

## **B(e)aring the Naked Truth: the Black Female Body Revisited**

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Abstract

*This paper argues that in the contemporary era of mass media consumption of black images, the black female body continues to be subjected to stereotyping that reproduces the old forms of racist oppression. Based primarily on the collection of personal essays edited by Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon, *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Lips, and Other Parts* (2005), it examines some of the negative images of the black female body upheld in the collective consciousness of the American black community while discussing the issues of black aesthetics, in particular as they apply to women.*

*Keywords: Afrocentrism, black aesthetics, black discourse on modernity, black female body, controlling images, ideology of white superiority, objectification, standards of beauty, stereotypes*

### **Introduction**

Historically, the bodies of black women in the United States have always been objectified. Displayed on auction blocks, subject to enforced sex and unwanted pregnancies to satisfy their slave masters' pleasure and greed for more profit, they were property and commodity in the hands of white men. Although slavery has long been abolished, as Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon argue, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century American society the black female body continues to be objectified; black women's body parts are still "the subject of constant critique and appraisal" (1), as they are pitted against unattainable standards of beauty advertised by media that reinforce the ideology of white superiority.

In this paper, based primarily on the collection of personal essays edited by Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon, *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Lips, and Other Parts* (2005),<sup>1</sup> I analyze, through the lens of black feminism, what African American women – professional women and celebrities, as well as ordinary black women – think and how they feel about their bodies, examining some of the negative images of the black female body upheld in the collective consciousness of the black community. To provide contextual background, I first discuss the issues of black aesthetics, in particular as they apply to women, to demonstrate that they must be seen both as part of the entrenched legacy of slavery and in light of the black discourse on modernity of the 1920s and Afrocentrism of the 1960s.

### **The Ideology of White Superiority and the Issues of Black Aesthetics**

Now, if you're white, you're all right  
If you're brown, stick around,  
But if you're black, Git back! Get back! Get back!  
(a children's rhyme)

Sharing her experience of how other people perceive her identity, Asali Solomon, Assistant Professor of English at Washington & Lee University, succinctly summarizes how the politics of race are daily played out in the imagination of Americans onto which particular meanings and stereotypes have been grafted:

With apologies to DuBois, I've raced past modern double consciousness right into the collective mental illness of postmodern multiconsciousness. I can see myself through the eyes of the brother in the obscenely shine black Escalade who stares right through me, the White woman smiling at me curiously in the supermarket, and the Mexican construction worker who leers at me with erotic hostility. Despite how I try to see myself, it sometimes catches me and takes my breath away that *for most people I'm homely because I'm brown and nappy*. (Byrd and Solomon 35-6, emphasis mine)

Her words expose not only the collective nature of the plague that poisons the minds of contemporary American society, but also the fact that black women continue to be viewed within this society as inherently less than fully beautiful because of their physical features: dark skin and nappy hair.<sup>2</sup>

The roots of this attitude must be understood within the context of the ideology of white superiority that has, historically, assigned to African American women in American society the place of the inferior "other." Exploiting the notion of oppositional difference to highlight the alleged inferiority and racial "otherness" of black women, since slavery whites have used the most noticeable physical characteristics of skin color and hair texture as two *visible* markers in justifying white superiority.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1781, Thomas Jefferson described skin color in his "Notes on the State of Virginia" as "the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty." In his estimation, whiteness represented the superior color; "the fine mixtures of red and white [being . . .] preferable to that eternal monotony, [ . . .] that immovable veil of black." Moreover, he reasoned, "Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form [ . . .] The circumstance of Superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?" (138).<sup>4</sup> Jefferson's belief, based on his own subjective standards of beauty, according to which both dark complexion and African hair texture are devalued, and his own equation in which *visual* difference equals ugliness and inferiority, has proved immensely pervasive. Initiating a discourse of black inferiority that by the first half of the twentieth century American society would come to internalize, his words, later supported by scientific research and "evidence" derived from craniology, would become the hardest stumbling block preventing African Americans from gaining equal status and rights within the United States.

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century blacks had begun to voice their concern over the political ramifications of their image (Piess 205). Conscious of the convergence of politics and issues of aesthetics, they saw the newly emerging caricatures of themselves circulated in popular American art, as an impetus to reconstruct the black image, to define it *anew*. Yet the debate over the particulars of this New Negro proved rather ambivalent. As Henry Louis Gates points out in his essay "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," in certain ways, the New Negro was a kind of a myth of a black ideal based on a denial of its own history – "the modern black person" had to break away from his slave past – and a countering of the plantation and minstrel stereotypes (132, 143). Equally problematic was the fact that while rejecting the white aesthetic standards, many black intellectuals at the time "embraced them in part, believing that 'whiteness' would aid in their quest for full citizenship and equality." Feeling ashamed of the unkempt appearance and jungle-like habits of the lower working classes that they saw as threatening to the uplift of the black race and its collective identity, middle- and upper-middle class blacks came to "advocate[ . . .] the grooming and cleanliness norms of Euro-Americans" (Wade). In their view, the progress and respectability of their race depended on individuals' appearance. Women especially, seen as central figures in racial uplift, were encouraged to maintain a cultivated appearance that, it was agreed, involved properly groomed hair and, preferably, fairer skin color. Beauty industries began to design products that would help to alter both the African texture of hair

and the dark skin color, as "good" hair and light skin became the two major prerequisites for a better life.

To understand black women's desire to change their appearance solely in terms of white privilege, however, would be misleading. As Shane and Graham White argue in *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginning to the Zoot Suit* (1998), "black cosmetics were associated with modernity and, most importantly, with progress. [ . . .] African Americans' adoption of the new cosmetic practices demonstrated the distance that had been traveled from the 'demoralizing effect' of slavery" (189). Moreover, "It was not so much that most African Americans who used cosmetic preparations wanted to look white; it was more often the case that they wanted the same freedom to construct their appearance that whites were allowed" (188).

The newly emerging racial confidence, aligned with the message of racial uplift, became visible in the institutions of the black beauty contest and the black fashion parade, both relying primarily on the display of black female bodies (191). In 1925, African Americans were ready to prove that "our race has produced more varieties of beauty than any other race on earth," from "the bronze Venus with the mysterious black eyes and crisped hair, with cheeks of dusky rose hue" to the "Indian peach variety with the baby grey eyes and brown curls" (191). Madame Mamie Hightower, a self-made African American entrepreneur, sponsored a nationwide search for Miss Golden Brown: the national beauty contest being promoted as a part of racial uplift. With the memory of the color line drawn during the Miss America contest in 1921, she urged her fellows, "We must develop, in every member of our group, that quality known as pride. It is not enough that some scientists are admitting that the glorious Cleopatra was of our race – let us prove once and for all that we have here in America some of the most beautiful women of the world" (qtd. in White and White 199). To refute the claim that her "aesthetic manifesto" and "endeavors were [ . . .] prompted merely by a desire to imitate white America and its standards" (199-200), she asserted with confidence: "We do not want to be white, but we do want that *light*, bright, velvety textured skin that is rightfully ours" (qtd. in White and White 200, emphasis mine).

It was not until the late 1960s when a new black aesthetic emphasizing the distinctiveness of black culture would emerge. Seeking to subvert and redefine the undermining definitions of beauty and blackness, the Black Power Movement rejected the cultural (and aesthetic) hegemony of whites in order to embrace the African past. Advocating an essential blackness based on rejection of everything associated with Euro-American, it "extolled the virtues of black life-styles and values, and promoted race, consciousness, pride and unity" (Van Deburg qtd. in Wade). The "Afro" or "natural" hairstyle and clothes of African textile and design in particular became two primary symbols of the new racial identity. Yet just as the 1920s New Negro was a kind of a myth of a black ideal based on a denial of its own history, much of the 1960s discourse on blackness and the African past was also mythology, a social construction to "further the ideological goals of the Black Power Movement's nationalistic program," and prove that blacks "indeed had achieved a certain level of enlightenment about themselves and the[ir] plight [ . . .] in the United States" (Wade).<sup>5</sup>

Despite its efforts and its noble slogan of "black is beautiful," meant to affirm African textured hair and dark skin, the movement lacked the power to undo fully the damage that Jefferson's idea of racial hierarchy had caused to the consciousness of the black community. As Okazawa-Rey, Tracy Robinson, and Janie Victoria Ward point in their critical essay "Black Women and the Politics of Skin Color and Hair": "Many assume the 1960s to have been a period in which black people transcended the pathology of colorism and stood back and analyzed its effect upon them. [ . . .] [But] too often the old favoritism toward lighter-skinned women prevailed. During the macho-revolutionary fervor of the sixties, to many black men, lighter sisters were still the most desirable, most worthy, and most feminine, and

thus, most in need of (male) protection” (14). Indeed, the fiery rhetoric of the 1960s, imbued with sexism and blunt assertion of black masculinity, did not liberate black women from psychological degradation; instead, it restricted their struggle for self-image by asserting that in patriarchal society, a woman’s beauty is defined by men, for whom femininity – historically always associated with white women – is its most important prerequisite.

The following discussion of some of the personal stories in *Naked*, focusing more closely on the issues of skin color and “good” and “bad” hair, describes black women’s attempts to overcome the stereotypical attitudes about blackness and beauty, as they apply to women in a postmodern society of market culture where some blacks have already gained access to mainstream media and other sites of institutional power.

### The Proverbial Black Girl and The Light-Skin-Good-Hair Girl

LOOKING INTO THE MIRROR,  
THE BLACK WOMAN ASKED,  
“MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL,  
WHO’S THE FINEST OF THEM ALL?”  
THE MIRROR SAYS, “SNOW WHITE,  
YOU BLACK BITCH, AND DON’T YOU  
FORGET IT!!!”  
 (“Mirror/Mirror” by Carrie Mae Weems)

Reflecting on her experience of being of dark complexion, Aminata Cisse, a graduate of Spelman College, of Bajan [Barbadian] Senegalese origin, recalls:

*I have always been made aware of my skin color, even before I was cognizant of its meaning. In my otherwise vivid memory of childhood, I cannot name a defining moment or source of my color issues. I can remember feeling an ever-present ache of alienation and exclusion. I remember thinking that some people would not like me because of my complexion. But the details and dialogue are a blur of slights and verbal assaults on my ego. (Byrd and Solomon 68, emphases mine)*

With her dark complexion, African features of full lips, slanted eyes, and high cheekbones, Cisse has always been “the other”: an alien among whites and a second-class citizen among blacks (71). While in junior high, she was singled out as “the darky”; as a high school senior, she was regarded as “the ‘new ideal’ of beauty” – the exotic queen – but excluded as “not the girlfriend type” – not a girl to be dated or involved with. Isolated all her life, Cisse has come to the conclusion that colorism has invaded the perception of her fellow black people who “wear blinders that allow only light-skin to filter through” (69). As she describes in *Naked*, her feelings grow particularly bitter when watching contemporary rap and hip-hop videos; that is when she feels herself “physically deflate[...].” (69). Comparing her dark complexion to the skin of black women shown in those productions, she sees that the majority of the representations of black female beauty are light-skinned with European features. Her response to this distressing reality is that of paralysis for she knows she can “never live up to the one asset that never fails: *light skin*” (69, emphases mine).

Cisse’s experience reveals not only the extent to which some black people have come to internalized white supremacist ways of thinking, upholding that light skin is a preferable and desirable asset, but also the damaging impact of such internalization on the psyche of black women with dark complexion. As bell hooks points out in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), black people allow “this [false] perspective to determine how they see themselves and other black people.” Consequently, “many black folks see [themselves] as ‘lacking,’ as inferior” (11), failing to construct a positive self, allowing for “mindless

complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralyzing despair [to] enter” (4). To address this collective crisis of identity, hooks insists that they must learn to see blackness with a new pair of eyes; they must interrogate the cultural production of the black image and representation that reinforces the color hierarchy and white privilege by giving preference to light skin to see it as part of the legacy of racial and sexual violence – to acknowledge that the light skin is not just “rightfully ours” but also, and perhaps more importantly, *the* painful heritage of rape of black women by white slave masters. Cisse, however, like many black women, lacks the strength to liberate herself from the oppositional thinking and/or to subvert the images devaluing her blackness. Despite her education that has made her aware of the history of black people in America and her family background – her proud, Afrocentric mother who believes in the beauty of blackness and even superiority of black people – she succumbs to the pressure of daily encounters with colorism, considering leaving the country for Senegal, where she can feel beautiful, for blackness there, as she sees it, is a “good thing” (Byrd and Solomon 74).<sup>6</sup>

Cisse’s experience with colorism resonates to some extent in the story of the health editor at *Essence* magazine Akiba Solomon, an ordinary dark-skinned woman who describes herself as “the descendant of Down South Negroes” (Byrd and Solomon 89). Growing up in urban Black America, Solomon also felt excluded because of her dark skin from the circles of those who are considered beautiful; in her experience, she could only be “pretty for a dark-skinned girl” or “something more exotic than what [she is]” (89, emphasis mine) – a Jamaican or an Ethiopian, as men have often considered her. Like Cisse, she knows in theory that: “no complexion is better than another” but reality teaches her that lightness means “more power and options” (89). For example, as Solomon muses, with light skin, she could be not only “Afrocentric by choice instead of necessity” (89, emphasis mine), but also, and most importantly, a black princess, free to indulge in sweetness, sensitivity, and silliness, qualities that she feels the world attributes only to white or light-skinned girls, who stand in opposition to the proverbial Regular Black Girls, thought of as ‘tart-tongued,’ ‘quick-witted,’ and ‘down to the gristle’ (88).

Solomon’s hypothetical musings reveal that by virtue of her dark skin color, she has been restricted in her choices of self-definition, while forced to become a practitioner of Afrocentrism and deny certain aspects of her femininity praised not only by Afrocentric men of the 1960s (a vexing paradox) but also black men of the twenty-first century. Moreover, they painfully demonstrate that the black community (Solomon’s “world”) has internalized and continues to reinforce the false dichotomy of femininity versus toughness, created during slavery to justify the abuse of black women. Within this dichotomy and in agreement with the tenets of the Cult of True Womanhood, historically, white women were considered as ladies or angels, their purity and chastity in need of male protection, while black women, by the logic of oppositional difference, could only be defined as un-feminine and/or overly sexual [this aspect will be discussed in more detail in the next section]. Succinctly summarized in the text accompanying Carrie Mae Weems’s photograph “Mirror/Mirror” quoted at the beginning of this section, “the mechanisms of both black and white females’ socialization into white supremacist ways of thinking [can be] evoked by a reference to a popular fairy tale [Snow White]” in which the black woman can never be the princess, only the black bitch/witch (Glowacka 9).

Yet reality has taught Solomon other important lessons, such as that the proverbial Regular Black Girl does not exist, except as a stereotypical representation created to maintain the conventional, white way of seeing blackness, and that she is allowed to, and, indeed, must learn to define herself with her own words, to subvert, alter, and/or otherwise transform all negative representations of dark-skinned women. She has learned that she must shatter those mirrors reflecting a white (or light-skinned) face that “immobilize[] her in the standards of

beauty with which she cannot identify” and “can only yield an aesthetics that ‘wound[s] us, beauty that hurts’” (9). Having suffered through a “severe clinical depression with a psychotic episode” (Byrd and Solomon 98) as a consequence of her initial succumbing to these unattainable standards, Solomon has learned the hard way to resist strong impulses to see herself as a powerless victim; unlike Cisse, she has chosen to reclaim the humanity of black women of all hues by writing her own message to the world, proclaiming them free and calling them “to work toward a day when it’s actually true” (100).

Solomon’s proclamation of liberation for all black women, based on positive recognition of difference, can be seen as an empowering expression of loving blackness, a revolutionary attitude that bell hooks describes in *Black Looks* as “political resistance [that] transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life” (20). At its core, loving blackness recognizes the basic truth that black feminist poet Audre Lorde articulated in *Sister Outsider* (1984) a decade earlier: “the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (123). Loving blackness thus encourages black women to move away from internalized oppression to newly self-defined selves, and urges them to conquer their own internal oppressors by setting their minds free and by affirming difference.

As the personal stories in *Naked* demonstrate, however, in the twenty-first century America, affirmation of difference still happens mostly in black feminist theory and fiction; the majority of black women and girls continue to long for the ideal of “the light-skin-good-hair girl,” exalted not only in nearly all music video clips but also in most magazines that routinely chose for their models fair-skinned black women, particularly with blonde or light brown long hair. This is reality, explains Norell Gaincana, a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of Chicago, in her personal account pertinently entitled “No Fairy Tale:” the devastating vestiges of the Jeffersonian message can still be observed in the contemporary black community, where both colorism, i.e. the preference of light skin over dark skin, and the heightened perception of “good” and “bad” hair, continue to be salient issues. In Gaincana’s view, “good hair” has by now become “an open secret” in the black community; it is “something we all recognize without a textbook definition. Intuitively, we know what it means, what it looks like, and who has it” (Byrd and Solomon 212). “Good hair” means soft straight or wavy hair, associated with whiteness, which has come to imply beauty, purity and goodness by its orderly way of flowing; it stands in opposition to nappy hair, which, in contrast, suggests ugliness, impurity, and “badness” because it is unruly and harsh.<sup>7</sup> “Good hair” is also a sign of social validation; it wins attention and adoration while it protects from sly remarks that undermine one’s self-esteem. If you want to be prized, “You *gotta* have the [right] hair,” seconds Jill Scott, Grammy-winning songwriter, published poet, and actress, as she summarizes the extent to which the white standards of beauty have come to saturate the contemporary black community (147, emphasis mine).

Asali Solomon shares their opinion. Despite her position of a college teacher and thus a role model in the classroom, which, as bell hooks argues in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice to Freedom* (1994), offers itself to be a “location of possibility” where students can “collectively imagine a way to move beyond boundaries” (207), she believes that “In its natural state [. . .] Black women’s hair is unrepresentable” (Byrd and Solomon 40). With the memories of herself as “an awful blur, a black fuzzy thing on the rug” (38) in the kindergarten, and an unpretty and/or invisible girl in the school, she defends the importance of “good hair” for the identity-formation of little black girls in the world that devalues blackness: “If you are a brown, nappy girl, there are many things you might want to change, so much capital you do not have” (39). So why not change hair that is malleable, as

so many black women did in the past? Why not use this “symbolic currency” to buy acceptance in the still highly racial(ized) society?

Raised in the 1960s, in a family where the politics of beauty were represented by her mother’s wearing a short natural, as well as “by pictures of smooth-headed, tall Massai women . . . and an art photo . . . featuring a Black woman with cornrows that struck straight up with puffy little ends,” Solomon admits her reasoning is problematic; she *knows* how she *should* feel about black hair and blackness. Yet reality forces her to adopt ways that seem less hurtful to her self, hairstyles that do not provoke negative commentaries. Her personal account, just like that of Cisee, however, is not a simple story of failure to challenge racial stereotypes and to overcome the kind of self-hate preventing African American women from embracing African textured hair and dark skin as acceptable and beautiful. Rather, it should be understood as a valuable testimony to the difficulties involved in maintaining racial consciousness as a *moral* imperative in the world flooded with images that still reinforce white standards of beauty, and that are particularly detrimental to the self-esteem and positive self-concept of black women who are the antithesis of the ideal of light-skin-good-hair-girl.

### The Flirtatious Vixen, the Whore, and the Wild Tough Sexually Liberated Woman

Man seeker dick eater  
Sweat getter fuck needing  
(from “Woman Poem” by Nikki Giovanni)

Insecure about her rapidly developing body, and lacking in knowledge about healthy sexuality, thirteen-year old Margeaux Watson, now a correspondent at *Entertainment Weekly*, was portraying herself as a flirtatious vixen to comply with her prescribed role. As she explains her rationale in *Naked*: “that’s how people perceived me, I figured I better act the part” (Byrd and Solomon 154). By the time she was 17, Watson had slept with more than five men, aborted a child, and been raped by her 24 year-old boyfriend who took physical delight in hurting her, which she, unaware of her abuse, “dismissed . . . as an unfortunate side effect of fooling around with older men” (155). Blaming her female body for the brutal experiences, she decided to adopt “a more boyish look,” and “to establish a new, less sexual energy in my interactions with men” (157). Yet soon after, her past repeated itself: a classmate whom she thought her friend raped her. Watson came to realize that: “no matter how I dressed it up or down, *there was something overtly and potently sexual about my body that men couldn’t resist and I couldn’t control*” (158, emphasis mine). Awakened to the world of black women’s sexual politics, she sank into a dark period of depression, seized by the paralyzing fear of intimacy” (158).

Just as the construction of standards of beauty according to which blackness is devalued cannot be separated from the ideology of white superiority and the historical context of slavery, neither can the social construction of black American women’s sexuality. Historically, black American women’s sexuality and fertility were controlled by white men, both directly, through enforced sex, and indirectly, by a set of controlling images.<sup>8</sup> Defined as women with an insatiable sexual appetite that, as Thomas Jefferson pointed out, makes the orangutan have a “preference for black women over those of his own species” (138), they emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white Americans as embodiments of unrestrained sexuality, as innately promiscuous, sexually aggressive Jezebels, who stand in direct opposition to sexually pure white women (Collins 70). Despite the efforts of black leadership to reclaim their chastity and respectability as part of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century ideology of racial uplift, problematic in that the New Negro Woman’s sexuality was largely reduced from “bad” to none, and the more recent literary works that attempt to reconstruct black female sexuality as a positive, liberating space, the historical

legacy that deems black women over-sexed has never faded; although slavery has long been abolished, the fascination with the allegedly oversexed black female body has remained embedded in the erotic fantasies of whites who continue to long for the exotic “other.”

Worse yet, fueled by sexism and misogyny that surfaced in the 1960s discourse of the Black Power phallogocentric idealization of masculinity (hooks, *Black Looks* 98) and the 1970s boom of *blaxploitation* movies that made the depiction of black women as sexually promiscuous commonplace, thus “validating” the belief that black women are uninhibited whores (Pilgrim), the stereotypical image of a loose black woman has infected the consciousness of the black community as well. As the lyrics and visual background of contemporary rap/hip-hop music reveal, black women continue to be viewed as bitches, Jezebels, ‘hos, and hoochie mamas, their representations being largely reduced to those of flirtatious vixens and/or wild, tough, sexually liberated, often castrating, women. A half of the century after the *Blue Note Records* began to use images of actual black artists on their album covers to promote black music, black images are now undeniably part of the mainstream, yet paradoxically, promoting and/or reinforcing, the vile sexual stereotypes of black women whose only value is, once again, as sexual commodities.

A victim of the white supremacist ideology and of the lack of positive, nurturing messages about black womanhood, Watson has internalized the stereotypical image of the loose black woman, succumbing to the oppressive conditioning of the society that commodifies black female sexuality by projecting and upholding an image of a wild, tough, sexually liberated woman. Unable to challenge the representations of herself as a sexual object and “construct a sexuality apart from that imposed on [her] by a racist/sexist culture” (hooks, *Black Looks* 65), she has accepted a life with a constant fear of invasion and violation of her body over which she does not have any control. As a result of that, her interaction with black men has been severely crippled, closing the door to a possibility of a healthy heterosexual relationship. Doubly alarming yet, her life story, as the collection *Naked* reveals, is by no means unique.

Like Watson, Ayana Byrd, a journalist, also “wrestle[s] with what [her] body is for, who it is meant to please, and how . . . to navigate it through spaces both social and sexual” (Byrd and Solomon 18). Growing up at home, she never “learned that there is something healthy and sexual about . . . physical forms” (18); while movies that she saw by the time she turned ten, “managed to inflict enough damage to my psyche that I’m still working out now” (19). As she discloses in her personal testimony, one of the movies, *Something About Amelia*, portrayed a father who was raping his 12-year-old daughter, whose mother did not want to believe that her husband could be capable of such actions. Watching it, Byrd was quickly initiated into the power of sexual desire. Since then, Byrd has had many personal encounters with the power of sexual desire that cannot be separated from black women’s sexual politics of commodification interlocked with the controlling image of the loose black woman. She has been whistled at, shouted at obscenely and yelled insults at. She’s been mistaken for a prostitute, chased, spat on by teenage boys for daring to ignore their advances, and otherwise forced to accept sexual hints as a way of life. Painful as it has been to be treated in such a way by men of her own race, she still finds the “real ignorant thing from a Black man [...] better than [that of] a White guy” because, as she explains, “his statement would be supported by a history of plantation rape and jungle fever fantasies” (30, emphasis mine). To escape embarrassment and rage, however, Byrd has resorted to denying her public body by covering it in hoods and sweaters, admitting that her Barnard College feminist rhetoric – “This is my body – I can dress however and do what I want with it, and no one has the right to say or do anything” – just proved too naïve outside of Soho and the Village. Adopting this new look by reducing her sex-appeal, unlike Watson, Byrd has achieved relative peace of mind, which, as she claims, does not “get [her] dreaming about polishing [her] gun” (31), but neither does it make her “feel completely at home” in her skin (17).<sup>9</sup>

As Watson’s and Byrd’s stories indicate, in contemporary American society, fed on media representations of black female bodies as expendable commodities, black women are daily subjected to both racist and sexist ideologies, trapped in the space where black female sexuality cannot be defined outside the context of domination and exploitation. The lack of positive images of black female sexuality often results in denial, passive acceptance of the status quo, and/or silence surrounding the very subject, rendering the topic of sexuality a taboo. More frighteningly yet, the stories also reveal that black women are inclined to dismiss, excuse and/or justify the black men’s behavior, either as “an unfortunate side effect” (in Watson’s case) or as “real ignorant thing” (in Byrd’s case) because of false racial solidarity. By doing so, they implicitly reinforce not only the highly questionable double standard that “it’s less offensive for a black man to call a black woman ‘bitch’ than it is for a white man” (Samuels, “We’re Not” 44)<sup>10</sup> but also the demeaning sexual stereotypes they seek to subvert.

On the other hand, several personal stories in *Naked* suggest that some black women, singers and other artists in particular, have learned to appropriate the sexual stereotypes to “either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it” (hooks, *Black Looks* 65). As hooks notes in her essay pertinently titled “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” “Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, . . . [they] have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious” (65). The experience of light-skinned/wavy haired singer Kelis is an example of such an approach. Justifying her complicity in her own objectification, Kelis explains in *Naked*: “Sex sells . . . America is all about what is appealing to the eye . . . I’ll be damned if I’m going to hide what God gave me” (Byrd and Solomon 103-4). Her words, exposing the complex interplay between exploitation of the black female body and capitalism in which the marketplace determines who can get profit and how, manifest a new black female subjectivity that reflects, to some extent, her control of sexuality. According to hooks, however, this subjectivity is problematic since Kelis’s representations do not interrogate or challenge the dominant representations of “the exotic Other who promises to fulfill racial and sexual stereotypes or to satisfy [both men’s and the market’s] longings” (hooks, *Black Looks* 73). Rather, they blindly exploit the commodification of blackness, which constructs black women as evil, immoral “prostitutes who see their sexuality solely as a commodity to be exchanged for hard cash” (105). In doing so, they signal that Kelis fails to understand how her complicity in the debasement and humiliation of the very culture she belongs to helps to reinforce and reinscribe the desires of the whites.<sup>11</sup>

The above-discussed stories seem to suggest that in twenty-first century America, ordinary black women still cannot embrace their sexuality and “place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center” of their lives without the fear of being labeled “loose” (hooks, *Black Looks* 76). Yet the personal testimony of Jill Nelson, a journalist and author of nonfiction, partially challenges this assumption. Unable to fight the demons of the cultural marketplace, Nelson has come to understand that her body had two selves: “the public body that had to be denied: constrained, covered, and kept in check so that [she] could move around without being catcalled and objectified” and the “private body – lush, loose, a self-affirming world in itself” (Byrd and Solomon 79). Nelson has learned to reconcile the two by ignoring the public body defined by the values, judgments, expectations, and fancies of others, and learning to listen to her private body: to know it as a source of pleasure, as her own “personal instrument” that she “should learn to play” and *only if [she chooses to do so]*, to teach others how to play as well” (81, emphasis mine). Reclaiming both her subjectivity (and agency) and her body as a site of positive desire and sexuality, she has overcome the debilitating impact of the institutional branding that stigmatizes black women, rendering them powerless. Moreover, by affirming the place of “the private” in the highly public and politicized world, she has

acknowledged the ignored existence of many black women who do live happy lives in healthy relationships with black men, resisting the pathological assessment that the present state of affairs in the contemporary black community is nothing but dire.<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the black leadership efforts of the 1920s and 1960s to redefine the demeaning images of black people and challenge the pervasive ideology of white ideology, the majority of the personal essays in *Naked* testify to the fact that in the twenty-first century, the legacy of slavery is still alive as black women continue to suffer from the consequences of internalized racism, enshrined deep in the psyche of the black community and manifested in negative stereotypes, reinforced by a media-driven society. The devastating vestiges of the Jeffersonian dichotomy can still be observed in the contemporary black community, where both colorism, i.e. the preference of light skin over dark skin, and the heightened perception of “good” and “bad” hair, continue to be salient issues and where the realities of black women’s lives continue to be informed both by the fear of and pain from having no control over how they are perceived by other people. Consequently, having internalized the message that their bodies do not conform to America’s acceptable standards of beauty, defined by whites in the eighteenth century, and if so, only in the prescribed, commodified ways, many black women do not consider themselves beautiful, but rather as deficient and inferior. Their low self-esteem often gives way to self-denial, self-hatred, depression, and, at the extreme, killing rage; their relationships with men often fail or are largely unhealthy. Afraid to embrace their bodies, many black women lack the strength to “battle[ ] body demons on a conscious, constructive level” (3) and to redefine themselves in new, positive ways.

Despite the bleak scenario, however, the personal stories in *Naked* also indicate that black women are beginning to voice their fears and concerns, to tell of their pain and failures, and to address the issues that seem to shape and define their lives: racism, sexism, and capitalism. Valuably, from the personal testimonies collected in *Naked* there emerge strategies of resistance that resonate, to a large extent, with black feminist theory and can be applied in the lives of ordinary black women: loving blackness, affirmation of difference, recognition of how the vestiges of slavery are still at play in the minds of both white and black people, irrespective of gender, conscious rejection of stereotypical messages and interrogation of one’s own complicity in their perpetuation, and finally, knowledge of oneself as one’s own sexual subject, free to choose and define one’s own identity. Although it may be a long way before the black female body is fully reclaimed in the United States, the foundation for this process has been laid.

## Notes

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A draft of this paper was presented at the 2007 CAAR conference in Madrid under the title “*In Medias Res: Reclaiming the Black Female Body Once Again.*”

<sup>1</sup> The choice of the text is deliberate. I find that in academia, little space is devoted to non-academic writing that falls outside the category of fiction, although personal stories can provide powerful testimonies for us to learn from. Also, I want to acknowledge the recent boom in self-help and/or inspirational books for black women, especially those dealing with stories of mutilated lives.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, due to space limitations, I restrict my discussion mostly to these two main features, although occasionally I mention others as well.

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<sup>3</sup> As Robyn Wiegman argues in her book *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, “visuality is the central aspect of Western knowledge that has contributed to the articulation of race and, subsequently, to the emergence of racialized discourse. The Western production of the African subject as sub-human is related to the epistemologies of vision which reduce that subject to an object and property through the logic of corporeal inscription. The perceived subordinate particularity of the other, such as skin color, hair texture, shape and size of lips, nose and buttocks, legitimates the visual paradigm within which only these characteristics are recognized” (Glowacka 2).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson was not the first white person to notice the racial difference and express his/her preference for whiteness. In the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, for example, the Royal Librarian, the Keeper of the Archives in Portugal, and the Chronicler of the discovery and conquest of Guinea remarked that some of the captives were “as black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear (to those who saw them) the images of a lower hemisphere” (Griffin 519).

<sup>5</sup> In “Black Hair/Style Politics” Kobena Mercer points out one of the myths surrounding African American natural hairstyles, arguing that “these hairstyles [afro and dreadlocks in particular] were never natural, waiting to be found: they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed” (254). In other words, they should not be seen as an appropriation of an African aesthetic but rather as a response to racism, a “specifically diasporan creation” (Wade).

<sup>6</sup> Cisse’s choice is, to a large extent, influenced by the fact that she has relatives in Senegal.

<sup>7</sup> Some scholars argue that the texture of African hair may be “bad” not only because it does not conform to the white standards of beauty (it is not straight, long, and/or blond), but also because it implies wildness associated with unrestrained sexuality. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see, for example, bell hooks’ essay “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace” in *Black Looks: Race and Representations* (Boston: Southend Press, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> The belief that black people are sexually lewd and promiscuous predates the institution of American slavery. As early as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, European travelers to Africa found Africans scantily clothed and understood African polygamy and tribal dances as proof of the African’s uncontrolled sexual lust (Pilgrim).

<sup>9</sup> Byrd’s reference to “polishing [her] gun” may seem rather strong. Yet one personal essay in *Naked* involves a story of Cynthia Berry, a woman serving her sentence for murder of a man who happened to be a victim of her rage, depression, and self-hatred stemming from years of molestation, rape, and the domestic violence at the hands of her two husbands. This story sadly illustrates the extent to which the debasement of black women is harmful for the whole black community.

<sup>10</sup> The comment was made in October 2007 by Isiah Thomas, the black Knicks coach and president who was later accused of sexual harassment and name-calling by a former female executive, Anucha Browne Sanders. While he was not found guilty, a Manhattan federal trial jury ordered James Dolan, the Madison Square Garden owner who had fired the executive in retaliation for her complaints about Thomas, to pay \$11.6 million to Sanders, thus opening a dialogue about black misogyny. See *Newsweek*, October 15, 2007: 42, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Likewise problematic is Halle Berry’s winning the Oscar award. As Kumea Shorter-Gooden, psychologist and author of *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (2003), points out in her book: “Though many were happy about the milestone victory, some Black women quietly expressed disappointment that Berry had been honored for an acting part that included a graphic sex scene with White actor Billy Bob Thornton. [...] In my opinion, Halle Berry was awarded for fulfilling a stereotype” (31). Needless to say that Halle Berry is light-skinned and has “good hair.”

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<sup>12</sup> Although I do not deny that there is a pressing need for African Americans to address the issues surrounding sexism and internalized racism in their lives and communities, I want to be fair and acknowledge the part of the African American population always left out from the discussion – those who live in healthy relationships. In some ways, this is a corrective to my own article “The Culture of Disrespect: On Internal Colonization of African Americans” in *Peaceful Multiculturalism or Culture Wars?*, eds. Šárka Bubíková and Olga Roebuck (Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2007:96-103).

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