terry McMillan's work went further in showing the psychological and emotional fragility of these women, even in the wake of financial success. McMillan's work also addresses the inherent gender stereotypes laid against women who had made strides in becoming the educated lady that was at the heart of the middle class romance; a version of the black romance that is preserved in contemporary black romance fiction.

Chick lit challenges two of the major premises that undergird the contemporary black romance. The first premise tackled by chick lit is the myth that class mobility positively affects the success outcomes for black romance. The second myth (or rather set of myths) also debunked by chick lit is the idea of the successful black woman as "masculine" and as an "emasculator." Concurrent with the rhetoric of social mobility has been the suggestion that black women lose their sense of femininity, and seek to assert financial and emotional control over the men in their lives the moment that they gain credibility within their fields. By looking at the world produced within the work of Terry McMillian, and understanding more about how chick lit actually greatly

embodies the feminist ideology emerging at the moment of the genres production, McMillian's work can be appreciated as being a fully nuanced understanding of the intersection of new black femininities, class, and the relationship between black men and women in the late 20th century. Her narratives aptly dissect popular myths on why an increasing number of educated and professional class black women remain single.

McMillan's work is interesting precisely because it marks a stark move away from the romantic optimism that propagated in the work of Toni Cade Bambara and later on in contemporary black romance. By choosing to focus on the ways in which successful black women felt pressured by both society and their families to settle into relationships with someone who they may have decided to be incompatible in order to "quickly" have children, McMillan brought a sense of humanity to the conceit of the successful woman. Even as her novel remained fixed on romantic intimacy and the mounting feelings of anxiety and depression that such interactions in the context of the black relationship cause, she also revealed how female friendships occupy an important space in the emotional centering and alleviation of feelings of isolation that are related to stress. Female companionship is a major component of chick literature, but has always been a significant source of comfort and the primary marker used by black women in literature to show a female protagonist's emotional growth and spiritual health. What happens when you take away the stabilizing influence of female friendships?

In the next chapter I will discuss what I understand as the "underside" of the black chick lit genre, urban fiction. Arguably, urban fiction continues to deal with the same issues of respectability politics in the 20th and 21st century. However, what is unique about urban fiction (aside from its origins) is the overwhelming attention to issues of sexuality and the criminalization of poor working class blacks in the same urbanized areas often detailed in chick

lit. A presence that is by and large either completely effaced in chick lit or used to heighten the difference of the issues with romance experienced by upwardly mobile, successful, black women and the “crass” and “uneducated” woman of the poor working class. One of the most interesting differences between these two genres is the role of female friendship in shaping feminine identity. In urban fiction, female friendship occupies a limited space that is almost always subordinated by the main protagonist’s focus on securing the signs of financial access (i.e. through illicit work, relationship(s), and quality/production obsession or materiality).

Chapter 4:
Black Women, Reactions against Propriety, and the Literary Resurgence of the Urban Novel: Ghetto Fiction in the late 1990s

> "…the African American novel is a hybrid form. It is not the culmination of an evolutionary process in the narrative tradition. Rather it is the product of social and cultural forces that shape the author's attitude toward life and fuel the dialectical process between romantic and mimetic narrative impulses."[91]

In the previous chapter, I mentioned briefly that the 1990s not only introduced capitalist feminism's obsession with materiality as chronicled in chick lit, but also ushered in a genre that remains the most marginalized in African American genre literature, so called "urban" or "ghetto" fiction.[92] Unlike its counterpart, chick lit, the literary history of urban fiction is complicated as it can be traced back to the aesthetics of the black detective novel from the 1930s with the political undercurrent of the social protest novels that began emerging during the late-1940s and early-1950s. Despite the potential room for argument concerning the literary origins of urban fiction, it is a genre most often definitively connected with the extremely rough and gritty fiction of writers marketed and published under the Holloway House Publishing Company from the mid-1960s to the 1980s. Urban fiction, in many ways, was the literary equivalent of the blaxploitation film. Encompassing writers such as Donald Goines, Iceberg Slim, Odie Hawkins, and Joseph Nazel, the earliest incarnation of the urban fiction novel is undeniably a world rife

[91] Bell, Bernard. "Dual Tradition of African American Fiction: An Interpretation." *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience, Second Edition*. Ed.

[92] Ghetto fiction has faced a very public disownment from the rest of the African American literary tradition, raising some very important questions about what should be classified as African American literature. Ghetto fiction can be traced to the 1960s and 70s writers Donald Goings and Iceberg Slim (Richard Beck); more importantly the beginnings of ghetto fiction explicitly challenge traditional ideas of African American canonization. See C.L. Jackson's "The Literate Pimp: Robert Beck, Iceberg Slim, and Pimping the African American Novel." New Essays on the African American Novel: from Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead (2008).

with misogyny, sexual sadism, and physical and emotional violence against women.[93] In short, urban fiction was the forum in which black male rage was not only allowed full expression, but *encouraged* for profit.[94] Unwittingly, the Holloway House helped to frame urban fiction as the central space through which violence against the black body and psyche could be viewed as twin facets of the experience of modern urbanization for African Americans.

In the 1970s, novels prioritizing the struggle for upwards mobility displaced works emphasizing the criminal and deviant aspects of black society. In doing so, narratives of black success often hinged on avoiding controversial or politically charged stances on the direct impact of structural racism on African Americans. Ironically, this topic had found its voice within urban fiction of the 1970s, and became a central part of the black urban hero's aggression. Despite the commercial success of a few works from the early incarnation of urban/ghetto fiction, the political and cultural aesthetics of the moment, particularly the focus on the narrative of black success combined with Holloway House's own model of profit over quality, ensured that urban fiction would remain at the margins of African American literary production. One of the major results of this marginalization was that urban fiction largely became a genre despised for its content, and for what was seen as the poor writing quality of its authors. In addition, the literature that exposed the undersides of urbanization from an insider's point of view was in serious danger of completely vanishing from the public eye. However, this all changed in the

[93] In the same Oxford entry, Bell perhaps more roundly summarizes some of these impulses within African American male literature as: "Before the 1960s the protagonist in the African American novel was generally a male who was part rebel and part victim, striving to define himself in the whirlwind of social and cultural forces that denied or threatened to destroy his humanity."

[94] According to an interview conducted by Justin Gifford, "Harvard in Hell," there was much internal controversy and exploitation between the workers and writers of earl urban fiction and Ralph Weinstock and Bentley Morris, two publicists who started and ran the then premier publishing imprint for urban fiction, Holloway House. The influence of Holloway House expanded to also include black erotica through the addition of Players, a magazine that was aimed at a largely black male audience.

1990s when urban fiction underwent a renaissance which was ushered in by the publication of the first in what became Omar Tyree's trilogy, *Flyy Girl* (1993). *Flyy Girl* introduced the world to Tracee Ellison, who represented the multiple complications of urbanized black adolescence (middle class background, married parents who separate, early sexualization, exposure to drug culture, peer pressure, and the onset of puberty). Continuing on the heels of the momentum started by Omar Tyree, Sister Souljah also introduced a significant character in the form of a teenaged protagonist in her novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), Winter Santiaga.[95] While also a coming of age story, *The Coldest Winter Ever* distinguishes its self through its focus on consequences, especially for young girls participating in alternative socioeconomic models. *The Coldest Winter Ever* was eye opening in the sense that it did not just reveal issues of urbanized life for black teens. Souljah implicitly suggested that even teens participate in these highly dangerous economies and were therefore equally at risk of suffering various bodily and emotional wounds that would undoubtedly create long-lasting psychic traumas. These traumas are especially played out in romantic and other forms of intimate relationships. In the urban fiction genre there is a reprisal of some of the ambivalence towards intimacy that continues from the early contemporary black romance novels. For example, Rosalind Welles's *Entwined Destinies* (1980 represents some of the ambivalence towards heterosexual black romance as being explicitly connected to the repressed feelings of maternal abandonment and displaced black male rage that are revealed to be prime factors affecting the hero's ability to find fulfillment within his romantic relationships with women. The direction of black male rage shifted from being focused at the "enemy" outlined by systemic forces and injustice to a more

[95] In his article, "African American women writers and popular fiction," Herman Beavers explained "the novel [The Coldest Winter Ever] must be understood as a cautionary tale, the intensity of which grows stronger as the novel progresses, culminating when Winter herself is arrested, sent to prison for a fifteen-year sentence and forced to live the life of an incarcerated black woman" (269).

tangible target represented by black women. This is perhaps why in so much of urban fiction prior to the 1990s, black male rage is depicted as a force that drives the action and, more often than not, ends up destroying the home or relationships that they initially wanted to protect.

As a genre, urban fiction focuses on the effects of a lack of intimacy building between the modern black couple. Despite the fact that most of the heroines in urban fiction are depicted as coming from low income, low educated backgrounds, most of the writers of revamped urban fiction are black women who come from middle class backgrounds. The "fall from grace" is meant to imply that despite being statistically positioned for a traditional narrative of success, these women became involved in alternative economies and life paths that derailed the expected push towards upwards mobility. As authors, these are women who, much like Terry McMillan from the previous chapter, have grown up observing or being trapped in emotionally and sometimes physically abusive relationships. This is not an attempt to in any way flatten the work done by urban fiction as a genre on a variety of levels, nor is it meant to collapse the uniqueness of the subjective view of those authors producing work within this genre. Rather, this statement is meant to acknowledge the truism that much of the writing done by the authors in this particular genre has some basis in real world situations and encounters. Thus, the influence of personal experiences with not just criminal life but broken black relationships does carry a massive and critically important weight that influences many of the interactions that take place within the realm of the novel. Furthermore, the emergence of black women into urban fiction, a genre that was geared so heavily to expressions of black male rage, was fueled by the anger at systemic oppressions being redirected into the community and home. While domestic violence cut across all class lines, a common element that seems to connect black women who write in the

urban fiction genre is a preoccupation with the ways in which black intimacy continues to be shaped by the post-Civil Rights imperative of social ascendancy through success.

The renaissance of the urban novel in the 1990s revealed a major thematic shift away from black male rage as the sole driving point of the urbanized experience. Instead, in what has remained a rather provocative engagement with feminism, the urban fiction novel from the 1990s onwards has taken great strides to create a space in which motifs of black female self-destruction are explored. As the beginning of the modern renaissance in urban fiction, both Omar Tyree and Sister Souljah's works must at least be mentioned; however, these particular novels are not the most appropriate ones for fostering the conversation central to this chapter. These novels feature protagonists who are in many ways awakening to their sexual selves. The primary point of the heroine's engagement with the plot is to learn the limits of her personal boundaries of acceptable expressions of sexuality. However, Teri Woods' *True to the Game* (1996) provides deeper exploration and insight into black romance in an urban setting, and builds on the idea of female self-destruction as a response to the pressures of black respectability politics. In a comment about her decision to pursue urban fiction over a genre that had netted great financial success such as those produced by Terry McMillan, Teri states:

> "I think it is hard for a publishing house to grasp the diversity of black people in a book and understand it without a concept. I got a letter from a famous black writer saying I should write about being black in corporate America. They're accustomed to that kind of story because of Terry McMillan, who thank God, opened the gate. But Terry McMillan didn't open any doors for me; Sister Souljah did with her writing."[96]

This is a provocative statement precisely because it illustrates the sense of disconnect as both a reader and author that Teri Woods felt from the type of writing being produced in popular literature by African American women. Black women's popular fiction, perhaps because of its

[96] Nadira Hira's interview, "Curling Up With Teri Woods." Savoy 3.6 (2003): p. 42.

focus on female empowerment, almost always seemed to depict either the female success narrative or a successful woman who was struggling with her success. These novels preserved a dream in which there was a direct correspondence between success and the will to achieve. The pressures in these narratives often stemmed from internal insecurities within the heroine. Yet, these narratives ignore the very real forces of systemic oppression, violence, and extreme poverty. The black female success narrative became a pervasive trope as a result of keeping the experience of "fallen" black women at the margins, a fact of black women's popular literary production that was first upset by Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever*.

In the process of carving out their own distinct sense of feminine identity, the protagonists at the heart of urban fiction are depicted as complex heroines who recognize not only their victimization within their communities, but also challenge the idea that the culture of respectability ensconced within the world of the upwardly mobile elite actually affords black women any protection against systemic victimization. In doing so, urban fiction as conceptualized by black women authors often uses materiality as a way to discuss not just class position, but also to interrogate the larger cultural treatment of black women as disposable objects, ones who are overly concerned with sexual and material gratification.[97] In the previous chapters, I suggested the ways in which class and this notion of the ideal of the successful black woman became one of the central themes of black chick lit. However, for this chapter the focus is on the ways in which urban black women from the poor working class rejected the ideal of black female success while seemingly embracing other components of late 1990s black feminist

[97] Herman Beaver's essay, "African American Women Writers and Popular Fiction: Theorizing Black Womanhood," makes the point about the strong lack of academic inquiry into women's popular fiction that I believe to be most compelling in its reasoning. Beaver suggests that there is widespread distrust by literary critics towards "popular fiction, as cultural content produced in accordance with industrial and corporate procedures that seek to limit production and labor costs, market to selected demographic sectors, and achieve the largest return investment" (264).

identity. As such, the women represented in the modern urban fiction novel expose true romantic intimacy as being the most dangerous to the maintenance of black female spiritual wholeness and health.

Thus, this chapter will discuss three aspects of the cultural moment that shaped black women's engagement with urban fiction from the mid-1990s to the first decade of the 21st century. One has to understand that black writers in the urban fiction genre were responding to black respectability politics, monolithic models of black female success, and fractured black female friendships. These factors, when put together, suggests that rather than being passive victims the heroines of urban fiction often evince anger, aggressiveness, and self-destruction as tools that, when framed next to their sexuality, will afford them access to the financial if not emotional security assumed to be the sole domain of black women in the middle class.

Urban Fiction and the Politics of Black Respectability

From a historical standpoint, urban fiction is intrinsically connected to the rise of the professional class in African American communities during the 1980s. Thus, it should be considered as the mirror genre of the "girlfriend" or chick lit that began appearing in the latter part of the 1980s via artists such as Terry McMillian. The voices of the middle class began to proliferate in African American letters as a major response to "[s]tereotypes that regard the black middle class as sellouts [which] help police black identity around narrowly defined ideals of authentic blackness" (Thompson 54). Whereas Terry McMillan's work chronicles the narrative of success and the pitfalls therein for African Americans, Teri Woods's first novel, *True to the Game* (1994) examines the simultaneous underbelly that runs parallel to the socially prescribed measurements of success, i.e. employability as envisioned by attaining a college degree or

starting a business by perfecting a trade. In addition, there was increasing instability within African American communities across the nation that was caused in no small part by the crack epidemic.[98] From the mid-1980s until the 1990s the African American community was besieged by waves of violent crime, and families were devastated by three strike laws and disproportionate sentencing practices for those caught selling crack cocaine.[99] This is the cultural moment that is running in the backdrop for Teri Woods's narrative. *True to the Game*'s location spans from West Philadelphia to Harlem New York, and reflects the world that Woods most readily identified with. In Woods' own words:

> "The urban fiction movement has given a voice to the struggle of inner-city black folks. They come from everything that's broken—broken homes, broken families, broken neighborhoods— and to feel that no one cares and, even worse, to be born into systemic structure that's not built on the principles of even allowing people to stand a chance, then its valuable. At least it's valuable to me."[100]

True to the Game is the type of writing that would not be considered a "novel' in the more literary sense of having fully fleshed out characters and of following a clear plot structure that exactly mimics the five part structure of exposition, rising actions, climax, denouement, and conclusion. Indeed, *True to the Game*, like a lot of urban fiction is a premier example of a plot driven novel. There are a wide number of characters who enter into the scene and leave with

[98] According to information provided by DrugFreeWorld.org, "The biggest surge in the use of the drug occurred during the "crack epidemic," between 1984 and 1990, when the drug spread across American cities. The crack epidemic dramatically increased the number of Americans addicted to cocaine. In 1985, the number of people who admitted using cocaine on a routine basis increased from 4.2 million to 5.8 million." African American communities were disproportionately affected by the epidemic.

[99] In *Survival of the African American Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* (2003), K. Sue Jewell reports that an annual study conducted by the NHSDA in 1998, revealed that for the years occurring between 1991-1993 whites made up 82 percent of drug dealers (compared to only 16 percent of African Americans) but the actual number of arrests for drug related charges was higher for African Americans in the years spanning over a twenty year period from 1979 to 1998. As Jewell points out, "The federal drug trafficking laws that established mandatory sentencing for the possession and trafficking of crack cocaine and powder cocaine enacted by Congress in 1986 and 1988 result in racial disparities in sentencing that contribute to longer sentences being given to African Americans" (191).

[100] The quote above was taken from a "Q & A." The interview was published in the *Library Journal*.

equal frequency, so much so that it becomes hard to pinpoint exact details from the plotline and harder to sympathize with a particular character's situation. Instead, the reader is kept at the edge of their seat as they are reading the novel by the human or psychological quality with which Woods dissects what she called the fast pasted lifestyle. A "love" story centered on nineteen-year-old party girl, Gena, and her romantic interest Quadir, which is contextualized amidst the backdrop of the fast paced lifestyle of the inner-city at the dawn of the crack epidemic era. The plot of *True to the Game* shifts quickly and is narrated from the perspective of various characters, so that the reader comes to understand a little bit about what is motivating each character. As the first in what has blossomed into a trilogy of novels (*True to the Game II* [2007]) and *True to the Game III*, [2008]), *True to the Game: A Fable* suggests much about the drive for class ascendancy and the all-encompassing obsession with status that trickles down from the middle to lower classes.

As a story, *True to the Game* brings attention to a few of the issues that trouble the dynamics within contemporary African American relationships. Most notably in these relationships are persistent and stagnant notions of the respective needs of men and women. For example, even though some may rightly conclude that Gena is a "gold digger," her pursuit of financial capital is woven around her need for stability. For her, stability means not having to constantly worry about whether or not the bills will be paid or if there will be a roof over her head. Relationships are conceived of as being transactional rather than emotional exchanges that can better her social position. Likewise, the men that she has been involved with showered her with material goods as a way to promote their own finesse as providers and as negotiators of traditional roles of black masculinity. She knows that in the environment in which she was raised, a sexual liaison is the best way to obtain middle class normalcy.

For many African Americans, the achievement of progressive normalcy became a major goal of the Civil Rights movement. This goal fueled the literary recuperative advancement of the late 1960s and has driven the rise of the black middle class. The influence of respectability politics on the development of the urban fiction genre must be fully understood in order to understand some of the conceits within the genre.[101] This is because, as Nicole King points out, "black class aspiration, or upward class mobility, mostly pursued and realized through educational advancement and material acquisition, has occupied contradictory and competing status within representations of the so-called black US community" (212).[102] The middle class novels of black life during the 1980s/early1990s attempted to remove or dismiss narratives of *blatant* pathology, wishing to instead redraw class lines and lend a different type of authority to their social critiques. The weight of these critiques stem from a system of coded behaviors, most of which are aimed explicitly at preserving the respectability of middle class African Americans by controlling the public image of black women. As scholars Aisha Durham, Brittney Cooper, and Susana Morris have summarized, "the politics of respectability describes a range of strategies, largely regarding notions of honor, self-respect, piety, and propriety, deployed by progressive black women to promote racial uplift and women's rights and to secure broader access to the public sphere" (724).[103] Hence, the focus on black women and men who have achieved success within socially accepted professions. By virtue of its focus, crime and the

[101] In the politics of (heterosexual) intimacy the "terms of the relationship, even in fictive situations, are historically based and lend their characters an attitude, more or less suitable to them" (89). Hortense J. Spillers discussion, "The Politics of Intimacy," explains that the suitableness of characterization is so because it delves into the overly deterministic prescription of gender based behavior roles, i.e. "a locking of female and male destiny" (89). The larger point that is seems to be underscored in Spillers essay is that healthy black male and female interactions can take place once the proscription of gender roles have been dropped.

[102] King, Nicole. "You Think Like You White": Questioning Race and Racial Community through the Lens of Middle-Class Desire (s)." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction.* Duke U P. 2002. Print.

[103] See "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay."

everyday problems and decisions facing the struggling classes of African Americans were not being represented and recognized in the literary output. Thus, urban fiction whether as a masculine or feminine genre, attempts to shed light on those who live outside of the more accepted narrative of class ascendency.[104]

Gena explicitly links her potential for class ascendancy with control over her sexuality. One underlying assumption being made by Gena is that sex is only a tool, and like any tool it can be honed and used to acquire a better living circumstance. Only after assessing his potential material worth does Gena decide that she would be willing to entertain interactions of a sexual nature with Qaudir. Extending the metaphor of "the game," the reader should understand that for Gena, and by implication, the women with whom she is also associated, sex is the main arena through which one can "win" a relationship that will secure their livelihoods and open the door to a more stable existence. Thus, it is important to note the rest of the comment made by Gena: "Gena and Sahirah dropped down, way down, for the lifestyle that they were living. The only way to not give the sisters their props was if they weren't getting paper. Thoroughbreds of the streets, getting money was what it was all about, and any way you could get it, you were supposed to" (6). Rather than entering relationships for emotional fulfillment, Gena has embraced the idea of avidly searching for someone who can fulfill her class ambitions.

True to the Game: Sex and Material Access

Teri Woods's narrative demonstrates one critical point of departure from the early chick lit of the 1990s; chiefly this has to do with the perception of women's possibilities. While the

[104] Referring to the cultural notion that one can better their economic situation and class status through the pursuit of formal education and opportunities that are actively sought or learned about from contacts within the professional networks of a career field.

chick lit produced by authors such as Terry McMillan often showcased black women who were well educated and possessed with a unshakeable belief in their professional abilities, many of the heroines central to urban fiction are women who, much like Woods, do not have a college educated background or necessarily have equal access to various improvement opportunities. Thus, Gena and the women with whom she briefly associates as the narrative progresses are in effect women who exist outside of the media hyped wave of female empowerment and models of business ownership that arose in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s. Without skills and education to fall back on, some women continued to feel that their worth as women was entirely bound up with their ability to enter into relationships with men who had shown their potential as providers. In addition, sex becomes a means to an end. In doing so, this strips away all of the positive power imbued within chick lit's reclaiming of sex as the site of feminine pleasure. Rather, women's sexual and emotional gratification is treated more as a byproduct than an active goal of their relationships.[105]

In the opening pages Gena makes it clear that there is an association between sex and material access.[106] She is accompanying her best friend Sahirah to a club in Harlem when Sahirah spots what seems to be a really nice and expensive car driven by two black men who also happen to be physically attractive. Sahirah whips her car around and flags the car down. Sahirah immediately focuses on the driver of the car as she assumes he is the car's owner. Gena

[105] Referencing to the point established by Elizabeth Marshall et al: "Driven by fast plots and intriguing characters, urban street fiction titles are a quick read. The protagonist often surmounts barriers by relying on her sensuality as well as her abilities to manipulate dangerous situations. Often, a dramatic event takes place within the first two chapters of these books. Although conflicts exists between the main character and society at large, internal conflicts also exists within and between characters. Money and sex are used as vices of manipulation" (31). See "Ghetto Fabulous: Reading Black Adolescent Femininity in contemporary Urban Street Fiction."

[106] To return to a point raised by Herman Beavers, "Urban romances that end with successful couplings between black men and women are not, as some might argue, instances where black women subordinate their desires in order to capitulate to the demands of patriarchy. Rather, they often create novelistic closure by juxtaposing the couple's happiness against the demands of the material world" (267).

thinks, “How convenient…Sahirah gets the driver and I get the passenger” (2). Thus, Gena’s initial meeting with Qaudir Richards encapsulates a sense of great disappointment, despite her reaction to his physical looks. While conversing with Qaudir, Gena takes note of “the diamond bezel Rolex he had on.” In much the same way that the car was the original point of attraction, jewelry and accessories can also be indicators of the level of financial security that a man has access to, in the case of Gena and her friend, they are seeking men who can translate the intangible aspects of a relationship into material goods.

While materiality and the preoccupation with owning things are a part of the ghetto lifestyle, the true focus in terms of development is on the way that an individual’s reasoning changes with criminal success. It is a move inwards and not outwards as one would automatically presume from the hyper-visual associations of “the ghetto” as a space in the media. In more direct terms, the “ghetto mentality” is one marked not just by an obsession for the finer aspects of life, but by a mind that is literally in constant survival mode. The acquisition of assets is one way to ensure that the individual or family unit is able to maintain some semblance of normalcy. Being “mainstream” or “normal” is equated with being fixated on class status and wealth. The egotistical aspects of the ghetto mentality are extremely pronounced through first person narrations. In this state the narrator remains ever watchful, and often produces inter-social and ethical perspectives that are at odds with one another. An example of this from *True to the Game* is being raised in a highly religious and moral home but continuing to pursue a lifestyle that could be considered decidedly immoral. Typically, this produces moments of counter-intuitive behavior, leading the character to life changing mistakes. This assertion proves no less true in the case of Teri Wood’s heroine, Gena.

Underlying Gena's first meeting with Quadir is an unspoken assumption that Quadir participates in, "the game." In this case, the game refers to the trafficking or marketing of narcotics. While this is revealed to be true, Gena reacts to Quadir's advances with a degree of assuredness about her feminine role as someone tangential to the players within "the game." This is because Gena is already used to dealing with men who are employed within the informal economy of the drug trade. As is pointed out just a few pages after Gena meets Quadir, "When the Junior Mafia began to spread cocaine throughout the city, money began to flow like water from the faucet, and niggas were givin' it up like it was leaves on trees" (6). Thus, Gena has learned to mentally associate wealth and status with the men who participate in the drug scene, and has made a conscious decision to embrace the occupation of "drug dealer" as a lucrative and viable career for her potential partner. Even in what may seem like a straightforward decision regarding a relationship there is a great deal of class based ideology being rejected. Take for example the model of the ideal partner ensconced within the middle class romance; this is usually someone who is often defined by his skill with navigating through the same systemic forces that limit the majority of black men from entering into the upper middle class. The street hustler is recognized as being the more "realistic" and "attainable" counterpart to the black male professional explored in *Entwined Destinies*. In *True to the Game* the street hustler is presented as being a more attainable romantic partner both because of Gena's overall exposure to men heavily involved in "street life" and because of their shared socioeconomic backgrounds.

Not unlike the heroines from the romance novel(s) discussed in chapter 2, Gena forms romantic relationships with the men whom she is most likely to encounter in the course of her daily life. Since Gena is a major party girl, she is always in the club scene where there is an increased risk of drug related activity and crime going down. In addition to the types of men she

encounters, there are certain types of behavior or attitudes towards women that Gena sees and accepts as being a normal part of "being with" or romantically associating with a man. For example, she expects her love interest to be controlling and possessive to some degree. She also normalizes physical and verbal violence as a part of the typical relationship experience. Intimacy and romance become internalized as destructive forces. The reason that she normalizes this behavior is because she is someone whose daily interactions and therefore decisions are directly impacted by an extremely negative view on intimacy and the nonexistent experience with romance as a healing force. This view on intimacy is a major point on which urban fiction differs greatly from chick lit.

Since the early 20th century, marriage was constructed as another way for African Americans to establish claims at legitimacy, and therefore a way of demarcating morality as part of class status. Marriage and its associated traditions were adopted as "many newly freed blacks responded by donning the trappings and conventions of 'civilized society'—including the hegemonic ideology of monogamous marriage" (DuCille, 15). For African American women of the middle classes, true feminine achievement and success continue to be connected to their ability to land not only career accolades but the husband who was equally yoked. As noted in the previous discussion of McMillan's work, black women in the middle class continue to be haunted by the specter of idealized black romance. This is because there remains as ever, an intrinsic connection between class and sexuality. Marriage as a sign of class status remains deeply entrenched in the notion of the ideal American family as a two parent home with a high earning male figurehead at the center.[107]

[107] Paraphrasing from Judith Stacy's article "Scents, Scholars, and Stigma: The Revisionist Campaign for Family Values."

Because of the focus on middle class black couples in romance fiction and in the more recognizable black romance presses such as Kimani and Arabesque, the working and poor class were denied sexual and intimate literary representation. By making sex outside of the explicit context of marriage something deviant, it reinforces an imaginary line between the explorations of black sexuality. The black underclass expression of sexuality is brought into focus through its constant negation. The major response of black popular culture to the increasing availability of black models of courtship and intimacy was to eventually make the central assumption that legitimization was solely part of the middle class experience. This is to say that writers of ghetto fiction seek to refute the limiting and harmful images and state of modern "blackness" by reimaging interactions between black men and women, as primarily interactions between the forces of economics and race. For women, this is embodied by the figure of the 1980s black lady: that of a woman both college-educated, happily married to a black husband equally as educated, in addition to being both emotionally and financially supportive of the family. However, as we moved from the 1980s into 2015 the increasing social reality of unequal representation in higher education between black women and men has often placed educated black women in precarious dating pools wherein they are unable to find these equally matched partners.[108]

It is then best for the women featured in urban fiction to remain somewhat emotionally detached as these interactions are more about commercial exchange than intimacy. Prior to

[108] Since the 1990s there are many studies that examine this imbalance and its wider significance in terms of romantic intra-racial competition between Black women competing for men from the same dating pool. These studies point to economics as the biggest reason behind the failure of Black romance. Black women, having attained higher education, often end up earning more than Black men. For a more comprehensive examination of the influence of culture in the construction of Black relationship's see Clyde W. Franklin's "Black Male-Female Conflict: Individually Caused and Culturally Nurtured," *Journal of Black Studies* (1984), and Sandra Barnes's "Romantic and Familial Relationships with Black Males: Implications of the Cinderella Complex and Prince Charming Ideal," *Black Women, Gender and Families* (2009).

agreeing to accompany her best friend on her manhunt in New York's clubs, Gena was involved in a relationship with Jamal, someone who was very controlling and physically abusive. When she returns from a night out, for example, she sees Jamal's car parked in front of her house, and infers that he has spent the night watching for her to return home. Immediately, he starts questioning her about where she has been and who she has been with. While Jamal proceeds to publically humiliate Gena by calling her a "trick" and assaulting her in front of her apartment. Gena thinks about how quickly their relationship had soured. After Jamal has finished his tirade against her, she explains that, "[o]nce she was finished poring over her purchases, hardly remembering any of them, she put them away and realized that she was happier at that moment then she'd ever been, but didn't know why" (10). Gena's happiness is directly linked with the new clothes that are filling up her closet space, clothes that Jamal had bought for her. Jamal's money solidified the start of their relationship and is the only reason that she has tried to maintain the idea of a real relationship.

The depth of Gena's obsession with materiality is also reinforced via the brief "girlfriend" centered conversations that occur around Gena's then still ongoing relationship with Jamal. Not only was Gena's beating highly public, but it is suggested that the beatings she receives are justifiable. There was no one that attempted to intercede on her behalf because she remained with Jamal after the first altercation. Furthermore, it is suspected because of her background as a party girl that she is doing something to justify Jamal's rage. Indeed, their assumption of Gena's misbehavior is verified when she refuses the flowers that Jamal attempts to bring to her in apology for his actions and she informs first the neighbor who checks in on her after her beating about the call that she received from Quadir, the new man she has met in New York. After she meets with Quadir she officially breaks off her relationship with Jamal. As she is

getting her hair done in the beauty parlor, Gena explains that "it wasn't working, Bev. I care about him, but I can't see myself being with him" (29). Bev, the hairdresser, responds to Gena's announcement with the observation that she does not seem to be emotionally affected by the break up. Bev is fishing for more information concerning Gena's seeming complete lack of reaction to her breakup with Jamal, as Bev presumes that Gena's only source of income is possibly ending.

Bev says "I don't believe you're letting you're Jamal go. He treated you real good" (29).[109] Of course, Bev is conflating what she calls "good" treatment with Jamal's propensity for spending money on Gena. She is ignoring the abusive and controlling aspects of Gena's relationship with Jamal. When Gena responds to her comment with the suggestion that "[m]oney can't buy love" (29) she is met with the assertion that, "it can buy mine" (29). The underlying suggestion within this exchange of "girlfriend" talk is that as long as she is being taken care of by Jamal, she should continue to try and make a relationship with him work. Even if "making it work" sometimes involves receiving a beating and dealing with controlling behavior. Implicit not only in the blasé way that Gena details her very public physical abuse, but also the reactions from the various people within her social network, is a narrative in which violence is almost normalized as a way to show commitment and affection. It is also assumed to be the price that a woman must pay if she wants to better her situation through her intimate connections. Gena remains trapped in this cycle. Even though she decided to pursue a relationship with a new man, she still has not stopped the caustic linking of sex and access to upper class privileges. Rather than assuming that a new relationship with Quadir can a mark opportunity to grow independently, Gena proceeds with her romantic pursuit of Quadir as she would with any new

[109] This quoted exactly as it appears in the primary text.

hustle. However, Quadir manages to break through the deeply ingrained ideas that Gena held about relationships only as sources of commercial exchange and inspire real emotion in Gena.

There are surprisingly few moments dedicated to Quadir's motivations. Throughout the novel there is a deep implication that Quadir is a beloved community figure. This is in part because he literally employs various people in his illicit business that would otherwise be almost fully dependent on subsisting on the meager allotment received from welfare and social security. More importantly though, the people within the community view Quadir as someone that they can depend on when they need help. As such, most people in the community have turned a blind eye to Quadir's particular business. They are willing to ignore the effects of Quadir's empire because, despite the fact that he earns a living pushing drugs, he remains a symbol of hope for the community. A strong leader, charismatic, and well ordered, Quadir has qualities that Gena comes to appreciate. Ironically, Teri Woods utilizes the exact same qualities found within contemporary black romance heroes and relentlessly pursued in the professional black male of chick fiction, to construct a character that excels outside of the prescribed model of success.

Indeed, Quadir's background made his success possible. Quadir grew up in a stable two parent home where education was prioritized. Superficially, this seems like the beginnings of a firm foundation for a respectable lifestyle. To a certain extent, Quadir does follow the path of respectability. As he informs Gena "he was 25, with no kids graduated from college with a bachelor's in psychology" (82), meaning he had some advanced formal education and skills that could have landed him a legitimate job had he chosen to enter into his career field. Instead, he uses the skills he learned to better his relationships with the community and with the men, teenagers really, working under him. To them he is not just a symbol of pointless authority, as many of the adults they have encountered are, but a model of black male potential that takes

responsibility for those in his community and close social circles. Thus, Quadir is actually viewed as a positive role model for inner-city youth because he continues to try and rebuild what he destroys within the community through his drug trade. However, Quadir's story is not a simple glamorization of the crime lifestyle. Upon further reflection Quadir's narrative fragments also reveal the subsequent struggle and failure for a respectable life that he watched his parents go through. He first explains, "he grew up in a fucked up part of North Philly and was poor until his pops started running street numbers and robbing banks. His dad opened a little store, and from there he bought a few properties and basically paid his bills on time and established a solid line of credit" (82). Quadir, like his father, simply wants to accumulate money and then retire gracefully and settle into the upper class. His wish for retirement is repeated in the few snapshots that he narrates; however, his wish for retirement is compounded by the starting of a turf war with an up and coming gang that is increasingly bringing what seemed to be a rather abstract concept of the danger of street life into clear and present reality for Quadir. As members of his group die or are jailed, he knows that his dream of peaceful retirement and perhaps his budding relationship with Gena are being endangered by his continued involvement with the street life. For this reason, the fact that he now has someone who he believes he can finally be his unguarded self around, Quadir demands assurance of Gena's complete commitment.

As a result of her encounter with Quadir, Gena begins to undergo a subtle change in her understanding of relationships between men and women. She agrees to go out of town with Quadir just a few days after having met him. Gena agrees to the trip with the full expectation that sex will be a major part of the "bonding" experience. However, she is surprised when Quadir asks her what her preferences are regarding room arrangements. His consideration towards her was a welcomed surprise. In addition to his consideration, Quadir also shows Gena what real

affection should be. He touches her without the intent of violence or sex. As Gena observes while lying in Quadir's arms, "of all she had done and all the places she had been, all the men, every single last 29 of them. They might have fed her, brought her something, laid her body down and gave her a couple of dollars, but none of them simply got in the bed and held her" (40). Even though Gena's "relationships" with men are extensive, her actual dealings with intimacy and emotional connections are almost nonexistent. Gena's realization is highly potent precisely because rather than actual relationship building she has only been doing what may loosely be termed serial dating, where sex was the only priority.

Quadir has something that has been missing from the male heroes discussed thus far: he is more emotionally balanced. To start off with, while Quadir does have definite perceptions concerning black women, i.e. he spends the beginning of his courtship with Gena waiting for her to use sex to try and manipulate him into purchasing materials for her, but he is not so wedded to those preconceptions that he cannot tell when a woman is being genuine with her expressions of affection. While Quadir is initially physically attracted to Gena, he is also interested in her at times blunt personality. Gena's bluntness allows Quadir to feel that he can be equally as honest and direct with her in his intentions. Fully aware of Gena's relationship history, and more importantly, her propensity for having a fling when she gets bored with the direction her "relationships" have taken or seem to be heading, Quadir informs Gena that not only is she "on a trial period" but he will not personally be monitoring her every move as he has many acquaintances throughout the area that can and will report any sexual misconduct on her part directly to him. Rather than viewing this as a move that rehashes the control of her prior relationship Jamal, Gena understands this as being an expression of Quadir's intent to start a

serious relationship with her. She is struck by both his maturity and his honest interest in her outside of the sexual arena.

Under the family values rhetoric embodied by Ronald Reagan's politics, single parent families headed by black and Latina women became prime examples of the ongoing attempt to marginalize specific segments of racial groups. Black female sexuality without the prospect of marriage remains criminalized by social reform policy and characterized as examples of social deviance. In her article, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," Cathy J. Cohen does a strong job illustrating how certain groups, despite their heterosexual linings, continued to be marginalized by America's obsession with family and sexuality. Cohen further explains this position by suggesting that: "sexuality and sexual deviance from a prescribed norm have been used to demonize and to oppress various segments of the population" (259). She first delineates the systemic structure of racism that has undergirded the definition of family in America, a definition that "as viewed through the lens of profit and domination and the ideology of white supremacy, were reconfigured [around marriage and heterosexuality] to justify the exploitation and regulation of black bodies, even those presumably engaged in heterosexual behavior" (257). Riding on the strength of Reagan's "Cadillac-driving, steak eating, welfare Queens" (259) myth, the black family continued to be represented as a stain to America's construction of family and as a structure deeply entangled within a web of irrevocable pathology. While Cohen's argument emerges out of a queer studies critique, her notions also suggest why deviant narratives of sexuality were treated as a threat to the normative stability sought by black respectability politics. The idea of sexual pathology has been specifically linked to perceived notions of poor working class women as promiscuous and as unable or unwilling to control their reproductive health. Yet, with a fuller understanding of how Gena has developed through her relationship with

Quadir, it becomes apparent that, rather than reveling in narratives of pathology, the urban fiction novel picks up right where the fantasy of the middle class romance leaves off.

Urban fiction, because of the focus on decision making, and the life and death consequences that often result because of those choices, presents situations where sexuality is completely disconnected from the aim of securing class status through marriage. Sex is used as tool and as a method to reestablish female dominance within systems that are often outside of a woman's control. Sex without the pretention of marriage or romance seems to be embracing the pathologized sexual history ascribed to black women since slavery. It is this understanding of the genre, one that only embraces existing models of black sexual pathology that have made a few black female authors highly uncomfortable. As an example of this consider this letter from Terry McMillan to Karen Hunter and Simon and Schuster:

> Karen, you should be ashamed of yourself, but like Jonathan, I can tell that you (along with your sister-in-law Wendy Williams) are all cut from the same cloth. You care nothing about pride as a Black woman or you wouldn't align yourself or even put your name on some of the ugliest words and stories possible. You are an embarrassment and for someone going around bragging about being a Pulitzer Prize winner (which I understand you are not, that you were associated with other writers at the Daily News who actually deserved it) you should be ashamed of yourself for relying on such a prestigious literary prize to co-write some of the despicable and outrageously base books that you can. I find it sad indeed when a Black woman of your so-called reputation was willing to help my ex-husband write a tell-all describing "the juicy details" about our so-called relationship. You know he is a liar and a thief and that he played me and you didn't care. As long as you got paid, and this is precisely why no one (last week I understand according to Book Scan a whopping 600 copies had sold nationwide, and only 87 on the entire west coast) is buying it. Karinne "Superhead's" book is tanking just like Balancing Act, and RJ's book is not going to fly either.[110]

Terry McMillan's letter flashes on a couple of points. First, the marketing of the primary author of the *Balancing Act*, Johnathan Plummer by Simon and Schuster, made it clear that the

[110] The text is taken from an AALBC affiliated discussion forum, *Thumper'sCorner*. The open letter was posted with permission from Terry McMillan herself. The letter in its entirety can be accessed: http://www.thumperscorner.com/discus/messages/30702/30333.html?1198798304

novel is written by McMillan's ex-husband. The author blurb published on Simon and Schuster's website is clear in citing this information as the headlining feature of attraction for Johnathan Plummer's work. McMillan is enraged by the implied association between herself and this novel and the use of the very public and dramatic divorce as a tool in the marketing strategy. Most importantly, McMillan is angered by the attempt to ghettoize what for her was her realization of middle class romance. Her personal attacks of Karen Hunter reveal a deep-seated sense of shock at the professional and class betrayal of a celebrated black woman such as Karen Hunter. Terry McMillan feared what all black women who become a part of the professional middle class fear, the exposure of the sexual and deeply intimate self. While this letter never received widespread media circulation, perhaps because Simon and Shuster did not respond to McMillan's email, the email makes a series of indictments against Karen Hunter that stem directly from black respectability politics and class standards that she believes Karen Hunter broke in pursuit of profit. As McMillan outlines chief among these is the fact that a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, someone whose work has been recognized by one of the highest literary authorities, would resort to publishing black fiction that celebrates non-heterosexual intimacy, an element that is also vastly reviled as a form of sexual deviancy among the underclass.

From a critical standpoint, representations of black female sexuality continue to remain tangential if not outright largely ignored in the literary engagements of canonical African American authors.[111] Part of the difficulty with productively discussing the issue of female sexuality has been that it is deeply entangled with historically specific notions of victimization

[111] Evelyn Hammond's essay, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," makes it clear that the critical silence is problematic because The problem of this critical silence is that it leaves in place the idea of a pathological black sexuality, and continues to represent a version of cultural history in line with a narrative of the agrarian south. As it relates to a later point made by Hammonds, black feminist have still not figured out how to not only deconstruct these models but have remained trapped in coping strategies developed by black middle class women throughout the same period.

and promiscuity. These two notions have long been the fuel for the political and social representation of black women as sexually deviant and morally bankrupt. As such, the primary battle of representation for black women has been with defining themselves as women who are spiritually whole and pure. In this quest there was no room to deal with "black feminine pleasure" or desire. In terms of the history surrounding feminist production, "While white elite women's sexual history has included the long effort to break down Victorian assumptions of sexuality and respectability in order to gain control of their sexual selves, [b]lack women's sexual history has required the struggle to be accepted as respectable in an effort to gain control of their sexual selves" (Barkley Brown, 292). Thus, one of the most lasting stigmas as it relates to African American women's literature has to do with the presence of the overtly erotic self. The overtly erotic seems threatening to middle class sensibilities because: "Black women's sexuality is often concealed, that is [b]lack women, especially middle-class women, have learned to present a public image that never reveals their sexuality" (Barkley Brown, 292). As a genre, the urban fiction produced by black women seeks to reestablish a connection between the black feminine and the erotic self. After all, this becomes the source of female competition, which is another facet of the middle class romance novel that is being interrogated by urban fiction's recognition of black female community as fractured.

Sexual Competition and Fractured Black Female Community

Sex is not just about individual pleasure. Since, in the urban fiction narrative, it is deeply entrenched within the world of respectability and financial stability, sex is also a way to showcase feminine prowess. In certain situations, sex becomes a marker of female success if a woman is able to net the most coveted male within the community or if she is able to capture the

embodiment of the ideal marriage partner. For this reason, sex also becomes an arena in which some urban fiction heroines see themselves in direct competition with one another. In *True To the Game* this facet is brought to the foreground via the close friendship shared between Gena, and her lifelong friend and fellow "gold digger" Sahirah. It was Sahirah who first spotted Quadir and engaged him and his friend in conversation. Initially Gena is not impressed with Quadir because he was not driving the fancy car that had drawn Sahirah's eye. Earlier, I explained the disappointment encapsulated in the initial meeting between Gena and Quadir. Indeed, after the meeting Sahirah teases Gena about being upset because she got the number for the driver of the car. However, when Sahirah discovers that Quadir is a millionaire she informs Gena that Quadir has been obsessing over her. She agrees to not pursue Quadir after making Gena promise "to take her shopping" (20) because she has won "the jack pot" in terms of partners. While Sahirah does step aside for her best friend, she herself remains fixated on social status. Her urge drives her to rapidly date her way through Quadir's group and members from a competing organization with the explicit hope that she, like Gena, will be able to find another millionaire drug dealer to take care of her.

Even as Gena is growing in her relationship with Quadir, Sahirah is placed in a position where she has to make a decision to either grow past her obsession with social status or continue down a self-destructive path. While out clubbing with a drug runner named Winston, Sahirah is approached by a former fling and also drug runner, Ra. Ra tries to get Sahirah to leave with him. Ra's feelings as he approached Sahirah was that he "took her personal, that he felt something for her and wanted to be with her, just her, if just for a minute or longer than that. He wanted her time" (49). Ra tried to get Sahirah to leave with him both out of sexual attraction and out of sense of commitment. Unable to distinguish between "game" and true interest, Sahirah thinks

about the status that she has from being Winston's primary girl. When Ra presses her further, Sahirah asks him if he really needs her to come. To which Ra replies, "Look at him with those girls. That's disrespectful to you, and you know it. How you gonna let him play you like that? I would never disrespect you like that. You should have been stepped off " (50). Even as Ra reveals his deeper concern with her emotional wellbeing, Sahirah can only think about how much status she would lose if she were dumped or abandoned by Winston. Status is more important than even her self-respect and this is why she chooses to go back to Winston's side. She thinks that, "Being the one Winston and his Mercedes went home with would confer royalty on her, and she wanted to be Queen Sahirah" (50). Because of her obsession with status, Sahirah decided to leave with Winston and is caught in the crossfire as his car is shot up (also by a former flame of hers). While Winston survives, Sahirah dies almost instantly. Prior to the shooting, Winston was contemplating when he should leave Sahirah; after the shooting he was so concerned with his own pain that he did not immediately realize that Sahirah had been wounded until he tried to move her.

Sahirah's death is important for two reasons; first it explores the end of the self-destructive motif that persists when one views relationships as simply transactional. Secondly, Sahirah is Gena's bestfriend. As friends, these two have been partners in crime, chasing men throughout metropolitan areas. Given the strides Gena made both in her relationship with Quadir and as a person, she and Sahirah would have quickly grown apart as Sahirah's obsession would have turned to pure jealously towards Gena. From a narrative stand point, Sahirah's death is necessary as it prevents the potential destruction of female friendship between her and Gena. This is a conflict that is guaranteed by the fact that Gena had found the ideal partner, while Sahira continued to date men across all drug related organizations. Sahira would have felt

inferior as a woman to Gena and would have thus tried to seduce Quadir from her. However, with Sahirah's death, Gena can not only mourn the loss of her friend, but she also is free to close this chapter of her life as she finally begins to emotionally commit to a real relationship. While this estimation of how Gena's growth would have altered her close friendship with Sahira may seem to be an over-reading, validation underscoring this interpretation is contextualized by Gena's immediate interactions with other black women in her social circle. Indeed, Gena is not allowed to properly mourn Sahira's passing before her prowess as a woman is challenged.

Gena finds out about Sahirah's death after she returns from an out of town trip with Quadir. In her period of mourning, she sits in her house alone for a few days without contact or emotional support from any of her own relatives or friends, when she receives a call from Jamal. Once it is revealed that Jamal is the caller, Gena questions why he has called her house so late at night. Jamal gets upset and informs her that, "You're a fucking trip. You aint shit. You lucky I don't come over there and kick your ass" (84). Jamal is very much aware that Gena's best friend has died. However, he seeks to punish her for leaving town with another man, and for being the one to break up their "relationship" such as it was. He believes that he can con her back into a sexual relationship with him but her abruptness and unwillingness to engage in the same type of interactions that she used to allow ends this idea. Without knowing how to engage this new version of Gena, he is reduced to having what amounts to a verbal temper tantrum. Not only does Gena soundly reject him but she also informs him that "I don't have time for you. You are beneath me" (84). When she tells him this, she is claiming back some of the self-value that she formerly let him strip away from her. She is a woman who now has an understanding of herself as more than an object waiting to be played with at his disposal. This is a moment where Gena is

making a claim about her worth as a woman. This is a value that is primarily revealed through competitive relationships with other women.

Gena has no sooner made this claim than she receives a secondary call from a woman named Kim, who is more of a passing acquaintance rather than a close friend. In what starts as a condolence call concerning the death of Sahirah, Kim abruptly switches to asking Gena questions about who she went out of town with. When Gena informs her that she went to the Bahamas with Quadir, Kim quickly implies that she is one of Quadir's many girls. She states that, "Quadir ain't nothing but a whore. But he's good for a couple dollars though" (85). Kim disparages Quadir's value as a "relationship type of man" and thus invoking a negative reflection on Gena's worth as a woman through her association with Quadir. Kim then precedes to inform Gena that "Everybody is trying to see him" (85). Kim's comments are the start of an emotional attack that gets to Gena in a way that Jamal's comments no longer could. Even though Gena knows that the man described by Kim is not at all the one that she spent time with, Kim's comments touch upon Gena's sense of uncertainty regarding her relationship status with Quadir. This is an uncertainty that stems from her past dealings with men, and the doubt that lingers over her ability to become the spiritually whole woman that Quadir is seeking. Despite the fact that Kim is not a close associate of hers, Gena has a degree of trust in Kim's comments because she is a woman from her same social group and class. Kim's comments come right after Gena had already confronted her former flame, Jamal. Just as abruptly as Kim started the conversation about Jamal she switches conversation topics back to Gena's trip with Quadir.

Female competition, missing from early black chick lit, is an important literary strand within urban fiction. The heroines of urban fiction are often women who have become consumed with an extreme narcissm that makes it hard for them to operate in healthy ways with other

women. In the case of Teri Woods' *True to the Game*, Gena does not come off as narcissistic because she was able to create a friendship with a Sahirah that lasted into adulthood, however, this narcissm persists in the depiction of the women that Gena interacts with. While she does have narcissistic moments they are often undercut by Sahirah. Thus, she remains capable of feeling empathy for others. Without close female companions, the typical urban heroine is depicted as someone who is almost incapable of love or deep emotion. Without Sahirah around to act as a stabilizing force, Gena needs someone close to her who can be a, if not necessarily moral then certainly tangible, reminder of healthy interaction. In the place of close friendships, Gena embraces the romantic relationship being offered by Quadir.

Following so close on the heels of Jamal's call, Kim is able to take advantage of Gena during a moment of emotional unrest. With the death of her closest female companion, and still becoming comfortable with the woman that she has grown into under Quadir's influence, Gena is in a really vulnerable place. Kim tries to undermine Gena's growing sense of womanhood by suggesting that she is incapable of selecting a partner appropriate for her station. Her taunts about Quadir's sexual promiscuity are meant to make Gena turn back into an insecure and materially obsessed individual. This is further substantiated by Kim's rather forceful turning of the conversation to the status of Gena's current involvement with Jamal. Kim asks Gena, "So what…You done kicked Jamal to the curb now that you're fucking with Quadir?" (85). Kim attempts to shame Gena by implying that she is leaving Jamal solely because Quadir is a better catch in terms of her class status. Kim's comments also suggest that she owes Jamal something more for financially taking care of her up until she was able to have a relationship with Quadir.

As Kim mentions that she too would like to fly away, Gena tries to get her to admit that she has started an affair with Jamal. However, when Gena pointedly asks her "who she is

messing with" (85) Kim's response reveals a deeper sense of competition between her and Gena. Kim states "Shit, the man I want is nowhere to be found" (85). She then follows this up with the statement that, "The ones you want are never the ones that want you" (85) Up until this point, like Gena, the reader may be assuming that the man being implied as the source of the confrontation between Kim and Gena in this scenario is in fact Jamal. However, this is not exactly a clear cut conclusion despite the fact that Kim does end up in some form of a relationship with Jamal. First, Jamal is already a free agent by this point. Therefore, there would be no need for Kim to call and harass Gena about Jamal if she was interested in him. Secondly, Jamal has been available for any interested woman to approach, so there would be no need to seek information from Gena. The only scenario, in which the need for a confrontation of this particular nature would happen, is if the man that Kim is competing with Gena over is actually Quadir.

As Kim implies, Quadir's position within the community and the drug trade is unique. The fact that he is also just getting back into town is also in line with her statement about "the man I want is nowhere to be found" (85). Kim is jealous over the fact that Gena not only had what she views as a good man in Jamal, but that she also had and was able to find an even better man in Quadir. By holding Jamal up as a "respectable" example of a man, and demeaning Quadir, Kim is trying to get Gena to return to Jamal so that she herself can pursue a real relationship with Quadir. This interpretation of the real intent behind Kim's talk with Gena is confirmed by Kim's assertion that, "I just don't understand why you and Jamal didn't work out" (85). Keeping in mind that Kim was not a close friend of Gena's but someone that she occasionally talked too about gossip and parties; Kim is trying to get Gena to reveal more

information about her decision to leave Jamal so that she in turn can convince her of why she should go back to him.

Gena finally confronts Kim on why she felt the need to understand why her relationship with Jamal ended, Kim responds with the comment that: “I’m saying, Gena, Jamal gave you the world. He did everything. Shit, all those women Quadir got, I would have stayed right there with Jamal” (85). She goes on to tell Gena, “At least with Jamal, you had a motherfucker that came home every night and gave you whatever you wanted. You must not want a brother that’s gonna treat you right” (86). Upset, and realizing that Kim is not trying to inspire any positive connection Gena finally cuts her off and suggests that she go ahead and pursue a relationship with Jamal if she really believed he was everything she made him out to be. While, Kim leaves the conversation seemingly satisfied that Gena has given her permission to seduce Jamal, there is also the implied acknowledgement of a formal competition between these two women.

Despite the fact that Gena has directly asked Kim if she was interested in Jamal, Kim never gave a direct answer. Thus, Gena is shocked and momentarily enraged when Kim shows up at Sahirah’s funeral with Jamal. However, when Jamal and Kim make it a point to try and engage Gena in conversation, Gena informs Kim in front of Jamal that, “I’m through with him. He’s all yours” (98). She does this without giving Jamal a chance to either explain why he chose to show up at the funeral with Kim, or why he attempted to engineer a fight between the two women. The key point being, Jamal wanted Gena to be hurt by his deliberate decision to show up at the funeral of her best friend with another woman. Jamal’s actions reveal the depth of his need to emotionally control Gena. By leaving, Gena breaks any lingering emotional control that Jamal may have had on her. As she leaves Jamal realizes “She really wasn’t that upset that he was with Kim. His plan had failed. At that moment he got the picture that it really was over” (98). One of

the implications in this moment is that Jamal may have encouraged Kim to call Gena and tried to further incite the sense of competition between the two women. Jamal may have believed that women compete over men because of desperation; and he was banking on Gena to feel a need to defend her "meal ticket."

However, by leaving without any attempt at an angry outburst, Gena proves to Jamal once and for all that she does not have any lingering attachment or reason to attempt to hold on to him, and thus no reason to compete with Kim for his affections. In essence, Gena takes away the sense of pride that Jamal had in deeming himself a man worthy of being at the center of a dispute between women. This is a dispute finally put to rest by the appearance of Quadir at the funeral and his public acknowledgement of their relationship. The act of public acknowledgement, from Quadir and not Gena, is a decisive move and coup that underscores not only Gena's right to "claim" Quadir but also to be respected as the woman that he deemed to be the most "worthy" of being his partner. As a result, Gena not only feels secure about her relationship but also the authority that her position as Quadir's "girl" grants her within his group and within the community that they both share.

In Teri Woods' *True to the Game*, the reader is treated to a vision of a world in which heterosexual black romance is broken and heavily influenced by the economy that drives corruption within communities. At the same time, black intimacy is also a force that can rewrite some of the damage caused by respectability politics. As a character, Gena has to learn to connect with a man as more than source of potential financial support. In doing so, she is able to actually develop into a woman who is desirable because she finally reaches some inner peace for herself. Once she has become comfortable with herself as a woman and with expressing her own

emotional vulnerabilities, she is able to allow Quadir to actually love her. This is something that she was never able to actually do despite her numerous relationships with men.

In the previous chapter I discussed how black chick lit analyzed the proposition that the goal of successful black women should hinge upon finding completion. In this sense, completion is associated with finding a partner who is of equal class status. The results of this proposition, as revealed in the analyses of Terry McMillan's work as the door opener for black chick lit, revealed the depression, bitterness, and vast amounts of disappointment that awaited those who became too caught up in the fantasy of middle class romance. However, in this chapter I shifted the scope of the analysis from those who were within the middle class to those women who were in the lower working classes. What vision was it that they could look forward to in the pursuit of their careers and romances I wondered? To answer this question I decided to examine urban fiction as it is a genre that seems to also be dealing with the notion of the successful black woman, albeit considering this notion from the perspective of lower class womanhood. Urban fiction explores the definition of black female success that is recognized, and creates a new model of what the successful black woman looks like. In doing so, urban fiction seeks to show how the negation of traditionally understood successful black womanhood disrupts the narrative of black class ascendancy. Upon closer inspection of the genre, what is revealed about the heroine of the urban fiction novel is something that very much aligned with a quote by Sister Souljah:

> "She's very intelligent, she works very hard, she hustles like anybody who believes in the American rags-to-riches story, she uses people the way America teaches you to use people. I think she's the quintessential American. Anybody who tries to stick her into some kind of a victim mode I think is missing the point of the book" (*New York Times*)[112]

[112] This epigraph is taken from interview published in an conducted by Melanie Rehak.

Urban or ghetto fiction as produced by black women, probes some of the accepted tropes of black female success set in place under the capitalist feminism of the late 1990s. In doing so, it allows us, as readers and critics. to not only account for those voices that exist at the margins of the group of women hailed as a second "model minority," but to also interrogate the real values often ascribed to those black women who are able to succeed through traditional frameworks. The idea that women can only succeed by closely following the ideas propagated as part of black respectability politics is harmful to both women who operate outside of these politics and inside of them. It leads to a repressive understanding of black female sexuality, to a cynicism towards heterosexual black romance as source of healing, and finally an obsession with materiality that can becomes fatal for the women who are unable to form emotional connection or develop trust in others.

Conclusion

In any age there are those who will look upon the images depicted within past decades with a sense of great nostalgia. What happens normally is that there will be a strong attachment to a certain narrative or idea that they presume to be lacking within the modern era. Within African American culture, the Civil Rights era is a huge cultural moment not only because of what was achieved but also because it allowed the black community to ignore many of the domestic problems that cropped up. Culturally, when we reflect on the Civil Rights period now, what is invoked as part of our memories is a strong sense of solidarity and also a sense of the prevalence of two parents within most black homes. Also captured in this nostalgia for the era, is the sense that this was a decade where "black women still knew how to be black women, and let a black man be a man." Insidiously subtle, the nostalgia for a return to a moment in which there were clearly delineated gender specific roles lies at the shaping of much of the so called "dating advice" and "self-help" books for black relationships being published almost exclusively by various black male entrainment figures. Of course, this is also a moment were black women have increasingly entered into positions of financial power and decision making inside and outside of their homes, which has undoubtedly triggered a sense of black male displacement.

The role of black sexuality in America has been documented in literature leading up to and following on the heels of the Civil War. In literary texts such as Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975), and in other neo-slave narratives beginning in the 1960s was a more explicit focus on black relationships under slavery and the persistent way in which female sexuality became the grounds upon which white male sexual desire often

interrupted the natural development of early black relationships.[113] However, until the mid-1960s, amidst the publication of the Moynihan report and the focus on the so called black matriarchy, black female sexuality was presented as not only the site of historical horror and abjection but as the implicit center and cause of black male misery.[114] The rendering of black female sexuality as dangerous and threatening to not only the assumed patriarchal system inherent in all heterosexual relationships, but also to the ability of black men to remain functional in society has been the most drastic shift in the 20th century (as opposed to slavery in the 19th) affecting black relationships.

Amidst the explosion of black feminist/"womanist" narratives, the 1960s also brought along the question of racial loyalty, and directly linked it to the creation of black manhood. A new obsession with black intimacy-implied in the specific fetishization of marriage and the attempt to create patriarchal homes by the end of the 1960s- emerged out of the family values rhetoric. Simultaneously, national interest in the Black Feminist Movement continued to grow. Put simply, black feminism challenged the very idea of their black relationship as ever being comparable to those of white Americans and the Moynihan report's implicit attempt to "ghettoize" black men and women by suggesting that their relationships operate outside of "normal" expectation. Perhaps, this is why the frame of decline was later linked by conservatives (black and white) to the rise of black feminism. Even today, black feminism is cited as the primary cause behind the black relationship crisis. This so called "black relationship crisis,"

[113] Frances Smmith Foster's *Till Death or Distance do Us Part: Love and Marriage* (2010) successfully argues against the widespread idea that slavery permanently disrupted the ability of African American's to form "normal" heterosexual relationships with each other. She proves that despite the separation of miles between lovers, and despite the systemic infringement of the white male gaze and subsequent rape of female slaves, couples still held on and some even went as far as to search one another out after the civil war.

[114] This is perhaps more famously stated by Michel Wallace in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1975) as "[t]his report did not create hostility. It merely helped to bring hostility to the surface" (12).

which had dominated social discussions since the 1960s, during the Regan era (roughly 1980-1993) was populated with a mixture of black ascendancy and decline narratives placing the construction of gender roles, family values, and sexuality in a very stark light.

Coming full circle, spanning from the 1970s into the mid-1990s black women became serious producers in the literary market. However, what is most special about the 1970s is the ways in which the question of racial loyalty begins to go hand and hand with black male anxiety. The results of this anxiety towards black women figure largely in early black feminist/ "womanist" literature. While the question of racial loyalty in and of itself is not new, the way in which it later shapes distinctions between black female literature and fiction of the 1980s was. One element that remained consistent throughout the treatment of the literary texts is the influence of the cultural context that was at play at the moment of literary production. Continuing in this vein, I would now like to take a moment to reflect on the sociocultural frame that has impacted the 21st century so far. *The State of the African American Consumer Report* produced in collaboration between the Neilson Company and the National Newspapers Publisher Association (NNPA) discovered that there was "an increase in the amount of blacks attending college or earning a degree to 44 percent for men and 53 percent for women. It also found an increase in the number of African American households earning $75,000 or higher by almost 64 percent." There are two points that bear closer examination: first, the gap between college educated black men and black women actually began to narrow at the time of the report's release (2012). Secondly, the sheer potential influence of African Americans on America's domestic market has greatly expanded and is projected to continue. Indeed, these numbers appear to grow even as per capita the unemployment and underemployment rate for blacks have remained relatively high. However, given the rates of college education among black women, the bulk of

Africa American buying or market influences lies with black women. In the follow up report, *Resilient, Receptive, and Relevant* (2013), the NNPA suggests a possible corollary between career success and marriage for black women. According to the *Resilient, Receptive, and Relevant* report: "in 23% of Black women who work full-time, earning incomes of $50,000 or higher, and has also resulted in younger, educated Black women delaying or foregoing starting families and having children" (6). Thus, one reason for the latest trend in black relationships has to do with the fact that more women are placing a greater emphasis on fulfilling their career ambitions either prior to or jointly with pursuing a stable relationship. Here we reach a point that has remained persistent within black popular fiction and culture, the reason for the tie-in between intimacy and economics.

Since Neilson Company and NNPA's 2012 publication on the African American Consumer, the attention on the phenomena of the SSBW (Successful Single Black Woman) has reached a new zenith. Rather than a choice, the media representation of SSBW's suggests that many black women have "given up" on ever marrying. On April 21st, 2010 ABC's Nightline devoted a segment entitled "Face-Off: Why Can't I Find a Successful Black Woman Find a Man?", wherein black male and female television personalities and actors weighed in on the issue. Journalist and author, Jimi Izrael, went so far as to contribute the suggestion that "women are looking for men who don't exist. They're looking for this picture perfect archetype, this Denzel Washington, to come pulling up to their house in a new Maybach Benz with a trunk full of Godiva chocolate and a suitcase full of thousands of hundred dollar bills, and it's not going to happen."[115] Of course, gut reaction aside, Izrael's comment has plenty of support in what has become known as "Successful Woman Syndrome" by certain segments of the African American

[115]Jimi Izrael is the author of *The Denzel Principle*.

community. Aside from needing to lower their standards, SSBW are encouraged to moderate more closely their work and personal time if they would like to improve their chances at finding a partner. Compared to other sources that comment on the supposed crises of SSBW, Izrael's comments represent just a small peak at the level of extreme paternalism that remains so pervasive within the discourse that has pooled around the topic. Take for example, the comment from singer, model, actor, and now author, Tyrese Gibson:

> "Some women are so on this independent kick, they end up alone. You're going to independent your way into loneliness. You go off and buy all the little poodles you want. 'At least my dog is happy to see me when I get home every day.' That dog or 'rabbit' will never be able to replace what a real man can do for you. So stay independent, get your own, but nobody wants to be alone, period… It's a lot of frustration that women have. [But] there's a lot of man's man [men] still left; We're out here, we're waiting, we're wanting, we desire you just like you desire us. Just don't give up on us… Give [us] a shot at your heart" (Tyrese Gibson, NecoleBitchie interview).[116]

Tyreese's comments imply that black women finding satisfaction within their careers has limited their ability to see the "real" men who are interested in them. To tease this out more fully, these comments hint at some of the hero angst explored with the second chapter of this dissertation. Tyreese suggests that the success of black women has allowed them to make black men feel as if they no longer have a place within the world of black women. Emotional intimacy is equated with material fulfillment. For scholars of both African American cultural and literary production, the 21st century has emerged as a rather interesting period. It is a return, as such, to the bruised egos and high anxiety about the role of black men in the lives of the black family. As more women are able to not only provide for themselves but also to support their families, black men

[116] Text from the NecoleBitchie interviewed was actually copied from Essence article, "Real Talk: Tyrese Says You Need a Man." Nov. 17th, 2011. Link to actual video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pk_T_9UZmdk

have more strongly began to discuss the future of black intimacy. This is an intimacy which continues to be closely entangled with issues of both economics and the call for respectability.

To correct this fear, black relationship self-help books share in common call to return to the black respectability politics of the Civil Rights era. In the 21st century, Civil Rights era nostalgia has driven the return to black respectability politics in very specific ways: in the dating advice black men give women tips for "interacting appropriately" with black men, for presenting herself socially at first meetings and thereafter, and most importantly for how to make a man feel like a man. Through dating advice books and subsequent movies, such as those outlined in the dissertation introduction, black men have become more vocal contributors to the discussion of black intimacy. Accordingly, to various degrees a common thread within the dating advice and self-help texts produced by black men is the suggestion that black men can only feel like men if they are at the center of a black woman's focus. Recognizing that black men are more likely to not be the breadwinners of the home, the suggestion is that black women must become more submissive and devote more of herself to her relationship in order to make it successful. In these types of dating advice and self-help books there is the repeated idea that phenomena of the SSBW can be solely attributed to the fact that black women have somehow let money and material wealth become the sole focus of their existence or is in persistent "work mode" in which she treats her partner more like a junior colleague than an actual partner. Thus, the black relationship help guides aimed at SSBWs function as return to feminine manners.

Feminine manners are stressed because it is assumed that all black women have lost touch with their feminine sides. In public statements, such as those issued by Tyreese Gibson and comedian Steve Harvey, feminism is repeatedly signaled as the source of black women's misunderstanding of how to be the "lady" still desired by so many black men. Despite the

assuredness with which black feminism is often seen as a disruptor to black intimacy, none of the criticisms made by those publishing on this particular issue actually show a critical or theoretical understanding of either mainstream feminism or most interestingly of black feminism. Rather than separating feminism into two separate camps the critique of it as a "disruptive" force to black intimacy collapses all feminism as seeking the same thing, which in discussion of black relationship dynamics is presumed to be the emasculation and alienation of the black male from spheres of influence or power. There is little acknowledgement of the ways in which black feminists has not only grappled with their own multiple points of intersection but also their personal relationships with black men. Nor does there seem to exist an understanding of how black women have actually been engaging in a complex and multi-layered discussion over the state of black intimacy, the relationship, and even over the persistent influence of black respectability politics. My intent here is not to simply offer up a critique on the flaws of a more recent canon being shaped around intimacy and black respectability politics (which it is ridiculously easy to do) but to place this conversation in terms of its cultural and literary deployment. My dissertation is a major contribution to the overall understanding of why certain ideas or tropes as it pertains to black women and black relationships emerge with the particular ferocity that they have in the moment and also to provide an actual critical bridge between black popular literature and cultural production.

The contributions that have already been made towards understanding black identity within an alternative archive of black women's literature presents a more complete image of the current state of black relationships. Despite the focus on those black women who have emerged within the realm of a more upwardly mobile class setting, the black relationship and by extension black intimacy itself, remains deeply troubled by the quest for a new notion of gender identity

and role. In the late 20th century black women struggled to embrace the legacy of the black feminist movement, and also with the pressures of actually having said success. There is intraracial pressure from close family and friends to balance financial success with a romantic relationship that should end with them finally achieving the middle class romantic fantasy. What becomes clear at least as related from the decades occurring between 1965 and 2000 is that black women were growing increasingly disillusioned with black intimacy at least as prescribed. Likewise, other factors outside of their immediate control (incarceration rates, homosexuality, the limited number of college educated men in the professional class, those not already married or actually looking to be married, etc.) contributed and continue to contribute to the framing of the relationship crisis in 2015. However, what is too often being left out of these fear driven conversations about the statistics surrounding the prospective marriage rates of SSBW is that now there is also a growing segment of the American population that is waiting to marry later in life, those that have been married previously and divorced, or those who have recently become widowed and are not rushing to remarry. In addition to these factors, there are also a growing number of people who have actively chosen to maintain a single lifestyle as there is no perceived benefit to marriage, or simply exist on the asexual/aromantic spectrum. All of these contingencies do impact the statistics and ongoing pathological narratives surrounding contemporary black intimacy and the depiction of black women inside and outside of those relationships.

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