Love and Marriage: The Politics of Family in Black Popular Fiction

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SUMMARY

“Love and Marriage” argues that popular romance fiction of the 1980s and 90s confronts the residual sexual politics of the Black Power era. Building on the work of Claudia Tate, Ann Ducille, and Candice M. Jenkins, this project examines how black intimacy became increasingly politicized after the collapse of black political organizations in the late 1970s and 80s, during what I call the "Post-Black Power era." Popular romance fiction reflects Black Power nostalgia and its emphasis on patriarchy, as it confronts the new sexual politics of black middle- and working-class women in the 1980s and '90s.

My introductory chapter traces the relationship between black popular fiction and the work of canonized black female writers, namely Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, whose popularity rose significantly in the 1970s and 80s. Despite black male literary critics who lambasted Morrison, Walker and others for their representation of black men, black female authors found a place within the academic community underscoring domestic politics later echoed in black popular romance fiction. Chapter One, “Marrying Up” examines how Sister Souljah’s (Lisa Williamson) The Coldest Winter Ever (1999) and Omar Tyree’s Flyy Girl (1996), much like Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905), a novel of manners, depicts protagonists who manipulate courtship conventions to "marry up"
SUMMARY (continued)

for their economic advantage. Material goods and luxury items drive the unscrupulous behavior of the novel’s central characters, but I argue that their nadir is not simply a drop in class standing or compromised sexual mores, but disruption of black patriarchy. Focusing on Terry McMillan’s *Disappearing Acts* (1989), and Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Brothers and Sisters* (1995), Chapter Two, “Marrying Down” examines how black popular romance novels evoke the Black Power era’s stereotypes of the castrating black woman and emasculated black man by depicting black working-class male characters and black female characters who have a new and unprecedented access to the middle-class. I contend that that the theme of unrequited love typical in mainstream white romance novels is replaced with an unrequited race and class politics between working-class black men and middle-class black women. Chapter Three, “Marrying Black,” contends that the pressure for blacks to marry or partner within one’s own race is metaphorically linked to the Black Nationalist insistence that blacks must “support black business.” Examining Eric Jerome Dickey’s *Milk in My Coffee* (1998) and Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love* (1995), this chapter reveals how the declining practicality of “buying black” amplified the political force of “marrying black” in the Post-Black Power era. As Black relationships become overburdened with the politics of the preceding era, interracial intimacy becomes the apolitical ideal in Kitt’s and Dickey’s texts.
SUMMARY (continued)

My dissertation concludes with an exploration of what it means to use “marrying” as an organizing motif when the denouement of the novels I have explored is precisely not marriage. The inaccessibility of the marriage ideal call for an examination of Sapphire’s highly popular novel *PUSH* (1996), which stands as an exception to many of the texts examined in the core chapters of this dissertation. Because *PUSH* features a black female protagonist attracted to the black nationalist rhetoric of Louis Farrakhan and deeply interested in upward mobility, but also mistrustful of heterosexual partnership or marriage as a legitimate route for it, the novel opens new possibilities for black female subjectivity that reject black nationalist emphasis on patriarchy and traditional narratives of heterosexual coupling and marriage.
I. INTRODUCTION

*I like marriage. The idea.*

–Toni Morrison

According to cultural anthropologist Corinne Kratz, as visual artifacts, book covers communicate "institutional links and interpretive assumptions that saturate cover designs as part of the book's production, circulation, and consumption" (Kratz 180). Book covers and other paratexts for the emerging genre of black popular romance in the 1980's and 1990's expose an early link to Alice Walker and her literary peers that is often glossed in discussions about black popular fiction. The 1999 Sagebrush edition of Terry McMillan’s *Disappearing Acts* (1989), of which there are fifteen editions, bore a portrait of a black man and woman by Synthia St. James, a commercially successful artist who designed book cover art for Alice Walker, the United States Postal Service's first Kwanzaa stamp, and illustrated Bill Cosby’s series of children’s literature. McMillan's paratext situated her within an institutional milieu that codified her as an important fixture within African American culture and tied her to a growing black literary canon of female writers. The 2004 New American Library edition of *Disappearing Acts* reveals a shift in institutional links, as it replaces the black man and woman looking at one another on the 1999 Sagebrush edition book cover, with a muted image of a black woman's body draped in a red dress against a burgundy background. The woman's face is partially hidden and the author's name is emblazoned in white, along with her distinction as a "#1 New York Times bestselling author", followed by the book title in dark red, all at the bottom of the cover. The move away from work by St. James demonstrates how black romance fiction had become established as a commercially viable and separate niche of black fiction which no longer needed to advertise its connection to reputable black female writers.

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The initial relationship between black popular romance writers and the "second renaissance" of black women writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Ntozake Shange, among others, reveals the sociopolitical and literary stakes that originally confronted black popular romance writers. In his 1979 essay "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists," Robert Staples argued that unlike "happily married women" who do not need to unleash "pent up frustration", black female writers of the 1970's owe their mounting success to their ability to satisfy black women's "collective appetite for black male blood" (27). Policing black women's depictions of black male characters was a common concern, but it failed to prevent black feminist theorists and black women writers from carving out a space in academia. Because issues pertaining to black male literary representations bled into the 1980's and 1990's, black popular romance writers such as Terry McMillan, Sandra Kitt, and Sister Souljah negotiated similar anxieties as their literary predecessors. Perhaps one of the most conspicuous similarities between critically acclaimed black women writers and black popular romance writers is their attention to heterosexual relationships. Morrison and her peers regularly depicted heterosexual relationships after marriage, while McMillan and her peers frequently featured heterosexual lovers seemingly on their way to the altar. Binding Morrison and McMillan era writers together is their attention to domestic discord between male and female lovers that, for example, leads to the end of a marriage in Morrison's *Sula* (1973) and impedes the realization of one in McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*. This focus on the gender politics of black heterosexual relationships allowed popular romance fiction to attract readers who were previously loyal patrons of Morrison, Walker, and Ntozake Shange, but popular romance fiction's inability to end with marriage demonstrated its literary hindsight regarding the antagonistic portrayals by earlier authors.
A key distinction between popular romance fiction and critically acclaimed black female writers is the former's dependence on romance conventions, specifically the expected happy ending of marriage. Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is emblematic of this dénouement, as Jane declares "Reader, I married him" at the end of the novel (Bronte 347). More than ten years after Jane's iconic proclamation, Harriet Jacobs challenges Jane Eyre's ending in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) when the main character, Linda Brent, says, "Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage" (Jacobs 228). While Jacobs uses the romance genre to narrate a story about her subjugation under slavery, including her sexual abuse, she is unable to adhere to Jane Eyre's representative finale. Jacobs rejects the typical marriage ending and juxtaposes marriage against freedom, outlining a distinct paradigm for black romance novels. Seemingly detached from nineteenth century slave narratives, black popular romance continues Jacobs's legacy of prioritizing freedom from sexual and physical exploitation over securing a marriage proposal. Not only does Jacobs underscore freedom, she highlights the possibilities of black female sexual abuse within the institution of marriage. For example, though married, Linda's master, Dr. Flint, is undeterred from attempting to "seduce" Linda into a sexual relationship. Marriage is further devalued through its inability to provide Linda escape out of slavery.

Creating a unique space from mainstream popular romance fiction, black popular romance novels often reject the marriage finale, despite the grand and minute gestures made toward marriage through content and form. Unlike the orphaned Jane Eyre, black female protagonists seem well-prepared for marriage, as they are often college-educated with successful careers in settings that include integrated middle-class metropolitan cities and suburbs. References to expensive vehicles, name brand purses, high-priced clothing, and other luxury
items are interspersed throughout the novels, but are also reflective of the mainstream popular romance market, as popular romance is argued to be the "stepsister to the fashion magazine" (Harzewski 50). Nevertheless, middle-class accoutrements not only attract a growing black middle-class readership, but provide added pressure for main characters to have successful relationships with satisfying endings. The definitive last hurdle for black middle-class female protagonists is finding a heterosexual monogamous male partner.

A. **Black Popular Romance and the Post-Black Power Era**

This project identifies how black popular romance of the 1980's and 90's negotiates the political expectations imposed on black courtship, marriage, sexuality and family in what I identify as the Post-Black Power era, which I will return to later. Instead of offering an introductory survey of the genre, my project insists that black popular romance reveals the political stakes for black women cautious of the marriage dénouement. For example, Zora, in Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*, has a child with her love interest, Franklin, but he also rapes her during their courtship. As a result, McMillan's ending scenes counter the aplomb of Jane Eyre's closing announcement of marriage. Franklin narrates the final vignettes, illustrated in mundane and inconclusive terms, as he and Zora begin a game of Scrabble with no discussion of marriage. Winter, in Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), is also not offered a marriage proposal at the end of the novel; in fact, she is faced with more unfortunate circumstances. She begins the novel on a high note declaring, "Brooklyn-born I don't have no sob stories for you about rats and roaches and pissy-pew hallways" (1). Describing her birth, she says "My father, Ricky Santiaga, was so proud of his new baby girl that he had a limo waiting to pick my moms up from the hospital. The same night I got home my pops gave me a diamond ring set in 24 karat-gold . . . It was important for me to know I deserved the best, no slum
jewelry, cheap shoes, or knock-off designer stuff, only the real thing" (1-2). Her pompous display of material goods continues throughout the story and her precipitous fall from grace is doubly marked by her refusal to comply with the black nationalist codes for black womanhood prominently featured in the novel by the inclusion of Sister Souljah as a character as well as her love interest, Midnight's, urging that she abandon her hypersexual dress and performance for the good of an invented homogenous black community. Midnight's and Souljah's black nationalist rhetoric frequently harkens back to a mythologized Africa, where black nobility is exalted, but gender inequality is ignored. Winter is not convinced by Midnight's and Souljah's claims and thus ends the novel without marriage, in jail, and mourning the death of her mother.

Pointing to the widespread black nationalist nostalgia evident in black popular culture of the 1980's and 90's, my project identifies these decades as the Post-Black Power era. As several scholars have illuminated, black nationalist sentiment shows up in the 1980’s and 1990’s in hip hop music by groups such as Public Enemy, films such as Deep Cover (1992), and I argue, is also overt in black popular romance novels. Fictionalized emblems of black nationalism not only situate the novels in a precise historical setting, but are symptomatic of the stronghold nationalist politics maintains on black popular romance and its readership, and on black popular culture, writ large. Given the attention to nationalism in black popular romance, I examine how the novels mediate the pressure to abide by the residual Black Power influenced race and gender politics that reinforce black male gender privilege among other racialized constructions.
B. **Critical Reception and the Problem with Stereotype**

Despite the success of black popular romance, the genre's use of African American stereotypes has sparked contentious debates. In response to Terry McMillan's best-selling novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and its subsequent film adaptation, *Ebony* magazine's April 1996 issue included a symposium entitled, "Was the Movie Fair to Black Men and Black Women?" and the 1993 *MAWA Review* issue included Edward M. Jackson's article "Images of Black Males in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*" (Richards 15-16). Although McMillan was a target of criticism regarding what some thought to be stereotypical depictions of African Americans in her novels, she used similar criteria to disparage other writers. In October 2007, McMillan sent an email to Simon & Schuster executives and several black media outlets decrying their endorsement of black popular fiction. She contends that black popular fiction is exemplary of poor writing and condemns it for its largely “exploitative, racist, and sexist” content, arguing that these books “show black people in a negative and stereotypical light.”4 This policing of African American representations in literature and popular fiction is informed by a history of African American stereotypes employed in literature and popular culture. For example, in James Baldwin’s "Everybody's Protest Novel," he insists that the overused stereotype of the victimized, weak, and helpless black character is used to advance the trope of the white savior. While these characterizations persist in twenty-first century culture in films such as *The Blind Side* (2009), the concern regarding stereotypes began to shift to middle-class anxiety about cultural propriety alongside growth of the black middle-class in the 1980's and 1990's. Criticism of black stereotypes in popular culture became defined by a framework dependent on respectable ways to showcase black images to mainstream audiences. Because stereotypical images of African Americans remain a part of the American cultural landscape, the issues regarding respectable and
stereotypical images became muddled. So, while McMillan's assertion that Simon & Schuster is capitalizing on clichéd black images could be a legitimate one, her argument that the books "show black people in a negative light" complicates her claim and reinforces the troubling merger of stereotype and images that do not conform to rules of black respectability. For example, McMillan's email to Simon & Schuster is consistent with the criticism she received about making her *Disappearing Acts* protagonist, Zora, sound "too white" (Richards 13). Valerie Sayers of the *New York Times* echoed the aforementioned appraisal of *Disappearing Acts*, asserting that "Zora's voice, though generally likable, has a bland quality" (Richards 13). McMillan's response attempts to counter stereotypes, as she says, "Look, she's not barefoot and pregnant, living in the projects and getting her ass kicked. I cannot apologize because some of us have been to college" (Smith 50). But her characterization of college-educated protagonists is also a way to adhere to codes of black respectability by depicting “positive” African American representations. The investment in portraying “positive” African American characters diminishes the novel's "literariness," as it necessitates flat utilitarian characterizations which work harder at countering stereotypes than at presenting complex and blemished representations of African Americans. McMillan's work attempts to challenge stereotypes, but offsets flat characterization by, for example, featuring four distinct protagonists rather than one in *Waiting to Exhale* or varying male and female narrated chapters in *Disappearing Acts*. Nevertheless, McMillan demonstrates how the issue of policing black stereotypes is inextricably linked to codes of black respectability.

The problem of weak characterization and the resulting issue of "literariness" is further circumvented by a recent shift within popular culture theory to go beyond arguing that literature should accept popular fiction within its ranks. There is no longer the tacit assumption that all
popular fiction, chick-lit, or urban romance authors aspire to be among the Pulitzer Prize winning authors of the academy, or that all canonical authors aspire to have their novels adapted into blockbuster Hollywood films. McMillan admits her indifference to being included within the literary canon in *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) when she parrots literary criticism of her work, saying, "after reading like the first fifty or sixty pages I don't know what all the hoopla is about and why everybody thinks she's such a hot writer because her shit is kind of weak when you get right down to it and this book here has absolutely no literary merit whatsoever at least none that I can see" (McMillan 60). McMillan confesses that she included the aforementioned passage "to let them know that I know what they say and I don't care . . . . What I've done, and what I will do, is write what I feel like writing. I can only hope that people like what I do" (Richards 17). Rather than work from an argument that attempts to include black popular romance in the African American literary canon, my project acknowledges the connection between early black popular romance writers and canonized black women writers, while analyzing the texts with reference to romance conventions, social contexts, and a corresponding matrix of black sexual politics that connect to broader political discourses about the black family.

Despite the rich interpretative possibilities in black popular romance, scholarship on these novels has not grown at the same pace as research on other popular culture mediums. First, love and romance have long been thought to be apolitical topics, so romance novels get overlooked because they allegedly do not deal with issues of freedom and justice, especially as the tradition of racial protest defines the African American literary canon. Literary scholar Ann duCille argues that "until recently, love and marriage were all but dismissed as female or, at least, feminized themes little worthy of study when juxtaposed to the masculinized racial and freedom discourse assumed to characterize the African American novel" (3). Narrow definitions of racial
protest also account for the reason early black popular culture scholars ignored black popular romance, but directed much of their attention to black popular music, specifically hip hop. Dominated by black male artists, hip hop music was immediately politicized because of its explicit mention of issues such as racial profiling, drug trafficking, and incarceration. Black popular romance's extraordinary success necessitates sustained critical attention and fortunately, there is now a growing field of scholars interested in black intimacy and there are several texts which lay the groundwork for examining the political value in African American literary depictions of home, domesticity, love, and marriage. Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (1996), examines how bourgeois domestic values were employed in nineteenth-century African American domestic novels as an intraracial method to overcome racism and disenfranchisement. Ann duCille’s *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (1993) travels similar literary terrain and insists that the broader theme of marriage and gender in black women’s texts reclaims and resexualizes the black female body. She asserts that the twentieth-century marriage plot by black women writers is no longer invested in rescue, protection, or utopian partnership, but instead emphasizes sexual commodification, emotional confinement, and male domination.

In *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007), Claudia Jenkins expands duCille's and Tate’s research by demonstrating how twentieth century African American literature reflects dominant public discourse about a so-called black family pathology as a legitimate justification for denying blacks social, economic, and political equality, thus restoring the political significance of the home and black intimacy. Jenkins argues that black women in twentieth century African American literature confront what she identifies as a "salvific wish," or a "black, largely female, and generally middle-class desire . . . to protect or save black women,
and black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity” (14).

I build on the aforementioned arguments in "Love and Marriage: The Politics of Family in Black Popular Fiction" by analyzing how black popular romance uses literary and popular forms to respond to discourse about black sexual politics and its political resonance in the late twentieth century. The political movements of the 1960's and 1970's, specifically the 1964 Civil Rights Acts and Executive Order 11246, otherwise known as Affirmative Action, expanded the black middle-class from the 1970's to the 1990's. As blacks moved up the class ranks, the importance of marriage and courtship increased alongside heightened political rhetoric emphasizing heteronormativity and preservation of the nuclear family. For instance, President Bill Clinton passed the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which defined marriage as "the foundation of a successful society", so national interest in policing the nuclear family led to widespread anxiety about family formation (United States). Reflections of anxiety about family formation also showed up in popular culture. Television show such as The Cosby Show, which ran from 1984-1992, and films such as Boomerang (1994), A Thin Line Between Love and Hate (1996), and Love Jones (1997) cultivated further attention on courtship and the black nuclear family among the black middle-class and stimulated the market for romance novels. Black romance uses depictions of courtship to help manage black middle-class anxiety about the family, as it capitalizes on the political rhetoric about family formation, but it frequently concludes without marriage indexing the contentious nature of the black gender and sexual politics in the Post-Black Power decades.
C. **Courtship and Marriage**

Though the novels I examine rarely end with marriage, my chapters are organized thematically around “marrying” to signify on the heightened anticipation for marriage. Chapter One, “Marrying Down” examines the depiction of heterosexual relationships between black middle-class women and working-class black men in Terry McMillan's second novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989). McMillan's novel begins quickly with passionate love scenes between Franklin and Zora, bolstering the hope that their courtship will reaffirm the "love conquers all" romance convention. The novel's emphasis on domestic discord and refusal to idealize love suggests two things. First, readers are able to see themselves reading within a trajectory of black women's writing unafraid to depict domestic conflict and thus the chasm between McMillan's novels and work written by Walker and Morrison, her literary predecessors, dwindles. This link gives black popular romance literary capital as its commercial success grows. Second, the novel refuses a traditional romance ending in order to highlight the unresolved gender and racial politics between black men and women remerging in the 1980's and 1990's. This counters the assumption that popular romance avoids "serious treatment of cultural, political, and social concerns" (Ferriss and Young 8). My analysis demonstrates how McMillan replaces the romance convention of unrequited love with an unrequited racial politics between Zora and Franklin. Zora's loyalty to a politics of personal responsibility attempts to render Franklin's gender privilege visible, as it is typically ignored in nationalist discourse about black male extinction, while Franklin's fidelity to a politics of institutional oppression helps mask his gender privilege and highlights his class victimization in their relationship.

Wharton’s *The House of Mith* (1905), a novel of manners, these novels depict protagonists who abandon codes of respectability in order to manipulate courtship conventions for their economic advantage and aspire toward partners "above their station." Material goods and luxury items drive the unscrupulous behavior of the novel’s central characters, but their nadir is not simply a drop in class standing or compromised sexual mores, but a disruption of black patriarchy. These texts suggest that the main character’s lack of racial pride has resulted in self-indulgent materialism, as they are both introduced to a miscellany of black nationalist cultural symbols, including everything from Louis Farrakhan to Kente cloth. The Post-Black Power era’s cure for materialism and sexual promiscuity is a version of black nationalism that displaces any emphasis on race and gender oppression for a narrative of personal responsibility. This chapter exposes how the unwillingness of Souljah’s central character to adopt a black nationalist position renders her completely unsympathetic, while Tyree offers his middle-class protagonist redemption and eventual success through her acceptance of a hodgepodge of black nationalist rhetoric.

Chapter Three, "Marrying Black" contends that the pressure for blacks to marry or partner within one’s own race is metaphorically linked to the black nationalist insistence that blacks must “support black business.” Examining Eric Jerome Dickey’s *Milk in My Coffee* (1998), which depicts a black male and white female relationship and Sandra Kitt’s *The Color of Love* (1995), which depicts a black female and white male relationship, chapter three reveals how the declining practicality of “buying black” amplified the political force of “marrying black” in the Post-Black Power era. As Black relationships become overburdened with the politics of the preceding era, interracial intimacy becomes the apolitical ideal in Kitt’s and Dickey’s texts. As the novels depict insufferable black intraracial relationships and romanticize black-white interracial intimacy, my analysis reveals how black female protagonists experience
more social and cultural hurdles to black-white interracial intimacy than the black male
protagonists because of the black nationalist emphasis on black men reclaiming masculinity
through white womanhood.

Chapter Four, "Outside Marriage" analyzes Sapphire's *PUSH* (1996) as an anomaly in
relation to the rise of black popular romance in the 1980's and 1990's. As I have mentioned
earlier, there are explicit connections between Terry McMillan and writers such as Alice Walker
and Toni Morrison, and Sapphire also acknowledges *PUSH*’s literary debt to the previous era of
black women writers, specifically Alice Walker. Nevertheless, Walker's influence on Sapphire
does not result in a popular romance novel, as it did with other black writers during the 1990's.
Sapphire resists the swollen black popular romance market and depicts a story that rejects even a
desire for a heterosexual happy ending. Moreover, *PUSH* includes black nationalist symbols and
rhetoric, which similarly show up in Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* and Omar Tyree's
*Flyy Girl*, but ultimately resists them in order to chart routes for black female subjectivity
independent of the cultural discourse insistent on the political need for a reclaimed black
masculinity.
II. CHAPTER ONE

“MARRYING DOWN”

I would be content being a housewife if I could find the kind of man who wouldn’t treat me like one.

---Terry McMillan

Buppie pulp-fiction writers like Terry McMillan have been lambasted by the literary establishment for a number of misdeeds, including what Daphne Brooks calls their “recirculation of the familiar, the literal, the safe, and self-conscious” as well as its disregard for the link between the present and “the complexities of the historical past or the future” (Brooks 172). It would seem as though McMillan’s ahistorical texts forfeit literary value in order to achieve commercial success, as they “aim squarely at the black middle class readers who are turned off by the relentless high-mindedness of say Toni Morrison and who want to see more of their own experiences and aspirations reflected in the books they read” (Garner 2). First Lady, Michelle Obama, is potentially one of the readers turned off by *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Beloved* (1987), as a copy of Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) sits prominently on her White House office bookshelf (*Essence*). There is an obvious elitism which deems McMillan’s readers as uncritical and Toni Morrison’s text as “high-minded” and contradicts Morrison’s legendary vow that if her work is not about “the village or the community or about you, then it isn’t about anything” (Morrison 339). Morrison explicitly racializes the village, community, and singular reader as black, disturbing the condescension employed to define Morrison against McMillan. Not to mention, the frequent impulse to compare McMillan to the past glories of Toni Morrison, rather than to her established contemporary peers like Connie Briscoe or Bebe Moore Campbell, reveals a problematic nostalgia for the literary past and a narrow black aesthetic politics. The
boundaries of this black aesthetic politics are further exposed by Thulani Davis, who disparages McMillan’s fiction as “less interested in race and protest,” further asserting that it “speaks in the practiced tongue of white mainstream literature” (Davis 26). Rather than affirm an elitist or protest-driven separation between Morrison and McMillan or to arbitrarily bind them together, my examination of black popular romance demonstrates how it fills a cultural and literary niche and interrogate what this new popular genre’s obsession with courtship can reveal about black sexual politics, as sexuality is what Hortense Spillers terms, the “locus of great drama” (Spillers 153).

E. Shelly Reid argues that there is a connection between McMillan and writers like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker because McMillan “extends” their achievements and “grapple[s], often successfully, with challenges facing black women speaking out in the 1990’s” (Reid 315). Indeed, Morrison does offer fiction that interrogates black sexual politics, but it is also typically deemed antithetical to the romance linked to McMillan and her peers. There is a subtle tie between writers like Morrison and McMillan other than their race and gender, but genre and commercial success also significantly shape the writing of black popular romance writers of the 1980’s and 90’s. McMillan’s commercial success has much to do with her themes of romance and courtship, but her connection to the African American literary tradition is that her work is not entirely apolitical as some argue. For example, the tradition of black women writers who used marriage and courtship to resist racism is documented by Hazel Carby, who argues that nineteenth-century black women writers often depicted black women and men as victims of white patriarchy and thus shared a common ideological goal as peers and spouses to resist white racism (Carby 144). Barbara Omolade similarly insists that among black men and women, “courting, romance, sex, and love were all tempered and shaped by a mutual need and by
opposition to the system of white supremacy” (Omolade 80). Kevin Gaines situates this impetus for black intraracial partnership within the larger project of racial uplift, asserting that late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black men and women understood the economic security and moral progress available through marriage as a way to resist white racism (Gaines 231). Though these scholars refer to nineteenth-century and early twentieth century contexts, their claims can be traced to contemporary scholars who argue that love is a “significant political act, particularly among those stigmatized and marked unworthy of love and incapable of deep commitment” (Iton 8). In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and The New Racism* (2005), Patricia Hill Collins contends that in choosing to love black women “whom society has so demonized, Black men exhibit a form of “strength” in resisting their depictions as hustlers, bad boys, and criminals” (250). Likewise, heterosexual black women who “demand that their Black male sexual partners respect them for who they are constitutes a rebellious act in a society that stigmatizes Black women as unworthy of love” through disparaging stereotypes about their sexuality and matriarchal roles (250).

Given the significant link between black intraracial marriage and anti-racist work, there is literary, sociopolitical, and historical expectation that in McMillan’s sophomore novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), Zora Banks and Franklin Swift will share ideological goals that work to resist stereotypes and racial injustice and inevitably end with marriage. Although McMillan builds the possibility of marriage through, for example, passionate sex scenes and Zora’s eventual pregnancy, the novel uses another romance convention to circumvent Zora and Franklin’s marriage. The desired but unreturned love depicted Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* (1905) or Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* (1907) is replaced by McMillan for a desired but unreciprocated racial politics that stalls the courtship between the principal characters.
Franklin, a construction worker and high school dropout, makes several failed attempts to fulfill his role as breadwinner. Zora, a college-educated high school teacher, is therefore forced to take on the financial burden in the relationship. Carby, Omolade, Gaines, and Hill Collins provide the expectation that Zora may understand, for example, how racism has hindered Franklin’s search for steady employment and subsequent service to the family as breadwinner. Likewise, Franklin is expected to understand how black women’s matriarchal role has been used to pathologize them as castrating partners. Their shared ideology is presumed to aid them in resisting the racism that has produced the “problems” associated with their incommensurate class positions, nonconformity to gender conventions, and access to the nuclear family.

In “Deposing the Man of the House: Terry McMillan Rewrites the Family,” Janet Mason Ellerby argues that McMillan’s fiction works outside the nuclear family, defining “new options for family, arrangements to accommodate both women who divorce and women who choose to create families without husbands” (Ellerby 107). It is true that McMillan offers depictions of the family that go beyond nuclear constructions, but these constructions are not new, nor in many cases are they chosen by her female characters. Characterizing McMillan’s work as a critique of the nuclear family or representative of new black family constructions allows it a more respected space in academia or redeems it as “important” literature because it can be labeled “progressive” or “resistant,” but this characterization also masks the history of the black family. *Disappearing Acts* does not carve out new alternatives to the nuclear family, because historically African Americans have not had full and complete access to the institution of the nuclear family. Donna L. Franklin insists that racism and sexism have aided in the increase of black single mothers, providing evidence that black mothers are not wholeheartedly choosing alternatives to the nuclear family, but are often compelled to adopt them (Franklin 17). According to *Black
Families, one year prior to the setting of Disappearing Acts, forty-nine percent of black children lived with one parent and eight percent lived with neither parent (McAdoo 275). Young black mothers used extended networks by living with parents, grandparents, or senior relatives prior to the most recent phenomenon of single black mothers living alone (McAdoo 25). While these are not the only constructions of the black family, neither case is exemplary of a traditional nuclear family. Unlike Ellerby, I contend that Zora illustrates how black women do not choose, but are forced to work outside of the traditional family norms and her desire for the nuclear family implicitly shapes an ideological goal to resist racism.

Part of Franklin and Zora’s ideological chasm begins with a disruptive gender politics. Ellerby claims that McMillan’s work champions a “reconfiguration of the family,” but this is antithetical to Zora’s expressed and overt desire for the nuclear family despite its inaccessibility. While the nuclear family is criticized for its dependence on a hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative privilege, Zora’s investment in the nuclear family can be understood as a complicated challenge to racism and sexism outside her home, but leaves her vulnerable to victimization within her home. Certainly, part of the Zora’s difficulty can be located within what Ellerby contends is Zora’s desire to “allocate to men a different space than the patriarchal center” (106). While Zora does imagine an alternative space for Franklin, her conflicting desires for a nuclear family demonstrate her anxiety that Franklin’s decentralized role can be manipulated as a way to relieve him of his responsibilities as a parent. Her anxiety maps on to the way sexism has made maternal child-rearing more important than paternal care and nurturing in American society, regardless of race. For example, in Illinois, divorced or single fathers are only required to give 20 percent of their income for the support of one child in comparison to an assumed 50 percent to 75 percent wives might be more likely to receive from fathers while married. As
Devon Carbado recognizes, black men are “perceived to be significantly more vulnerable, and significantly more “endangered” than black women,” giving them a privileged victim status which often obscures black male subjugation and oppression of black women, as well as reduces the expectations for black familial and paternal responsibility (Carbado 348). When Zora becomes pregnant with Franklin's child, black male privileged victimhood seemingly provides an additional reason for her to desire a nuclear family because Franklin's gender privilege naturalizes the oppression linked to single motherhood that Zora would experience and that is commonplace for black women. Zora and Franklin’s shared politics are complicated by the need for Zora to condemn the racism Franklin experiences, while acknowledging and protecting herself from sexism within her home. The delicate balance to maintain a shared racial agenda, while acknowledging her own race and gender oppression, proves unsuccessful in spite of the sociopolitical anticipation of Zora and Franklin’s courtship success.

According to Carbado, Franklin’s victim status requires that he present a respectable image of black manhood in order to garner sympathy. The text fulfills this requirement when Zora admits to being impressed with Franklin’s familiarity with Zora Neale Hurston, as she is named after her, and with his skills as a handyman. Readers learn that Franklin is an adept manual laborer, but also an informally educated, organic intellectual. Though this is not disclosed to Zora, he tells readers that he ended a previous relationship with a woman because she didn't vote and she couldn't figure out the more basic puzzles on Wheel of Fortune. We are also told he wins in Scrabble most of the time and reads literature by authors like James Baldwin, which of course should not be confused with any low-brow black popular fiction. Franklin is, by all accounts, an everyman or a seemingly perfect amalgamation. He is well-read and a skilled manual laborer, and he is street smart, but not a thug or hoodlum. At one point Zora thinks to
herself, “How ironic. He reads more than I do.” (268). Franklin’s everyman characterization shapes what I call a “redemptive masculinity” whereby supposedly effeminate and/or white, middle-class characteristics like playing Scrabble or reading high-brow literature are balanced by racially marked black working-class or “blackened” qualities such as blue-collar work. In Sister Souljah’s *The Coldest Winter Ever* (2000), Midnight is a drug dealer painted as a smart, avid reader who recommends books to the main character, Winter. Though Midnight does not have a traditional blue-collar trade, the amalgamation of his illegal trade, business acumen, desire to leave the drug trade, and interest in reading constitute another version of redemptive masculinity, ultimately providing a more respectable black male image.

Midnight is less representative of the everyman that Franklin embodies, but Zora is similarly cast as an everywoman. Zora and Franklin’s universal characterization suggest a shared racial politics because their depictions imagine the potential for broad negotiation and compromise between African American men and women. Zora establishes her ability to balance opposing ideologies through her friendship with two polarizing friends, Portia and Claudette. Portia is described as an attractive serial dater, who enjoys shopping at Saks Fifth Avenue and offering candid advice to Zora about her partners. Portia seeks her mates with clear standards of financial stability reminiscent of the late Gwen Guthrie’s 1986 pop song, “Ain’t Nothing Goin’ on But the Rent,” where Guthrie sings, “You’ve got to have a j-o-b, if you want to be with me. No finance without romance.” Portia is characterized as the stereotypical “ho” or materialistic woman who is willing to “sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants” (Hill Collins, *Sexual* 128). Another character in the novel accuses her of auctioning “her pussy just so she can go on a shopping spree” (102). In contrast, Claudette aptly represents a perfectly stock version of middle-class respectability, as she is a lawyer and her husband a physician. She
frequently makes comments to Portia such as, “Women like you give the rest of us a bad reputation. But there’s some of us out here who’ve got more than an overworked pussy to offer” (104). Claudette attempts to prove black female respectability in spite of Portia’s sexual expression and courtship ethics. Claudette is most similar to the “black lady” stereotype defined by a career professional invested in countering claims of black promiscuity most often associated with the black working-class by avoiding profanity, miniskirts, plunging necklines, cornrows, and gum chewing (Hill Collins, *Sexual* 139-140). Her sole opportunity for sexual expression is within heterosexual marriage and her ambition is channeled through her occupation, though never as a threat to White and/or male authority (Hill Collins, *Sexual* 140). Though Claudette and Portia both curse, a small detail in the text, the majority of the qualities listed are primarily used to draw severe distinctions between these two banal depictions. Together Zora, Portia, and Claudette create a heterosexual class triumvirate that is always engaging in a system of checks and balances and evaluating one another’s bodies through class ideology, advancement, and sexual propriety. The depiction of Claudette, Portia, and Zora centers on what Candice M. Jenkins calls the “salvific wish,” or the black, female middle-class “desire to protect or save black women, and black communities, more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through the embrace of conventional bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity” (Jenkins 13-14). Black women are emphasized here because, as Rhonda M. Williams explains, they have historically been “the primary carriers of black familial pathology” as they are most often connected to domesticity (Williams 140). Zora’s function in the text, in part, is to act as mediator between Portia and Claudette’s incessant quarreling, but also to
represent the everywoman against their stereotypical characterizations. Zora’s intermediary status presents a complementary partnership with Franklin who also balances two extremes, the black working-class and the black bourgeoisie.

Portia foreshadows Zora and Franklin’s unrequited racial politics by calling attention to Zora’s body as capital and disregarding Franklin’s assumed racial victimization. Portia bluntly concludes that Franklin probably cannot “afford” Zora, suggests Zora end her relationship with Franklin and follow a strict itemized list of criteria when looking for a mate. Her statement about Franklin’s inability to “afford” Zora is entirely familiar when considered within the larger context of recent popular cultural narratives about black heterosexual relationships. In the film adaptation of Disappearing Acts, Sanaa Lathan plays the role of Zora, against Franklin, played by Wesley Snipes. Coincidentally, Lathan also plays Kenya McQueen in the 2006 film, Something New, about an upper middle-class black woman dating her white landscaper, Brian Kelly. Before Kelly and McQueen can admit their supposedly taboo attraction to one another, Kenya, in the same way, pointedly tells Brian “you can’t afford me.” Kenya is most clearly trying to tell Brian that he cannot afford her services as a lawyer, but the awkward silence following her remark emphasizes the subtext as a reference to her body as capital, meaning also he cannot afford her body. While historically, white men have always been able to afford black women’s bodies, Kenya attempts to rewrite and right this transaction. The once ubiquitous accessibility of black women’s bodies is protected by claims of respectability and socioeconomic status. In McMillan’s novel, this is further demonstrated by Portia’s checklist for men, in which she argues that all potential mates should at least have two credit cards, a modern car, a one-bedroom apartment, and a college degree. Portia’s crude list champions a traditional masculinity by centralizing the issue of socioeconomic capital, but also advocates the protection of black
female bodies that are seen as open and accessible. In other words, Portia and Kenya are able to employ this discriminating filter of financial and social benchmarks as a way to avert stereotypes about black female promiscuity. This is important for both characters as unmarried black women, but it is a more critical edict for Portia who easily elicits more condemnation as a licentious woman, and therefore cannot afford to give up these benchmarks. In order to protect her own objectified body, Zora would need to adhere to Portia’s checklist and abandon her shared racial politics with Franklin, which recognizes how white racism has prevented him from claiming his “manhood” or becoming the breadwinner. It would seem that Zora and Portia need a middle-class masculinity to serve as a barrier against black sexual pathology and stereotype.

The boundaries of Franklin and Zora’s shared racial politics are put to the test Franklin first admits he has two children, is still married, cannot afford a divorce, and is a high school dropout. Franklin wastes no time in issuing a very self-conscious but pointed statement to Zora after his confession, declaring, “I guess what they say is true.” Zora’s response pushes Franklin to say, “That money and status and education and all that shit counts more than what people feel about each other, right?” (116). Zora’s idealistic view of Franklin is sullied by his socioeconomic impotence, though according to him, socioeconomic capital is supposed to have little to no bearing on whom you love, as he presents his guilt-ridden remark with little room for disagreement. Franklin’s prioritization of sentiment over class is not explicitly racialized or emphasizing an unrequited racial politics, but Hill Collins reminds us that racism in accord with socioeconomic failures deems black men ‘unworthy of love.’ Franklin’s sentiment is implicitly racialized and subtly interrogates Zora’s racial solidarity, as his question exploits her supposed commitment toward a shared racial politics and what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the “broader community norm that sees independent black women as somehow failing to support
black men” (Hill Collins, *Sexual* 144). Moreover, Franklin’s query more broadly capitalizes on the “patriarchal way that racial solidarity has been defined in the black community” (Crenshaw 416).

Zora’s response to Franklin is also burdened by an already vulnerable sexual and romantic propriety. In *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1997) Eva Illouz argues that “in modern romantic love, money and social status are not supposed to interfere with sentiment, and choosing a partner solely on these grounds is usually considered improper” (75). Franklin’s question puts Zora’s black female romantic and sexual propriety at risk, as refusing a “pure” love solely because of class and education easily identifies Zora as a gold digger. Franklin’s question also corresponds to popular romance conventions, and thus places McMillan’s text within the popular romance category. Romance novels and films use different themes and social contexts, but are most often characterized by their sentimental representations of love and romance, which are prioritized over class differences, caste, politics, and even geographical distance.

As Zora’s response to Franklin determines McMillan’s literary classification, her response also decides McMillan’s alignment with black women’s literary tradition because so many canonized black female novels about heterosexual courtship render sentimental, traditional notions of romance and heterosexual love luxurious, inapplicable, or tragically interrupted. Toni Morrison’s version of love between Nel and Jude in *Sula* (1973) is interrupted by infidelity and Jude’s subsequent disappearance. In Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), perhaps the most sentimental love affair exists between Pecola and the image of Shirley Temple, but is eclipsed by Pecola’s incestual rape. These examples suggest that McMillan’s presumed entrée to the literary
establishment is to challenge black women’s relationship to clichéd constructions of love, and McMillan’s purposeful choice to name her protagonist Zora demonstrates a partial investment in black women’s canonized literature. The most obvious connection between Zora and black women’s fiction is Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). The relationship between the newly widowed and well-heeled Janie Starks and the working-class guitar player, Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, link to Zora and Franklin because they mimic their incommensurate class positions. After two marriages, Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake is not ideal, but it comes the closest to the love she seeks. In one way, Janie’s access to love and romance is bought by her class, because her money and class status alleviate the pressure to marry for stability rather than for “true love.” Conversely, her class status must be suppressed to sustain her relationship with Tea Cake. Janie’s assets could provide a comfortable life for her and Tea Cake, but instead Janie swaps her dress for overalls and works alongside Tea Cake and other migrant blue collar workers in the Florida Everglades. Janie’s money does not compel Tea Cake to replace his denim pants for refined suits because his work, specifically manual labor, is one way to help prove his masculinity. As Janie relinquishes her class status to some degree, she revels in the form of gender equality created when Tea Cake invites her to play checkers with him, a verifiable “men’s game” according to her dead ex-husband. Janie’s money allows her to disrupt gender conventions, though there is little pressure for Tea Cake to disrupt standards of masculinity, creating a gender imbalance analogous to their class disparity. Nonetheless, romance is not entirely off limits to Janie, but her class position is suppressed by her relationship and her happiness is bought by her class, indicating the literal and figurative cost of romance. Hurston’s novel does not mean to idealize romance and love, as Janie’s relationship to Tea Cake highlights the cost of romance, thereby curbing the sentiment typical in popular representations.
of romance and love. Nevertheless, McMillan’s text straddles the literary fence, as she draws on one of the few black female authored texts that in some measure makes romance and sentiment accessible to a black female character, but problematizes this accessibility through incommensurate class positions.

The sociopolitical and economic burden on Zora and Franklin’s relationship highlights the potential for reciprocity or for class condescension that disturbs a shared racial politics. There is a possibility that Zora will equip Franklin with middle-class resources and values that can increase his income and help him come closer to fulfilling traditional, though problematic, definitions of masculinity. Franklin’s simultaneous contribution could be to serve as the patriarch for their family, thus making Zora "respectable," and challenge narratives about black women's inability to establish and be successful within nuclear families. Both transactions entail Franklin helping Zora achieve female respectability through the nuclear family and are evocative of black middle-class reform culture of racial uplift where impoverished urban blacks were linked to a social pathology defined by sexual misconduct and nonconformity to gender conventions. For example, McMillan’s characterization of Franklin satisfies the conditions for social pathology and need for reform, as he is a failed version of masculinity due to his economic status, education, and his extra-marital relationship with Zora. Her connection to racial uplift is important because uplift ideology reinforces class hierarchy and racial solidarity, though scholars frequently view uplift as a form of class condescension that does not adequately account for institutionalized racism.
Zora’s friends offer two extreme positions that intervene on Zora’s and Franklin’s attempt at a shared racial politics. If Zora were to conclude that Franklin’s income “counts more” than love, she would risk her sexual propriety and become the quintessential gold digger or “bitch” who, much like Portia, champions a conventional masculinity that defines men by their income. Portia is an emblem of black sexual pathology with her adulterous affairs, abortions, wardrobe, and depiction as a dating mercenary, but she also attempts to help Zora circumvent the risk of black familial pathology by advising her to reject Franklin. Portia objects to standards of black female respectability at the same time that she employs conservative gender norms for black men like Franklin. Portia’s gender norms translate into her belief that men like Franklin serve as the chief pathological threat to middle-class identity, implicitly rejecting Zora and Franklin’s presumably shared race ideology of race prioritized over class. Portia embodies sexual and familial pathology as well as sexual liberation, whereas Claudette symbolizes middle-class respectability and sexual repression. Claudette advises Zora to partner with Franklin, but she also believes the relationship can save Zora from sexual impropriety. Claudette’s version of masculinity is not necessarily a bourgeois conception of manhood, gesturing toward an unspoken acknowledgement of Franklin’s racial oppression and race over class solidarity. Claudette sees black female promiscuity as the most important threat, so she uses her class privilege to champion female respectability, while resisting conventional masculinity. Claudette’s exclamation that Portia gives black women a “bad name” is exemplary of her fear of black female sexual pathology and Claudette argues that Zora should render Franklin’s income completely irrelevant to any decision she makes about dating him or continuing their affair.

Claudette’s class identity allows her to ignore the importance of money and Portia identifies this irony, declaring, “If I had a live-in housekeeper and was married to a doctor, I
guess I could talk the same shit you’re talking” (104). Nonetheless, Zora’s disregard for the
importance of money ignores the gender conventions that will declare Zora’s role as breadwinner
a social pathology. Furthermore, Zora has a more precarious middle-class position than
Claudette, which further problematizes her decision to remain with Franklin. It is widely
claimed that one of the biggest real and imaginary threats to an already volatile black middle-
class identity is contact with and close proximity to, the black working class. The supposedly
contagious problems associated with the black working class, including poverty, crime,
unemployment, and substandard education, can potentially spread to the middle class and
reproduce similar problems, including the increase of non-traditional families. Claudette ignores
this threat and tells Zora to take none of Portia’s advice about Franklin on the basis that Portia
cannot maintain a heterosexual relationship and she further counters Portia’s checklist with a
pared down and less specific version of her own. She declares that Zora’s sole criterion for
Franklin should be how well she is being treated and how good she feels. Claudette’s interest is
in a vague notion of physical and emotional well being, while Portia offers a checklist of
material items for Zora to consider. It is quite telling that Claudette insists Zora use ideas of well
being and pleasure as a barometer for a good relationship, while she angrily argues that the only
thing Portia has to offer a man is pleasure. Claudette suggests that women should be the
recipients of pleasure, not the suppliers like Portia, fulfilling an unrequited sexual gratification
represented by the “Black lady’s” limited avenues for sexual expression.

The “black lady” is a consistent figure in black popular fiction, with a few varying
characteristics. For example in the late Bebe Moore Campbell’s *Brothers and Sisters* (1994),
Esther, the main character, is most similar to the “black lady” as she is college-educated, drives a
BMW, dresses impeccably, and works as a regional operations manager at a Los Angeles bank.
She is unlike Claudette, in that when she asks her blind date about his job and he says he “drives a bus” she feels a “shudder under her left breast and then an empty numbness” (30). Though Esther’s date drives a Mercedes-Benz, Campbell’s omniscient narrator unapologetically declares, “whatever magic the evening had possessed, suddenly evaporated” after Esther hears about his blue-collar job (30). Later when Esther’s friend inquires about her blind date, Esther’s response is taken almost verbatim from the aforementioned Gwen Guthrie song as she says, “Not interested. No romance without finance” (72). Esther prioritizes employment and economic position over middle-class accoutrements. Predictably, the men who fit her criteria do not show serious interest in her, while the men who do not measure up to her standards, pursue her the most. She initially refuses the advances of Tyrone, the economic “frog” who works as a courier and expresses interest in her. Eventually she acquiesces and readers predictably learn that he is the “prince” who adores her. Esther’s final decision to partner with a working-class man parallels Claudette’s advice to Zora about her relationship, though it does not mirror Claudette’s own marriage.

Claudette’s and Portia’s sexual politics inform Zora’s decision about Franklin, prompting Zora to declare that she “... always wanted a man [she] could grow with” (117). She further protects Franklin’s masculinity by saying, “I mean we’re sort of starting from scratch” (117). Zora’s retort confirms her characterization as a mediating figure, as it resists Portia’s version of conventional masculinity and challenges Franklin’s privileged victim status, by equalizing their positions. On a formal level, Zora’s response shapes the novel’s employment of the popular romance genre because she endorses popular sentimental representations of romance that dictate a prioritization of love over education, money, status. Zora’s reply to Franklin and subsequent genre mapping also attempts to create an equal playing field for Zora and Franklin. Their equal
playing field also protects Zora from the social pathology connected to black matriarchs, but more important, it appeals to a shared racial politics that prioritizes race over class. The historical significance and political economy of black love explained by Omolade, Carby, Gaines, and Hill Collins also designate Zora’s response as a nod toward a shared racial politics. Moreover, her acquiescence also indicates a failed reciprocal relationship based on class difference. Her disregard for his class status makes it difficult to provide him access to her middle-class values and resources because offering those resources will demand that she call attention to his working-class status. Ultimately, distinguishing his class position can translate into an emphasis on the thing he is most interested in protecting, his vulnerable masculinity.

Despite Zora’s response, McMillan’s text constructs a false gender/race binary that produces Franklin and Zora’s unrequited racial politics. When Zora attempts to assert familiarity with the racism that Franklin experiences, he bluntly rejects her empathy, saying “You couldn’t possibly understand, baby . . . Because you ain’t a black man” (221-222). Franklin’s control over the conversation around race and racism supports his status of privileged victimhood and a definition of blackness as male. His black masculinity echoes Gloria T. Hull’s *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982) which interrogates the gendered boundaries of race. Published a year prior to the setting of *Disappearing Acts*, Hull's text reveals how dominant rhetoric about race and gender renders black women’s subjectivity invisible. Franklin’s visibility and privileged victim status must be understood in context of a conventional masculinity that is always white, thus excluding African American men and instead assigning them “social scripts of marginalized masculinities” (Hill
Collins, Sexual 186-187). Franklin confirms the relationship between masculinity and blackness because black middle-class womanhood potentially threatens an already inadequate black working-class masculinity.

The novel’s narrative structure further contributes to the gender/race binary underlying unrequited racial politics, as Zora and Franklin use separate chapters to deliver first-person narratives to the readers. On a textual level, Zora’s deracialization allows her the opportunity to consent to a sentimental and romantic love. Her construction also works on a formal level, as it reflects McMillan’s use of the popular romance genre. In African American Literature: A Guide to Reading Interests (2004) Dana Watson maintains that “race is certainly present” in African American romance fiction, but “usually is not a major component” (Watson 297). Watson’s assertion confirms the novel’s unrequited racial politics, as Franklin shares his experiences of racism with the readers rather than Zora, carving out a separate text from Zora’s narrative. Zora is not privy to Franklin’s daily accounts of racism, so unbeknownst to Franklin, she begins to believe his unemployment is due to his laziness and inadequacy. Franklin’s effort to conceal the majority of his experiences of racism protects his vulnerable manhood, but it also invites Zora’s accusation of laziness thereby producing another version of his failed masculinity. Similarly, Franklin is not informed of Zora’s experiences with racism or sexism, therefore he trusts that her economic and educational achievements are based on an elite conservative meritocracy unaffected by racism or sexism.

It is easy to see how the social paranoia about black women moving up the economic ladder faster than black men shapes Franklin’s belief about Zora’s economic and educational success. Black nationalist literary critic Addison Gayle agrees that black women have “had it
easier because the entire paraphernalia of this country: its educational institutions, its courts, its political structures, have not been aimed at the black woman. It has been aimed at destroying black men as men” (Towns 27). In contrast, Patricia Hill Collins maintains that “black women either make less [than men] for the same work or work twice as hard for the same pay” (Hill Collins, Feminist 74). Other scholars point to the rising incarceration, violent crime, and high school drop-out rates for black women, while black female college graduation rates decrease (Carbado 348). Nonetheless, black male failure is often highlighted in public discourse while black female success is underscored. The Justice Policy Institute’s data suggests that the number of black men in jail or prison has “grown fivefold since 1980, to the point where more black men are behind bars than are enrolled in colleges or universities” (Butterfield). This is in comparison to data suggesting that 70 percent of all college degrees awarded to African Americans go to women (Hill Collins, Sexual 249). These kinds of contrasting reports substantiate black men’s privileged victim status and uphold Franklin’s goal to protect his masculinity while ignoring the racialized and sexualized oppression of black women.

Franklin is first to call attention to his flawed masculinity when he reveals the details of his marriage, children, and education. He is somewhat forthcoming about his life, but we learn that he never invites Zora to the room he rents, which is only five blocks away from her apartment. Likewise, Zora never asks to visit his home. Their complicity in keeping his home invisible underscores the importance of domestic spaces as representations of race, class, and gender politics. His sparse bed consisting of two mattresses on the floor and the mouse feces atop a pile of sawdust in his rented room severely contrasts Zora’s high ceiling apartment outfitted with a spare room for her piano. The five block distance of his home from Zora’s apartment represents Franklin’s contagious working-class pathology, but his home’s invisibility
to Zora underscores its containment. Franklin’s “bachelor pad” does not signify masculine freedom, but instead compromises his masculinity in two ways. On one hand, his residence is indicative of the institutional racism he faces and on the other hand, it suggests the laziness and squalor often associated with black working-class pathology. Franklin’s description of his wife’s apartment in a New York housing project echoes this pathology:

“They pushed the steel door open and counted three bullet holes in the bulletproof glass. The hallway smelled like piss. A balled-up stinking Pamper was in one corner, an empty bottle of Thunderbird right next to it, and an old TV set sitting in another puddle of piss. Did I really live here six years ago? Pam can do better; she just too damn cheap. A hundred and ninety-eight dollars a month for this? At least my room is clean. What she do with all her money I don’t know. When one of the kids get in trouble, she gon’ be the first one to wonder why” (62)

Franklin’s account is replete with ghetto cliché and although he attempts to enact a morally superior tone in his description of Pam’s apartment, his own living conditions are not radically better. The invisibility of his home could represent Franklin’s fear that his silent appraisal of Pam could be the same one Zora would render if she were to visit his apartment. The middle-class threat of being called “lazy” is always seemingly looming for working-class blacks who do not manage to move up the economic ladder. The threat of middle-class ideology buttresses Zora and Franklin’s unrequited racial politics.

The prioritization of black male survival over black female oppression is echoed when Franklin rapes Zora and further unravels any chance for a shared racial politics. Franklin rapes Zora during their courtship and the novel offers little fan fare around Franklin's crime. It is coded as matter of fact when she says, “Oh, so you’re going to rape me, is that it?” His calm response to her is, “I guess so” (408). When she gets up to clean herself, he says “I want you to sleep in it, so you’ll know you slept with a real man all night. Now lay down” (409). Zora’s rape does not get the same exclamation that Franklin’s experiences of racism do. In an earlier chapter
when Franklin unsuccessfully attempts to hail a cab three times, he asks Zora to do it and she is immediately successful. He begins a tirade in the cab, declaring “If you big and black in America, that’s two strikes against you—did you know that Zora? They think all black men is killers and robbers and that we gon’ cut their throats, then take all their fuckin’ money. Ain’t that right, sir?” (150) Rape does not require a spectacle resembling Franklin’s cab scene, as the text glazes over her assault without any commentary from Zora or Franklin, routinizing black women’s sexual oppression. In his discussion of black male oppression, Louis Farrakhan considers black women “fair game” as victims of black male abuse. Though Farrakhan is not suggesting that black men’s abuse of black women is permissible, his statement constructs violence against black women as commonplace and rational, which reads similar to the depiction of Zora’s rape. Franklin’s privileged victim status disguises his culpability and Zora’s commitment to a shared racial politics would seemingly mean she must deny her racialized sexual oppression.

Personal responsibility is dichotomized against racial victimization in the novel in the same way that gender and race act as a false binary. Zora’s race/gender oppression can be linked to her endorsement of personal responsibility, as it is a way to remove the shroud of victimhood that helps obscure Franklin’s role in her oppression. When Zora meets Franklin’s family for the first time she says she wished “black people wouldn’t harp so much on the past and stop blaming white folks for everything . . .I mean, we’ve got more opportunities now than we’ve ever had before. Some of us are just too lackadaisical” (202). With a bit of prodding, coupled with a glass of Scotch, Zora’s muted feelings gratuitously erupt. She openly addresses Franklin’s family, while subtly pointing the finger at Franklin. Her impugnation disrupts black men’s privileged victim status and makes visible their culpability in black women’s oppression. Giving
into the narrative of racial victimization means that Franklin as a black man will always be the prevailing racial victim and thus exonerated from the oppression he perpetuates. Franklin seems to concede Zora’s criticism of racial victimization, as he says, “Why I wasn’t taking this shit personally, I don’t know. Maybe ‘cause there was some truth to it” (202). Franklin’s approval of Zora’s iteration is similar to his professed admiration for his former girlfriend Pauline, who he says “at least” attempts to get off welfare and go to secretarial school, as she disproves the stereotype of the welfare queen abusing the system. Pauline epitomizes the brand of personal responsibility that Zora endorses. Zora and Pauline’s endorsement of personal responsibility only halfheartedly considers racism as a barrier to black advancement and culminates into a persuasive claim for personal responsibility, reflecting the seductive power of bootstrap ideology from both working-class and middle-class positions. Franklin presumably consents to Zora’s ideology in the same way she granted his unreliable and naïve sentimental politics that never bear out.

Franklin’s ideological concessions do not prove compromise, but instead highlight the unrequited racial politics that plague his relationship with Zora. As Zora inexorably spews platitudes about lazy black people and what she calls her “master plan” for their advancement in front of Franklin’s family, he sits back and thinks, “What Zora said made perfect sense” though it appears incongruous to his experience hailing a cab or finding work (203). Franklin finds himself in a moment of consent, but pushes for further explanation, asking “So are you saying that you think the situation of black people today ain’t got nothing to do with racism?” She answers, “All I’m saying is that we can’t keep blaming white folks for everything. I mean, a lot of us are definitely victims, but I also think the reason some of us fail in life goes back to our parents.” It is clear Franklin’s mother does not find Zora’s speech as palatable as Franklin does
and when pushed further by his mother, Zora takes the bait and injudiciously asserts, “If they [parents] instilled more confidence in us, maybe we’d grow up feeling more secure about who we are and what we’re capable of doing, that’s all” (204). Zora explains her support for family values, though Franklin’s mother wastes no time telling Zora to shut up and hurling mashed potatoes in her face. Zora’s account of family values aligns with her conservative ideology, but later when Franklin attempts to invoke Zora’s ideological position, she rejects it. Franklin draws a parallel between his “dysfunctional” family and his experiences of racism and unemployment, declaring that his mother “stripped him of his manhood before [he] was a man” (360). Zora’s annoyance about what she clearly believes is Franklin’s laziness precludes her from agreeing and repairing their unrequited racial politics, instead exclaiming that “No one can strip you of anything unless you let them” (360). Even when Franklin’s victimization aligns with Zora’s ideological beliefs, her subject position trumps his victimization and she cannot acquiesce. The gender/race binary that disrupts Zora’s relationship to race pushes her to advocate personal responsibility more than racial oppression. Later she admits, “Up to now, I’ve done a pretty good job dealing with things. Faking it is what I’ve really been doing. Pretending that nothing is wrong. That Franklin’s being married hasn’t bothered me. That his being out of work hasn’t bothered me. That his not having a formal education hasn’t bothered me. But it’s getting too hard, this acting” (255). The assessment of Zora’s friends is so important because we learn that the sentimental, middle-class politics of Claudette serve as Zora’s veil for the courtship ethics prescribed by Portia. Initially, Zora takes Claudette’s advice to ignore income and continue dating Franklin, but soon readers learn that Zora’s feelings about Franklin’s class position more closely approximate Portia’s initial advice. Zora’s initial alignment with Claudette prompts readers to view the novel as sentimental, linking it to common popular romance courtship tales.
McMillan’s text does not follow through on this thematic gamble, as Zora soon realizes she can no longer ignore Franklin’s class position and she eventually confronts the question of racism in front of his family.

Zora also abandons her Janie Starks-inspired class repression in front of Franklin’s family. She effortlessly references Confucius in her conversation with Franklin’s sister, Christine. Even as Christine, who has not been to college, admits that, “I don’t know nobody with a college degree,” Zora does not profess sympathy or acknowledge Christine’s personal statistic as a dismal fact (203). She subtly accuses Franklin’s family of being lazy and passive, and constructing them through the framework of black urban pathology, proclaiming: “Too many of us are hung up on what we don’t have, can’t have, or won’t ever have,” exacerbating a black working-class distrust of, and cynicism about, the black middle-class (203).

Unsurprisingly, Franklin’s mother responds negatively, declaring that Zora "...talks too damn much. Just like the rest of them sluts Franklin done brought home, trying to get my approval. They all the same, except this one done been to college and think she know everything. Well, not in my book. And I ain’t gonna sit in my own house listening to what she thinks is wrong with black folks ‘cause she thinks she is so high and mighty." (205)

At the same time that Zora does not fetishize Franklin’s working-class family as a sign of authentic blackness, they also do not glorify Zora’s education and class position as a status symbol or mark of progress for Franklin. As Zora reproduces the class condescension of racial uplift, Franklin’s family echoes the distrust of the impoverished blacks whom uplift aimed to reform.

McMillan’s ideological gendering offers readers the possibility for political consummation, but ultimately denies personal responsibility and victimization a future as
sustained ideological bedfellows. At the same time that the text racializes and masculinizes victimization, it feminizes and deracializes personal responsibility. McMillan’s text demonstrates how black popular fiction might offer a unique point of entry into debates about the intersection of racial, gender, and sexual politics, as it presents a romance between Zora and Franklin as well as one between racial victimization and personal responsibility. Zora’s commitment to personal responsibility blocks Franklin’s access to middle-class identity, as she highlights meritocracy while ignoring racism. In other words, Franklin’s access to middle-class identity is predicated on an ideology that is incompatible with his experiences. Simultaneously, Franklin’s masculinized blackness continues to make blackness unattainable to Zora. Zora’s bootstrap ideology translates into a conservative racial politics because of the way it denies the systemic and institutional conception of racial inequality. Thus, her disregard for racism challenges black men’s privileged victim status through undoing the relationship between black male abuse of black women and black male racial victimization. Dismantling this relationship simultaneously subtly resists a conservative black gender politics often criticized for marginalizing black female oppression. Zora’s bootstrap ideology also serves as a progressive gender politics that protects her from gendered and racialized oppression, all the while using a defensive colorblind facade. Zora’s veneer is problematic for the way it folds “into the broader process of institutionalizing dominant hegemonic understandings” about black female subjectivity, racism, and meritocracy (Iton 102). For example, undoing the link between racism and black womanhood is one way the relationship between McMillan’s text and the academy is severed and her mass market appeal is established. It is important to note how the rise of black feminist theory and activism in the 1970s helped bolster McMillan’s success through giving black women’s issues wider visibility. Nevertheless, the collapse of the National Black Feminist
Organization and the Combahee River Collective in the 1970s left a political and cultural void for black women and compelled writers like McMillan to appeal to a wider audience because black women’s avenues for political action and cultural expression were markedly reduced.

The narrow avenues for black women’s cultural expression, often controlled and dictated by men, and the loss of black women’s political organizations created pressure for them to tell the “correct” kinds of stories about black men and women. McMillan’s commercial success seemingly protected her from black male critics who took aim at writers like Alice Walker for their depiction of black men. During the same year *Disappearing Acts* was set, McMillan’s teacher, Ishmael Reed, lambasted Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982) and other “black feminist” novels, calling them “neoconfederate” tales and boldly aligning them with Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansmen* (1905) for their alleged overuse of “hate black male” themes (Martin). Reed goes on to defend himself and other black male writers against criticism for their marriage to white women, while simultaneously indicting Walker and other black female writers for their dependence on white feminists to garner literary fame and popularity. Zora, McMillan, and Ishmael Reed’s black feminist “race traitors” all negotiate with a marginalizing black nationalist rhetoric and are ultimately bound by their textual and academic negotiation of black gender politics. In *Terry McMillan: A Critical Companion* (1997), Paulette Richards contends that the traditional African American critical establishment views McMillan and her literary descendants as “frivolous because they do not grapple with racial tensions the way African American literature had in the past” (19). Daphne Brooks categorizes McMillan’s novels as “lowbrow, apolitical mass-market African-American expressive forms” (Brooks 168). Likewise, Scott McCracken asserts that McMillan is an “illustration of ‘low’ culture following ‘high’” as she has “followed critically acclaimed authors like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison into the marketplace
to write bestselling fictions about black women” (McCraken 176). McMillan’s use of the popular romance genre as a way to appeal to a mass audience, rather than the black literary establishment, temporarily shields her from an indictment of race betrayal directed at “serious” writers like Walker and Morrison, as she is constructed as someone not attending to race in a meaningful way (Richards 15). Certainly, the debate around what constitutes frivolous and serious literature can be a useful one, but it does not go without risks. Categorizing McMillan’s work as “frivolous” accepts an understanding of black courtship as apolitical and maintains the divisions between racial and sexual politics. The persistent disruption of romance by racial politics in *Disappearing Acts* upholds the bond between racial and sexual politics and also reinforces a definition of racial politics as private as well as public, inclusive of black women, and not disparate from a public, masculine black racial politics.
II. CHAPTER TWO

“MARRYING UP”

I'm not who you think I am. If you love me you love me for the wrong reasons.
--Sister Souljah

In 2005, Kanye West's song, "Gold Digger" spent ten weeks as number one on Billboard's Hot 100 chart, broke the record for the most digital downloads in one week, and amplified interest in the stereotypical black female gold digger. Domestic behavior has long held political significance for blacks, from slavery to The Moynihan Report (1965), and its importance continues to resonate through the persistent gold digger archetype. Black female rap artists alternatively use the gold digger as a position of authority and distance themselves from it, while male hip hop artists divulge their fear and paranoia about the gold digger's unscrupulous ploys. In Notorious B.I.G.'s 1997 song, "The World is filled with Pimps and Hoes," the mistrust of black women's intentions is bared when he rhymes, "hoodrats scopin with they eyes on my goods", and in the same song, artist Too Short raps that gold diggers are, "like pimps, you can't let em do it to you / She ain't no sucker, I know that bitch man / She wanna be a Pretty Woman lovin a rich man". As a popular trope, the gold digger haunts black heteronormative relationships and signals a courtship impasse repeatedly staged in hip hop and contemporary black popular romance. As a genre, hip hop has influenced the gender politics of the youth and young adult generation of the 1980’s and 90’s, whose interests also included black popular fiction novels, such as Sister Souljah's The Coldest Winter Ever (1999), Omar Tyree's Flyy Girl (1997), and True to the Game (1998) by Teri Woods, three of the novels I explore in this chapter. Sister Souljah's membership in the rap group Public Enemy, her success writing a black popular romance novel, and her use of fictionalized hip hop artists in The Coldest Winter Ever, are just
three clear examples of the link between hip hop and black popular romance, which is further substantiated by the courtship tales of hypersexual and materialistic black women depicted in both genres.

This chapter explores how the substantial attention to gold diggers in black popular fiction reanimates the power of black masculinity linked to Post-Black Power goals. Although the novels examined in this chapter are not the typical Harlequin romances, they use the marrying up convention linked to the romance genre. Because this romance genre provides a satisfying "Reader I married him" ending, the gold diggers' failed attempts at marriage indicate the ultimate achievement of black masculinity rather than heterosexual romance ideals. Desire to fulfill the patriarchal role often requires men to secure a wife who does not challenge traditional gender norms. The gold digger's need for a wealthy partner makes her a worthy candidate for patriarchal men who are in search of a wife or partner, but her motives remain a menacing threat. Not only does the attention to gold diggers in these novels demonstrate the growing emphasis on black masculinity in a Post-Black Power era, it advances a critique of black women's lack of social and political consciousness, education, and meritocratic goals. Gold diggers are targets for this criticism because their intentions supposedly reflect their indifference to the crisis of black male extinction. Thus, black women are urged to cease their plans to dupe black men, and instead to take on a specific brand of social and political consciousness, which encourages them to embrace patriarchal goals that preserve the black family.

There are a number of popular fiction texts which explore the gold digger's pursuit, such as JaQuavis Coleman's *The Dopeman's Wife: Part 1 of Dopeman's Trilogy* (2009) and Nikki Turner's *A Hustler's Wife* (2003), but Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (*TCWE*) is one of the most popular novels of the 1990’s, having sold over one million copies. Home Box Office
(HBO) has expressed interest in producing a film version of the novel, and although the film adaptation of the novel has yet to be formalized, Souljah has published several sequels to TCWE, which are also national best sellers. TCWE's popularity along with its allegiance to a specific black nationalist ideology make it an essential text for my analysis, as my interests center on the connection between black women's sexual politics and the broader cultural discourse of black nationalism in the post-1970's period. The illustration of illustration of black women's economic aspirations as well as its investment in the symbolic emblems of racial consciousness in Omar Tyree's Flyy Girl help further illuminate Souljah's bolder assertions regarding black women and a Post-Black Power racial politics in TCWE. Teri Woods' True to the Game has also had considerable commercial success, but demonstrates less interest in the brand of racial politics represented in TCWE and Flyy Girl. Thus, Woods' novel is an important text for my research because the protagonist, Gena, shares varying similarities with Souljah's and Tyree's main characters through setting, class identity, and class aspiration, but gets closer to the kind of lifestyle Tyree's and Souljah's protagonists work toward without explicitly engaging black nationalist rhetoric. Gena's limited success bears examination because her triumphs help uncover the cultural values encouraged and suppressed in black popular fiction. All three novels focus on black female protagonists who desire male partners who have achieved financial success through the drug trade or other extra-legal activities. Still, these three texts vary enough in their engagement with Afrocentric Black Power ideology to provide a complex examination of the connection between the black female gold digger's quest and the Post-Black Power era.

Female hip hop artists are especially important to the conversation about gold diggers in black popular fiction because early artists such as Salt 'N' Pepa and MC Lyte increasingly used hip hop as a platform to express their demands regarding courtship and sexual desire. Tricia
Rose notes that a central theme for black female rappers is heterosexual courtship (147) and Foxy Brown's 1996 song, "Get Me Home", confirms this assertion, rapping "Marry who? Daddy please / I'm takin it all from the stash to the keys". Brown's embrace of a shrewd courtship ethic is duplicated by rapper Trina, who raps about leaving "niggas pockets dry like the cleaners" in her 2000 song "69 Ways", building the anxiety about black women stealing black men's money. On her "Get Your Money Up" 2010 remix, Keri Hilson brazenly instructs potential mates that they must increase their wealth in order to court her, singing

If you think your impressin' us with your ice and your dub
Poppin' bottles in the club, get your money up
'Cause I ain't your average girl, I've been all around the world
If you wanna wow me, get your money up.

Hilson upsets the notion of a pure, romantic courtship and points to changing cultural norms in which black women's emphasis on financial standards provides additional protection of their bodies, which are represented, especially in hip hop, as open and accessible.

Black women's exaggerated requirements for men to provide financially suggest an unaccounted risk for black women who enter relationships with black male partners. Gold diggers who boast about their demands represent themselves as confident and adept, but also reveal their fear and anxiety about long-term economic stability with black men. Souljah describes how welfare programs have historically discouraged male participation in the home, but she also explains how some black men took advantage of these guidelines, which to some extent sanctioned a poor standard for fatherhood that included erratic familial involvement, sexual promiscuity, and increased emphasis on the mother's role (No Disrespect 10). Devon
Carbado maintains that black men are “perceived to be significantly more vulnerable, and significantly more ‘endangered’ than black women”, giving them a privileged victim status which often obscures black male subjugation and oppression of black women, as well as reduces the expectations for black familial and paternal responsibility (Carbado 348). Thus, the aim of securing financially stable black men operates as a hedge against potential black male absence and abuse.

Nevertheless, black women's new emphasis on money, rather than romance, points to a larger cultural anxiety about black women obtaining wealth that is “undeserved”. As I have mentioned in Chapter One, “Marrying Down”, Addison Gayle insists that black women have “had it easier because the entire paraphernalia of this country: its educational institutions, its courts, its political structures, have not been aimed at the black woman. It has been aimed at destroying black men as men” (366-377). In contrast, feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins maintains that “black women either make less [than men] for the same work or work twice as hard for the same pay” (Hill Collins, Feminist 74). Contradictions about men and women's privilege and oppression, expressed by Hill Collins' and Gayle's conflicting assertions, help create a gender impasse between black women and men, igniting male schemes to exploit women before they are duped. Moreover, public concern about black male “extinction” helps strengthen support for black male fear of the gold digger and influences popular culture's pressure on black women to lower their standards. The cultural panic about black male oppression does not deter requests for black men to accrue more wealth, as Keri Hilson, Trina, and Foxy Brown all reject popular discourse upholding black men’s privileged victim status.

The willingness of these female rappers to underscore their economic terms in courtship echoes their audacious claims about their sexual skills, which they often present as an enticement
for or consequence of the money and gifts men lavish upon them. In her 1996 song, "Not Tonight" Lil' Kim raps that after performing oral sex on "Jimmy", he gives her "bricks, credit cards and shit", he "kept my neck filled with ice / Put me in Chaneqs, kept me out nice", and in the last stanza of the song she brags that she and her friends willingly have sex in exchange for "car keys, and double digit figures". Winter Santiaga, the protagonist in TCWE, also reveals an identical ambition for herself and her friends, as she insists that while her friend, Natalie’s bedroom skills “earned” her a Chanel suit from a male suitor, her own abilities could yield “a whole wardrobe” (165). As male boasts of expensive cars and "duffel bags" full of money intensify, so goes the exaggerated sexual resume of black female rap artists; for example, in "I Need You Tonight", Lil' Kim declares that pornography star Vanessa Del Rio's raunchy sexual deeds do not surpass her own sexual performance. Winter similarly characterizes her sexual abilities, boasting that she has sex like “a professional jockey” (85). Newly popular versions of black female sexual agency unchained from racial uplift ideology, which limited sexual expressivity, must still contend with the "fear of confirming and conforming to racial stereotypes" and perpetuating the legacy of sexual abuse against black women (Thompson 3). Blacks and whites alike endorse the hypersexual black "jezebel" as a reason for racism and sexism. Thus, hypersexual black femininity sparks doubt within black communities regarding black women's allegiance to their race. Winter’s sexualized performance of femininity seems to break free from racial uplift's conservative definition of black womanhood. Nonetheless, these constructions of black femininity confirm black women's supposed sexual liberation and advance discourse about black women as race traitors.

Just as a "liberated" and brazen black female sexuality proves limited in countering race and gender oppression, the "marrying up" convention in romance novels similarly obscures the
issue of female agency by offering women two "choices." With a central conflict between passion and convention, protagonists must either choose love and defy norms about proper class standing or sacrifice love for social standing. Sister Souljah takes on this plot structure that has been made famous by writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and Edith Wharton, but depicts a milieu miles away from Wharton's upper middle-class setting or Austen's nineteenth-century tale. Winter ultimately descends the social ladder in a manner reminiscent of Wharton's Lily Bart, but Winter's initial introduction to money and material items is facilitated by her drug-dealing father rather than a wealthy aunt. As Winter uses her beauty and sex appeal to maintain the extravagant lifestyle her father establishes for her early in life, two major characters encourage her to adopt a racial consciousness based in Afrocentric Black Power ideology that will contain her threatening black femininity.

As a foil for Winter, Sister Souljah's characterization as an activist in the novel builds on her public political persona as social justice advocate and public speaker. One of her most memorable conflicts as an activist occurred when former President Clinton seized a quote from a speech she made during a function held by Reverend Jesse Jackson in 1992. Souljah contends that she was "speaking in the mindset of a gang member" when she said "If Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?" and that President Clinton took her "comments completely out of context" for his own political gain (Phillips). Clinton argued that Souljah's statement about killing white people was an example of reverse racism, comparing her to former Ku Klux Klan member David Duke ("Rap and Race"). In addition to her controversy with former President Clinton, Souljah is known for contributing to rap group Public Enemy and collaborating with rap artist, Tupac Shakur, releasing her own album in 1992.
entitled *360 Degrees of Power*, co-founding the African Youth Survival Camp in North Carolina, and serving as Executive Director of Sean Puffy Combs' Daddy's House Social Programs, the charitable arm of Bad Boy Entertainment ("Sister Souljah").

Like many of her public intellectual peers, Souljah’s activism also extends to trying to solve the problems preventing black men and women from having healthy intimate relationships. In her 1992 autobiography, *No Disrespect* (1994), she examines why black women and men "engage in relationships in which love is war" (xi). Souljah wants to "recapture the black male identity"(*Coldest Winter Ever* 468), insisting that the young homeless black men she met working at a civil rights firm "had more masculinity and confidence than some college men she had met throughout the world" (*Coldest Winter Ever* 446). Souljah’s preoccupation with black masculinity reflects the Post-Black Power era nostalgia for black nationalist rhetoric urging black men to ascend to their natural roles as patriarchs. Although the black middle-class grew exponentially in the 1980’s and 90’s, Souljah implies that middle-class identity prevents black men from enacting a proper masculinity. Her definition of masculinity challenges the brand of masculinity traditionally marked by capital and formal education, but harkens back to a black nationalism informed masculinity characterized by informal education or "street smarts” and comes closer to the redemptive masculinity I identify in Chapter One, “Marrying Down.”

Winter confirms this, as she recounts hearing Souljah’s voice over the radio, insisting that, “young black drug dealers are the strong black men in the community” (33). Souljah’s reputation as an activist and writer demonstrates how her prescription for black men to adhere to a black masculinity that rejects middle-class identity linked to college education reaffirms popular discourse about black masculinity.
Complementing Souljah’s gender constructions, popular Afrocentric psychologists argue that black should men "stand up and control their environment" (Akbar 37) and defend black women, as black women should not seek out white feminist organizations as a defense against white male sexual harassment, because "all she needs to do is to find any brother anywhere and say, 'These people are messing with me' and step back... Once that's done, that's it. No more problems" (Akbar 37). This patriarchal model suggests that black men are and have been responsible for the protection of black women, but it does not allow the possibility of black male oppression of black women or include a model in which black women "control their environment" the way real black men do (Akbar 37). This argument implies that black women need to be controlled by black men and upholds a narrow characterization of black women as "fragile ladies" — a status that has been widely understood to be historically inapplicable to black women's experiences in the US. In popular Afrocentric discourse, Black women's "fragile" identities are constructed in relationship to representations of strong black men. These problematic constructions of masculinity and femininity prove advantageous for gold diggers like Winter, enabling these femme fatales to subvert the sexist and racist expectations for black women to perform vulnerability and thereby conceal their strength in the face of black men.

Not all black men were able to meet the standards for black masculinity set by popular Afrocentric scholars, who defended overly generalized "African" concepts of self, manhood, and family, but these models nonetheless helped to create a widely celebrated portrait of black manhood and provided a historical and political context for black masculinity that was missing from popular understandings of black femininity. The collapse of the Black Panther Party and the National Black Feminist Organization resulted in a political void that helped produce nostalgia for a Black Power agenda of racial liberation that centered on black manhood, ignoring
black feminist ideology and its criticism of the Black Power Movement's marginalization of black women. Honoring ancient African kings and "Hollywood version[s] of Malcolm X", popular Afrocentric ideology while disregarding black feminist voices like Mary Ann Weathers, Florynce Kennedy, and Demita Frazier, encouraged vilification of black women and helped to sustain patriarchal notions of black manhood during the Post-Black Power era (Ransby 529).

In the 1980’s and 90’s, hip hop artists like KRS-One, X-Clan, and Public Enemy made use of Black Power emblems like red, black, and green flags, "Fight the Power" and "By Any Means Necessary" slogans, and widespread fist pumping. Acceptable models for black masculinity were implicitly and explicitly contained in hip hop's "political themes of unity, racial uplift, self-definition, self-determination, and Black diasporic connections", although the focus on unity did not always extend to black women, especially those women climbing the socio-economic ladder, as I discuss later (Forman 330). Scorn for black women's courtship standards is also partially due to the expectation that black women will naturally forfeit the terms of their sexual contract because of the popular discourse concerning black male oppression and possible "extinction". 50 cent's 2003 song, "21 Questions" where he asks, "If I fell off tomorrow would you still love me?" and "If I went back to a hoopty from a Benz, would you poof and disappear like some of my friends?" is just one example of the suspicion concerning black women's relationship criteria. Public Enemy's "Sophisticated Bitch" (1987), a conflicting caricature of black women as "sophisticated" and "bitches," serves as a warning call about women like Winter and her mother, Mrs. Santiago, who pose a veiled threat to black manhood because their new beauty and sex appeal causes men to fall prey to their insatiable material desires. Revising the “black lady” stereotype, front man Chuck D raps:
Now she wants a sucker but with an attache
And if you ain't got it, she'll turn you away
You can smile with style but you lost your trial
Cause you got a gold tooth, she thinks you're wild
She don't want a brother that's true and black
If you're light, you're alright, better stay back

The shift from Billie Holiday's "Sophisticated Lady" to "Sophisticated Bitch" reveals that, even as the much-hyped independent black female protagonist became something of a stock character during the Post-Black Power era in books by Terry McMillan, Connie Briscoe, and Bebe Moore Campbell, its popularity, along with the exaggerated gold digger characterization, exposes a social anxiety about how black women's undeserved class ambition has resulted in weakened racial consciousness and sexual mores. Resentment toward black women's class position is especially evident at the end of verse three when Chuck D raps, "Expose the funky bitch / Cause she thinks she's so-phisticated". The growing black middle class of the late 1980's and 90's helped enable a new stereotype of the "black lady" who "rejects the "unbridled 'freaky' sexuality now attributed primarily to working-class Black women" (Hill Collins, Sexual 139). The "sophisticated bitch" builds on the 1980's obsession with the black welfare queen, feared for her alleged ability to swindle the government for monthly "handouts", which were publicly framed as excessive, but kept her below the poverty line.

Chuck D's rap advances a new stereotype that combines the "black lady" with the promiscuity associated with black working-class women labeled "hoes" and aggressive women categorized as "bitches." This amalgamation is similar to Souljah's characterization of Winter, whose material goods and money enable her arrogance and snobbery, but are complicated by her
aggression, promiscuity, and life within New York's public housing. Incompatible with typical boundaries for a working-class lifestyle, Winter's access to money and expensive accoutrements of luxury handbags and jewelry correspond with a middle-class standard of living. On the other hand, her characterization does not suggest a firm middle-class lifestyle either, as she completely rejects the middle-class neighborhood her family moves to and strongly identifies with the friends and family from her old neighborhood in the New York City housing projects. The anxiety surrounding black women's social mobility and sexuality, marked by Public Enemy's song, links to Winter's characterization as a gold digger, even though she does not completely fulfill Chuck D's description of the "Sophisticated Bitch" who covets light-skinned men with an attaché case. As a well-heeled "jezebel", Winter’s directs her ambition toward hypermasculine and materialistic men who drive luxury cars, wear expensive clothes, and either rap or sell illegal drugs for income. She is candid about her courtship goals, as she describes a Range Rover with “rims so hot” that she “wanted to fuck the truck” (253). Although Winter shops in expensive stores, she has little desire to live in middle-class neighborhoods or attend their schools, and her desire for upper-middle class wealth, sans the middle-class class status, would seem to mitigate black middle-class fear of class infiltration. After she reluctantly moves to the suburbs with her family she even equates sexual repression within middle-class identity, insisting she is “backed up sexually, stuck in the suburbs” (36). Stephanie Harzewski argues that "with Edith Wharton and Jane Austen as acknowledged precedents, much of the chick-lit genre revisits the class without money conflict that pervades the novel of manners tradition" (41). Winter's inverse "money without class" conflict and her desire for the hypermasculine "brother that's true and black" demonstrates class loyalty and racial authenticity, as narrowly defined by Souljah and Chuck D, but it does not avail her any more honor than it does for the "sophisticated bitch".
While her financial dependence on black men partially upholds black manhood, it also puts it in jeopardy because of the allegedly tireless black male sacrifice to be breadwinners for manipulative and insensitive black women like Winter and her mother.

Winter's and her mother's courtship ethic reveals a shift in the discourse of race, gender, class politics in the Post-Black Power era, as the stereotypical castrating black woman who does not allow black men to take their role as patriarch is replaced with the gold digger, who finally covets the black man as the primary wage earner. Satisfying the marrying-up literary convention, Winter's mother, Mrs. Santiaga, candidly advises Winter to find a man who "knows how to provide" and "bless his woman with everything she wants" (5) because "beautiful women are supposed to be taken care of" (4). Although Mrs. Santiaga is a "badwoman" or what she calls a "bad bitch", she ultimately proves to be the Cinderella ideal, as she is not forced to sacrifice love or money, but manages to secure both through her husband, Santiaga, setting the bar high for Winter, who insists that she will not get "emotionally involved" with men who cannot "afford" her (4). Winter admits that her mother “made it clear . . . that beautiful women are supposed to be taken of” (4). The romance tradition typically features the "less worldly heroine", while the social climber, who typically fails at getting the attention of the novel's main suitor, functions as her foil. Souljah defies tradition, centering the novel on Winter's "climbing" rather than on herself as the "less worldly heroine", insisting that Winter's characteristics "were becoming popular in the teen female population" (462). Teri Woods' True to the Game is another sign of this trend, as her protagonist, Gena, falls in love with Quadir Richards, a drug-dealing millionaire. Gena is less strategic than Winter; Jamal, Gena's ex-boyfriend, stops short of identifying her as a gold digger, but he does call her a "trick" (ster) and identifies her best friend, Sahirah, Gena's more "worldly" foil, as a "gold-diggin' bitch" (12). Nonetheless, Gena is
clear about her attraction to men who wear flashy jewelry, which for her was "meant to represent wealth" (3), and upon first meeting Quadir, she quickly notices his diamond bezel Rolex watch (6). The characterization of young female characters like Gena and Winter, who live in the projects but use their sexuality as means to attract and court wealthy men, calls attention to the limited choices for black female mobility in low-income neighborhoods, in the face of arguments suggesting that black women fare better than black men in education and social mobility. It also reveals a courtship market in which black women's bodies are easily commodified, uncovering an exploitable weakness among black men, despite the popular discourse that black men spurn the black hypersexual gold digger for respectable "strong black queens". As black men express their desire for nation building, "self-determination", and controlling "their environment", black women's flawed response of sexual manipulation reflects the consequences they foresee within the new paradigm for black masculinity.

Marriage remains an end-goal in popular romance fiction, but it is not realized in any of the novels examined in this chapter, making courtship an increasingly important battle ground. The indeterminacy of courtship reduces the likelihood of marriage, as standards for black women and men, fear of black male absence and black female disloyalty all create courtship anxiety and higher stakes for marriage. According to the romance tradition, women who do not "conform to traditional sexual and domestic role expectations for women . . .fail in traditional feminine areas of influence such as domesticity, motherhood and love relationships" (Mussell 85), but even this criterion proves insufficient for black women. Winter fails in the traditional areas of domesticity, motherhood, and love, as she shuns "proper" sexual and domestic behavior for women, while "good" characters like Gena, who are "never loose" (126), are rendered acceptable by "controlling their sexuality, inspiring the man to be ‘good,’ and nurturing the members of the
family unit” (Mussell 85). Gena's mate, Quadir, admits to having done a thorough "background check" on Gena's past sexual activity and because of questionable infractions in which she dated men while she was in a relationship with Jamal who physically abused her, he puts her on "probation" (124). Her probationary period includes Quadir hiring a guy to woo her and reveal her disloyalty. The anonymous man arrives outside a mall in a convertible, “offered her dinner, then gave her some roses he already had in the backseat . . . talked real nice, giving her all kinds of compliments” (127). Although Gena passes Quadir’s appalling test, his tactics expose courtship as a critical vetting period. Affirming traditional gender conventions, Quadir's sexual history is given less scrutiny; in fact Gena happily accepts Quadir's marriage proposal, despite her suspicion that he has fathered a child with another woman while he and Gena were together.

Omar Tyree's coming-of-age novel, Flyy Girl, utilizes similar character types, as the materialistic protagonist, Tracy, appears partially successful when she is offered a marriage proposal by her on-again, off-again boyfriend, Victor, by the end of the novel. Nonetheless, Tyree's novel stops short of the "Reader, I married him" finale, because Victor Hinson, who is now Qadeer Muhammad, is in jail. Unlike Winter, Gena, in Teri Woods' True to the Game, is also offered a proposal, but like Winter and Tracy, she is unable to close the novel with matrimony because her rich suitor is murdered before they get married. Although Gena, Winter, and Tracey all abide by and challenge "traditional sexual and domestic role expectations for women", they still do not meet the elevated and ambiguous requirements for matrimony.

Gena's, Tracy's, and Winter's challenge to gender conventions in the face of the cultural anxiety surrounding declining rates of successful black intraracial marriage and black male survival helps characterize them as rebellious, street-knowledgeable, and shrewd gold-digging "badwomen" resembling the Stagolee or Stagger Lee "badman" trickster archetype symbolized
by opposition to white authority, violence, street knowledge, and unscrupulous and unflappable demeanor. Based on the life of Lee Shelton, a pimp who fatally shot his friend with a .44 Smith & Wesson in a St. Louis barroom because he would not return his "milk-white Stetson hat" (Brown 23), the mythologized Stagolee archetype is linked to African American literary figures, such as Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, and is central to Margaret Walker's poem "Bad-Man Stagolee" and James Baldwin's "Staggerlee Wonders" (1985). Although less explicit, the bad black man archetype also shows up in Gwendolyn Brooks’ 1950 poem “We Real Cool” where black men “Lurk late”, “Sing sin”, and “Die soon” (Brooks 17). Stagolee has served as a vehicle for championing various modes of black manhood from popular hip hop icons to Black Panther member, Bobby Seale, who used the "narrative toast version [of the Stagolee tale] as a recruiting device to get young black men into the Black Panther Party" (Brown 14). During the 1960’s, "black musicians such as James Brown, Wilson Pickett, and the Isley Brothers recorded versions of Stagolee that expressed a newly acquired sense of power among black males" (Brown 178).

A similar new sense of power among women is demonstrated through the "badwoman" figure, as it contrasts the professional black women in Terry McMillan's Disappearing Acts (1989), Bebe Moore Campbell's Brothers and Sisters (1994), and Connie Briscoe's Sisters & Lovers (1996), who claim to want men who simply maintain steady employment, have a white-collar career, and financial stability. Such desires are exaggerated through Gena's, Tracy's, Winter’s and even Mrs. Santiago's hyperbolic personas, as they want all of what the independent black women want, but without the hassle of working outside or inside the home. Black women have historically had few opportunities to be stay-at-home wives and mothers, so Mrs. Santiago's declaration that beauty is her "full-time occupation" (4) further highlights "bad" black female behavior, but also validates claims that black women have it "easier" and their socioeconomic triumphs are
unmerited. Gena does not have a job when she meets Quadir, and Souljah rarely depicts Mrs. Santiaga doing any domestic work, although readers are told that she sits at her vanity table for three hours applying make-up, shops often, and visits the beauty salon three times a week to be serviced. The badwoman character also rejects the ideal of black women as modern mammy or big momma figure. For example, when Winter walks through a shopping mall in an upper-class neighborhood with her younger siblings, she proudly wears a shirt that reads "These are not my fucking kids" (24). The Post-Black Power era's renewed interest in defining black masculinity through a nationalist and patriarchal lens enables the gold digger to exploit black male aspirations to be the primary wage earners and allows men the opportunity to engage in a patriarchal fantasy of having sexy, hyperfeminine women dependent on them. However, Souljah limits the metaphorical possibilities of her badwomen, suggesting that Winter's lofty standards of beauty and sexual appeal make her an "emotional, mental, spiritual, and intellectual midget", exposing her fear of the sexual deviancy stereotypes linked to poor and working-class black women (485). As a cautionary tale, Souljah's novel intends readers to suspend their approval of Winter and her mother's alleged pathology, but their dangerous appeal is especially important in a context in which the "view of black women as less desirable, less beautiful, less feminine and less valuable than white women [still] persists " (Tami). This context accentuates Winter and Mrs. Santiaga as badwoman figures, whose unusual power fills a contemporary cultural void, but is also comparable to hip hop figures like Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown, who enact a similar hypersexualized badwoman persona.

Imani Perry explains how Lil' Kim takes on the "heavily stereotyped image of the hypercritical black woman who requires material advantages in exchange for a romantic partnership with a man" in her song "Get Money" (168) where she raps:
Movado watch tennis for the wrist, nigga
You ain't never seen no ice like this
So now you know what you workin' with handle your business
And keep comin' with that stuff that I like.

Lil' Kim's exhibition of luxury items and instructions for her male lover to maintain her extravagant lifestyle are similar to the demands Winter makes on her male companions. Perry contends that the construction of "begging ass" black women, as popular t-shirts in the 1990’s read (168), is a "colonized response to mainstream constructions of male value being located in his ability to provide" and/or "black female frustration about lack of economic opportunity acted out on the male body" (168-169). Popular opinion might deem bragging about material wealth as contradictory to frustration with the lack of economic opportunities, especially as Winter makes thirteen references to her Coach purse, purchases high-end clothes, is uninterested in employment, and has siblings named Lexus, Porsche, and Mercedes. Winter rejects school, but the text offers very few depictions of women in Winter's community who have opportunities for financial gain beyond the men they set their sights on. Male characters such as Santiago and Midnight also do not attend school, but run a profitable illegal drug business that allows them to engage in "acceptable" materialism. Midnight, by Winter's calculation, drives a car worth $50,000 with rims worth $4500, but far from being criticized for his "materialism", he embodies the "true and accurate essence of black manhood" in the novel (469). Winter and Midnight both exploit members of their community through sex and drugs, but Midnight's exploitation and materialism are pardoned, helping to rationalize Winter's "black female frustration" and "colonized response" of avarice.
The focus on women's appearance and clothing is expected, especially in a marrying-up context, as it serves as a litmus test for their virtue, ultimately determining how successful they will be at attaining a marriage proposal. Alternatively, illustrations of revealing clothing in marrying up narratives can easily be used to blame women for their self-objectification, often rationalizing their sexual victimization. In the case of Tracy and Winter, men not only encourage them to avoid certain styles, but they also prescribe supposedly more appropriate attire, even down to their accessories. During an unexpected shopping trip, Midnight angrily asks Winter to “wear something decent” by insisting she replace her miniskirt with a conservative Eileen Fisher pantsuit at Bloomingdale's that he offers to purchase (59), challenging Souljah's aforementioned assertion that it is only Winter who overestimates the importance of clothes and material items. Midnight's plea for Winter to "cover up" runs counter to the popular images of drug dealers in films like Goodfellas (1990), Casino, (1995), and New Jack City (1998), which portray them as desiring hypersexual women with provocative clothes, but instead resembles the racial uplift ideology of defining "middle-class and ‘respectable’ working-class African Americans against a lower class whose members they believed did not follow rules of cleanliness, religiosity, and sexual purity" (Wolcott 15). Reinforcing the importance of sexual purity and diminishing the power of the gold digger, Midnight consistently rejects Winter's sexual advances toward him, preferring the more modest dress and conservative gender politics of Sister Souljah.

Midnight's rejection of Winter is consistent with Souljah's unique decision to include herself as a character in the novel, as this move helps diminish the force of Winter's first-person narration and encourages readers to evaluate Winter with a more condemnatory eye. It is no wonder that Winter describes Souljah’s “aggravating voice” as leaping out the radio and
“choking” her (46). Souljah's bold insertion of herself reveals Winter's power within and outside the novel, uncovering Souljah's anxiety about Winter's potential influence on readers and her uncontainable behavior. For example, Winter explains that she is “the girl you go to bed with and wake up with. The one you bring the dough home to and leave it on the counter so I can take care of the house. I’m the girl who gets other niggas to envy you, want to be like you, want to kill you. Me, it’s all about me, and real niggas know that” (294). The novel ends with Winter serving a 15-year prison sentence, but her long career of manipulating men and women begins to unravel when she meets Souljah. While a preacher instructs the crowd to pray during an AIDS benefit that Souljah has organized, Winter quickly puts half of the monetary donations in her purse. Winter’s schemes are usually successful, but when she leaves Souljah’s event and arrives at a nearby hotel, she reaches in her purse and finds that it only contains “Wet’n’Wild Lip gloss and a half-eaten chocolate chip cookie” (336). As both author and antagonist, Souljah challenges Winter's appealing characterization as a sexy, (con)fidence woman who mirrors the badwomen of hip hop and suggests that it is Winter, rather than Midnight, who needs excessive muting and critical evaluation.

Considerable effort is dedicated to marking Souljah's and Winter's opposing personalities, as Souljah declares that black women have but two choices of black womanhood, explicitly telling readers “you can be Winter or you can be Sister Souljah” (438). Souljah’s problematic gender dichotomy demonstrates a framework for a gendered and raced *double consciousness*. In her autobiography, Souljah confesses to purposefully donning sexy and provocative clothing in order to persuade single and married men to sleep with her, even as she worked as a social justice advocate. Winter similarly attempts to use her beauty and provocative clothing to ensnare men, although she places more emphasis on a monetary goal. Souljah professes her abstinence
in her fictional text and Winter maintains her lax sexual behavior, but both grow up in New York
project tenements, move to middle-class areas, and are hungry for male attention. Such
resemblances between Souljah and Winter thwart an easy separation of the two characters and
call attention to the warring sexual and racial identities of black women, buttressing the assertion
that the "unsexed black female and the supersexed black female embody the very same vice, cast
the very same shadow, since both are an exaggeration of the uses to which sex might be put"
(Spillers 164). Perfunctory representations of the 'unsexed' and 'supersexed' are consolidated,
providing the possibility that Souljah and Winter exist not just as physical adversaries, but also
as psychic companions. Winter's and Souljah's sexual identities overlap in Souljah's fiction and
non-fiction texts and Souljah's authorship and risky inclusion in the novel indicates a deep level
of intimacy with Winter's character, underscoring black women's sexualized and racialized "two-
ness".

The psychic damage of managing these competing identities corresponds to Souljah's
directives about black women's licentious behavior and clothing. Rather than focus on men, or
men and women jointly, Souljah places the onus on black women to change so black men will
not be tempted to fall prey to their allure as "jezebels". Though Souljah’s novel reveals how
racial uplift is used to regulate black women's appearance and behavior, Omar Tyree's Tracy, in
Flyy Girl, exposes how appearance and wardrobe choice become important criteria for Post-
Black Power cultural nationalism. Upon their first meeting, Tracy's eventual suitor, Carl, calls
her earrings "big" and "clumsy" and insists she doesn't need any "artificial additives" because she
is "already attractive" in his eyes (392). Tracy removes her earrings and her courtship with Carl
motivates her to eventually learn about Africa, replace her sexy clothes for a Kente outfit her
mother bought her, and swap her usually more flamboyant accessories for brown sandals and
After she questions Carl's choice to attend a black college, he says that his parents wanted him to attend a historically black college/university so he could "learn about his people", prompting Tracy to "think about race and college" (398) and later tell her father that she wants to attend a black college. In her autobiography, Souljah recounts how her activist boyfriend similarly exercises his privilege in correcting her appearance, saying "You know, you're a beautiful girl, but we have to work on you. I like girls with natural hair. I've always wondered why you have that fake extra piece of hair weaved in the back of your head. Does it give you that much more of a sense of security and value?" (77). Managing black women's sexual appeal by urging them to appreciate their "natural" beauty occurs with the supposedly noble goal of countering black women's objectification and strengthening racial pride.

Championing "natural" black beauty and conservative clothing coincidentally happens during a time when black women's access to cosmetic lines catering specifically to them (such as Fashion Fair, new hair care lines accommodating various hair textures, colored contact lenses, new methods for styling African-American hair, hair weave, hair color, and artificial nails) has amplified. Midnight and Carl acknowledge the power of Winter and Tracy's "sexual" allure by dichotomizing the cultural rewards of being "natural" against the immorality associated with being "sexy", in order to disarm Winter and Tracy's power as gold diggers.

Societal norms constituting "sexy", which is distinct from "beautiful" or "pretty", have not historically included all black women. For example, Alek Wek and Tyra Banks are both world famous supermodels, but Banks is frequently referred to as "sexy", while the "natural" beauty associated with Wek prevents her from being identified as "sexy". According to AskMen.com, Banks was voted as one of the most desirable women, while Wek is never listed as one the most "desirable" or "sexiest" women, but has been named one of People magazine's
most beautiful people in 1999. These designations for "sexy" and "beautiful" are not always made through a strict light skin vs. dark skin division, but can also use facial features, skin color, and body type, which must represent enough hypersexuality and what society identifies as phenotypic white features, to designate black women as "sexy" and "desirable". Rather than broadening the definition of "sexy" to representations of black "natural" beauty or overturning gender inequities that gold diggers exploit, Souljah and Tyree demonstrate how racial allegiance is once again prioritized over sexual identity for black women. The race-gender hierarchy is a repeated theme in black popular culture; for example, on her song "Doo Wop (That Thing)" on her 1998 best-selling album, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, rap artist Lauryn Hill rhymes,

> It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in
> Look at where you be in hair weaves like Europeans
> Fake nails done by Koreans
> Come again
> Come again, come again, come again, come again.

Hill does not explicitly mention gold diggers here, but her obvious play on *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933), Carter G. Woodson's famous critique of the U.S. school system's failure to present accurate historical information about African Americans, helps buttress the cultural politics she underscores in her lyrics. Woodson's argument that blacks will continue to perpetuate a pathology of self-hate if they are taught to "admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton" (1) rather than African Americans, provides the foundation for Hill's contention that black women's new interest in "fake" nails and "fake" European hair is evidence of a new and pernicious cultural "miseducation" or "self-hate". Like so many of her peers, Hill displaces institutional accountability and critique of cultural standards for beauty and desirability with a
scathing condemnation of black women's "culturally inappropriate" beauty choices. Black women's new access to beauty enhancements redefines what it means to be black and sexy, although Midnight, Souljah, and Carl continue to make hair and wardrobe serve as a narrow gauge for political engagement and cultural education. Angela Davis admits:

> It is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo. It is humiliating because it reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion; it is humbling because such encounters with a younger generation demonstrate the fragility and mutability of historical images, especially those associated with African American history (Ongiri 29).

While Davis’ hair is symbolic of a radical black political history, it confirms how matrices of power that black women negotiate are often narrowly defined by a refusal to wear straightened or chemically relaxed hair, "clumsy" earrings, "fake" nails, or "sexy" outfits. These gestures prove unable to fully account for Winter and Tracy's negotiation of class, race, and gender. The marrying up convention helps normalize this kind of appraisal of Winter and Tracy's fashion and dress, but the renewed interest in black women's accessories and clothes is also reminiscent of the Black Panther Party's (BPP) critique of Maulana Karenga's cultural nationalism. The BPP agreed that Karenga's emphasis on "cultural pride was a necessary phase in Black people's political development," but they accurately maintained that "it did not guarantee liberation" (Matthews 271). Tyree's and Souljah's formula for liberation and their remedy for "mis-education" includes longer skirt lengths, wooden earrings, and Kente cloth, as well as reading more books, attending school, and watching the news, but the Black Power emphasis on changing institutional structures is displaced by cultural nationalism and an Afro-centric ideology of personal responsibility.
Souljah’s bootstrap philosophy is made clear during a rare opportunity in which Winter is a passenger in Midnight’s car and is forced to listen to Souljah on the car radio, as she lectures about the ancient African elders "who believe that what you sow, you reap. If you do something positive, something positive will come back to you. If you consciously do negative things, then negativity will rule your life" (46). Souljah’s Afrocentric self-help ideology falls on deaf ears, as Winter astutely questions why Africans are not better off, given that positivity supposedly begets positivity. Winter's easy dismissal of Souljah's Afrocentric karma is similar to the conflict between BPP and Karenga's black nationalist US organization, as Karenga constructs "collective political memories of African culture" (Matthews 272) and is criticized for allowing cultural politics to displace institutional activism. Despite her reiteration of Karenga's cultural politics, Souljah’s criticism of what she calls the "inaccurate curriculum of the American public school system" (Souljah 464) appears influenced by point five of the Black Panther Party's Ten Point Plan, proclaiming:

WE WANT DECENT EDUCATION FOR OUR PEOPLE THAT EXPOSES THE TRUE NATURE OF THIS DECADENT AMERICAN SOCIETY. WE WANT EDUCATION THAT TEACHES US OUR TRUE HISTORY AND OUR ROLE IN THE PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY. We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of the self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else (Seale 67).

BPP's avowal to make institutions accountable for inadequate education is replaced in the Post-Black Power era by Afrocentric psychologists and Million Man March organizers, just to name a few examples, who transform the latter part of the declaration in point five, advocating "knowledge of yourself and your position in society and the in the world", into a tolerable self-help ideology of education and activism.
Souljah expresses disappointment that Winter does not try to "help herself" by attending school, which Souljah acknowledges is culturally biased, but Midnight hands down some of the severest condemnation when he yells, "Can't you read? . . . That's what I'm talking about---dumb women! You don't even know what's going on around you. If it ain't on the front page, you don't know it" (145). Midnight's frustration that Winter does not read the newspaper is meant to justify his continued rejection of her. Conversely, Souljah expresses her admiration for Midnight's resourcefulness in going to Columbia University library to read and Winter discovers that his reading interests include Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) by Franz Fanon, and *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (1992) by Karl Evanzz, which is in stark contrast to Winter's policy to attend school only when she has a "new outfit to show off or some new jewels" (9). Winter’s vanity and hypersexuality gets coded as the reason for oppression and disunity and thus, the “crisis” of black womanhood becomes a red herring, deflecting attention away from social and political inequities. Souljah even calls attention to these inequities in *No Disrespect* when she recounts how her elementary school's special education classes were filled with black students who, "instead of reading books . . . played checkers, watched television, beat up each other up---all with the teacher's permission, supervision, and indifference", while the "'top and most intelligent' classes were almost entirely white and had no more than a handful of black students in each discipline where it was English, science, mathematics, or history" (30-31). But Souljah's emphasis on educational bias is weakened in her fiction, as characters like Winter, whose placement in underachievement programs like these is possible, are lambasted for not attending school and reading enough. Souljah's vague concern for institutional accountability dovetails into a call for personal responsibility in which black women's educational and cultural deficiencies highlight their
undeserved class position and aspiration for affluent partners to love or exploit. Although Souljah exhorts black women to read "serious books" and value formal education, black men are overwhelmingly used to point out and correct black women's educational weaknesses, facilitating a relationship in which black women are dependent on black men for social and political enlightenment.

Because of the historically common practice of attaching monetary value to women through dowries, fear of the gold digger is not solely a twentieth century issue. Still, the heightened anxiety about black feminine courtship goals is a symptom of what Wahneema Lubiano identifies as "fetishization of the black family", as the gold digger obstructs the route to an idealized patriarchal black family (240). Unfortunately, tolerance for male characters like Quadir and Midnight, who sell drugs and are often driven by greed, is disproportionate to the criticism directed at black women for a similar kind of materialistic behavior performed in courtship. Selling drugs is one way for men to compensate for an inadequate black masculinity, thus it is sanctioned in the novels, while black women's behavior supposedly subverts this cherished black masculinity. The paranoia about black women is burdened by the public discourse about black women making social and economic gains at a time when inordinately high numbers of black men are going to prison and dropping out of high school. Public emphasis on this pattern of unaccounted black female success and black male failure thereby makes it all the more important to weed out parasitic, uneducated, and culturally unaware black women from the "black community", which is now especially interested in tightening its racial borders in the face of less conspicuous forms of racism. Black Power emphasis on institutional responsibility is replaced with an emphasis on gendered personal responsibility which in a Post-Black era includes broadly recharacterizing black women's sexual agency, "street smart"
education, and rising socioeconomic position as immoral and dangerous sexual behavior, (mis)education, and unmerited class position that undermines black unity and manhood. To be sure, the new discursive attention given to black male mortality and professional success is not misplaced, but cultural discourse around the black male crisis has begun sanctioning "man-up" crusades bolstering an oppressive black hypermasculinity. As a counter-narrative to discourse about black male socioeconomic failure, black hypermasculinity and conservative black womanhood unfortunately becomes the remedy for a homogenized black community (dys)functioning under the declaration that "love is war" (Souljah xi).
III. CHAPTER THREE

"MARRYING BLACK"

You can’t talk Black and sleep White.

---Haki Madhubuti

In his 1955 "Speech on the ‘Buy Black’ Campaign" Black Nationalist Carlos Cooks urges Blacks to "transfer the commerce, business life and body politic of the alien parasite to its rightful owner, the Black communities" (Deburg 88). Cooks's request for African-Americans to patronize Black-owned businesses within their communities echoes a popular black nationalist sentiment characterizing racial integration as exploitative rather than as a sign of black liberation. At the foundation of his argument is the idea that black business nationalism will help increase economic power, effectively ridding black communities of "unemployment, poverty, crime and alien exploitation" (92). Cooks’s pronouncement follows earlier protests such as the "Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work" campaigns of the 1930s and runs parallel to the strategies launched by Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) which determined that boycotts were the most effective strategy for attaining "civil and human rights" (Weems 27, 67). Black business nationalism was in part a response to White businesses that enacted Jim Crow laws, treated Blacks as second-class citizens, disseminated racist advertisements such as American Tobacco Company’s "Nigger Hair" tobacco, or simply ignored Black consumers (Weems 60). Buy-Black methods of activism would seem to be obsolete or irrelevant to late-twentieth century African Americans consumers who, according to historian Robert E. Weems, "now spend the vast majority of their money in shiny downtown and suburban shopping malls, and enhance the economic bases of these outside areas to the detriment of their own enclaves" (131). I begin with Cooks and Weems, not because "buy black" is an overarching theme in black popular
romance, but because the support of black relationships takes the same discursive shape as "buy black" in this fiction. Buying black and marrying black are both understood as methods to resist racism and economic exploitation.

In order to understand popular discourse about black/white interracial courtship, I begin with proponents of black intraracial courtship and marriage, who assert that a black partner is more apt to understand, acknowledge, and help prevent racism than a White partner. Randall Kennedy, author of *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption* (2003), insists that blacks resist interracial marriage because it indicates "racial disloyalty; implies disapproval of fellow blacks; impedes the perpetuation of black culture; weakens the African American marriage market; and fuels racist mythologies, especially the fiction that blacks lack pride in race" (110). Kennedy's assertion reveals the myriad of hindrances for blacks marrying white, but his inventory of resistance to black/white interracial courtship masks how, for instance, gender informs racist mythologies and racial disloyalty. Black women who date white men fuel racist mythologies about black women's supposed natural licentiousness because stereotypes about their promiscuity helped justify white male rape and sexual exploitation of black women during slavery. To be sure, black men have also had to confront a legacy of violence linked to "dating white," but nationalist discourse urges black men to reclaim their masculinity and access to white women has been championed as a method for black men to reclaim their masculinity. Relationships with white men intensify the evaluation of black women's racial loyalty, reinforce stereotypes of black women as licentious, and consequently work against heteronormative gender conventions. Randall Kennedy's assertion about discourse labeling black/white interracial courtship as a sign of racial disloyalty is indeed true, but does not reveal the unequal stakes for black women in interracial relationships. Gendered advantages are important in
elucidating why, for example, black men date "outside" the race, more than their female counterparts. Doubly important is the way black women are blamed for failed black patriarchy because the pressure for them to acquiesce to gender conventions intensifies as oppression continues to be justified by nonheteronormative family structures. This is especially true for the black middle-class, as the post-Civil Rights landscape witnesses an increase of black nuclear families.

Racialized edicts about courtship and economic empowerment are a part of the history of black political and social activism, but as the black middle-class grew two-fold during the 1980's and 90's and the pressure to fully integrate increased, opportunities to "Buy Black" subsequently declined. For example, the number of affluent black households jumped from 212,000 in 1967 to 764,000 in 1987---a 360 percent increase (Weems 103). The number of blacks moving to predominantly white neighborhoods further increased during the 1980's and 90's as the black middle-class grew. The gratuitous references to designer clothes in many black popular fiction texts confirm this rise in black affluence, but also reveal the declining import of Cooks's "Buy Black" campaign, as black-owned businesses can rarely offer middle-class accoutrements that this growing population desires. In the widely publicized 2009 "Empowerment Experiment," John and Maggie Anderson, a black middle-class couple from Oak Park, IL set out to resurrect Cooks’s campaign. The Andersons attempted to patronize black businesses exclusively for an entire year, marking a 14 mile drive to a black-owned, full-service grocery store as one of their most significant challenges (Gregory). We cannot be certain how Carlos Cooks might respond to the Andersons’ 14-mile trek, but it is indicative of the practical difficulties of sustaining" buy black" practices in the Post-Black Power era.
As the opportunity for black cooperative economics diminishes, "marrying black" becomes inflated with the residual sociopolitical importance of "buying black" and unfortunately, Black women face more hurdles than Black men who pursue interracial relationships, as I discuss later. The shame attached to the label of "Uncle Tom" or "Oreo" provokes Black middle-class anxiety about moving up the socioeconomic ladder, thus marrying black takes on the added task of verifying "authentic" blackness, especially for middle-class blacks moving into predominantly White neighborhoods. The integrationist policies of the Civil Rights Movement helped boost the numbers of black/white interracial relationships, as the movement challenged anti-miscegenation laws, but it also created nervousness among some about the maintenance of segregated black spaces of intimacy and economic transaction. Interracial marriage became legal in the US because of the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision and between 1960 and 1997 interracial marriages increased six-fold, "with twice as many black men as black women marrying outside the race," but characters in black popular fiction still reckon with the guilt and race betrayal associated with "sleeping white" (Franklin 134). The importance of "marrying black" further increased during the Post-Black Power era as social inequities continued but forms of political action changed, organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization and the Black Panther Party collapsed, and the visibility of black sexual and intimate behavior in music videos, television sitcoms, and popular films in the 1980s and 90s increased. Black hypervisibility "provoked a range of gatekeeping responses from those committed to restricting the circulation of certain kinds of information within black communities and maintaining ‘order’" (Iton 104). Claudia Jenkins argues that public discourse traces African American political problems to their inability to maintain "conventional domestic patterns" (22). The shift from what Jenkins notes is an eighteenth century focus on "externalized
racial oppression" to the nineteenth century attention to domestic disorder is consistent with
Wahneema Lubiano's assertion that the rising African-American "fetishization of the family"
(244) serves as a response to "state and civil-society attacks on the Black family" such as The
Moynihan Report (244). Consider, too, the statistics reporting that black children born out of
wedlock in 1980 rose from 56 percent to 67 percent in 1990 and to 70 percent in 1995 (Patterson
145). Non-fiction books such as Shahrazad Ali’s The Blackman’s Guide to Understanding the
Blackwoman (1989), The Blackwoman’s Guide to Understanding the Blackman (1992) and How
to Tell If Your Man is Gay or Bisexual (2003), among others, arguably serve as a reaction to
such statistics as well as to public attacks on the black family. As relationship training manuals,
the aforementioned texts mean to "teach" love and proper gender roles, encourage domestic and
sexual order, and defy the rising stereotypes about black welfare mothers, black male rapists, and
black promiscuity animated by dominant society’s sex and race hierarchies. To be sure, there is
an extensive market for relationship texts, but the emphasis on black heterosexual relationships
reveals the sociopolitical importance attached to black intraracial relationships during the 1980s
and 90s.

The link between black intimacy and black consumer behavior in the 1980s and 90s is
significant because this era is uniquely marked by the memory of black nationalist politics, the
spoils of integration, and the absence of any viable politics that outlines black private and public
behavior. Thus, black popular fiction becomes a logical place to take up my inquiry about the
politics of black heterosexual courtship, as so many black popular fiction texts are concerned
with intimate behavior. Remnants of a black nationalist past are particularly evident in Eric
Jerome Dickey’s Milk in My Coffee (1998) and Sandra Kitt’s The Color of Love (1995), two
texts I use to ground my analysis, which explore the various difficulties attending Black/White
interracial courtship and reveal their disparate stakes for black men and women. *The Color of Love* and *Milk in My Coffee* are among some of the most popular contemporary Black romance novels; *The Color of Love* is in its second edition and according to Kitt’s Web site, it was optioned by HBO and Lifetime (Sandra Kitt Biography). Dickey has written over ten novels and *Milk in My Coffee* is in its tenth edition, including a 2000 edition in French. The popularity of Dickey’s and Kitt's texts indicates the salience of Black romance fiction framing conversations about the complex gender politics associated with interracial relationships. Moreover, as a way of better understanding the powerful social force of the metaphorical link between buying black and marrying black, I situate Kitt’s and Dickey’s novels within a larger discourse on black courtship found in popular film and fiction.

As integration and the rise of the black middle-class weakens Carlos Cook’s manifesto for black economic behavior, courtship becomes a more visible marker of activism. In Dickey’s and Kitt’s novels, the political imperative to "marry black" becomes a burdensome obstacle to romance for the main characters, so they opt for interracial relationships where love can conquer the problems associated with their taboo courtship. The political force of "buy black" diminishes in these novels, but black relationships become more politicized and interracial intimacy takes on a supposedly more romantic function, suggesting a hierarchical relationship where love is privileged over politics. Jordan, the black male protagonist in *Milk in my Coffee*, and Leah, the black female protagonist in *The Color of Love*, are offered little to no opportunities for sexual or romantic indulgences in their black intraracial relationships, seemingly asphyxiated by the politics behind the marry black ethic. Ultimately, the political-economy of black intraracial relationships renders love a luxury in these popular romance novels.
The romance novel can be traced back to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747). Richardson served as a predecessor for gothic romance fiction in the mid-1800s and for what is called the "Golden Age of the Sentimental Domestic Novel", when white female authors such as Mary Jane Holmes and Maria Sedgwick gained popularity with a primarily white female audience (Ramsdell 7). Thereafter, black female authored post-Reconstruction domestic novels such as *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances Watkins Harper, *Contending Forces* (1900) by Pauline Hopkins, and *Clancy Street* (1898) by Katherine D. Tillman reflected a growing black middle-class audience and, as Claudia Tate asserts, "constitute a specific category of African-American fiction in which a virtuous heroine generally undergoes a series of adventures en route to marriage, family happiness, and prosperity" (5). During the twentieth century, novels most often categorized as young adult, such as the *Anne of Green Gables* series, were once most popular among adults (Ramsdell 7). Certainly, one of the biggest expansions of the popular romance market occurred in the 1990s when the genre opened to more diverse writers and protagonists, with "Ethnic or Multicultural Romance" securing a larger share of the market (Ramsdell 11). "Ethnic Romance" included African American romance, though the "romance" category is often inadequate as black popular romance authors regularly "write in more than one genre and both fiction and nonfiction" (Dawson and Fleet 9). Contemporary black writers are said to differ from their predecessors because of their "middlebrow appeal" (Dawson and Fleet 9), as Terry McMillan's 1996 *Waiting to Exhale* is credited for the shift of the "African American contemporary novel[s] to mainstream publishing" (Dawson and Fleet 15). Subgenres of romance that explore interracial romance

Donna Hill maintains that when she began publishing her popular romance novels, "Black books, Black authors and the stories that we wanted to tell were only being marketed to black readers—no matter what the content or message and relegated to a certain section of the store" (Brice). Black popular romance novels have recently managed to captivate a moderate amount of white readers, but black readers remain its primary audience. Despite the ability to fill a niche, criticism has been leveled at black popular romance fiction for failing to achieve crossover appeal. Placement in the "African American Literature" section of national bookstore chains, as well as black popular fiction book covers showing blacks in "Afrocentric styles," help preserve black popular fiction's predominantly black audience (Osborne), but Sandra Kitt insists that she "found it more difficult to sell the books with black characters" (Bradley). The well publicized fracas between Penguin Publishing House and popular fiction writer, Millenia Black, exemplifies Sandra Kitt's claim. After she self-published her novel, *The Great Pretender* (2010), Millenia's success attracted editors at Penguin Publishing House who later published her book. Shortly after learning Black was African-American, Penguin allegedly began marketing her novel, which was about white characters, as African American literature, putting African American characters on the book cover (Scott). Black's lawsuit against Penguin for changing the race of her characters without her permission led to vigorous online discussions about how the "African American literature" categorization decreases marketability and sales for black writers (Scott). Black's lawsuit recalls Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print", where Hurston argued that publishing houses shied away from "romantic stories about
Negroes and Jews because they feel that they know the public indifference to such works, unless the story or play involves racial tension" (118). Millenia Black's novel managed to attract Penguin's attention, but Black's fear about her novel being categorized as "African American literature" corresponds to Hurston's claim that mainstream audiences ignore black romance novels precisely because of their African American characters. Black illuminates the racist practices of publishing houses as well as mainstream consumers who will rarely purchase novels with black characters. Not only does Black's lawsuit gesture toward a push to make the "buy black" decree obsolete, but it also signifies its incompatibility with the capitalistic demands of the publishing industry, suggesting that authors must ignore racism and capitulate to the demands of the market in order to be successful.

The problems romance authors incur when writing about black characters correspond to the insurmountable challenges facing black intraracial relationships in *Milk in my Coffee* and *The Color of Love*, as compatibility is achieved in black/white interracial relationships rather than in black intraracial ones. More important, the thematic attention to the advantages and disadvantages of black/white interracial intimacy reveals that the obstacles for black women who ‘sleep white’ are asymmetrical to those of black men who ‘sleep white.’ Angela Davis asserts that the systemic white male rape and sexual coercion of black female slaves was a "weapon of domination, weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist" (23). Thus, black women’s relationships with white men are not generally understood as a challenge to white racism, but are often framed by a history of black women as instruments of economic, racial, and sexual exploitation, and according to Hazel Carby, "political terror" (18). Patricia Hill Collins notes that "traditionally, freedom for black women has meant freedom from White men, not the freedom to choose White men as lovers and friends," thus their relationships
"have long been constrained by the legacy of Black women’s sexual abuse by White men and the unresolved tension this creates" (162). Because of the history of black female sexual exploitation, Guy Mark Foster argues in his essay, "How Dare a Black Woman Make Love to a White Man!: Black Women Romance Novelists and the Taboo of Interracial Desire", that contemporary black women's psychological anxieties about white men historically raping and sexually assaulting black women has been the major hindrance for black female/white male courtship, even more than white men refusing to date black women. Early in The Color of Love, before Leah has begun dating Jason (her eventual White love interest), her white male coworker, Mike, pins her against a wall in a supply closet and aggressively tries to kiss her. Her response of punching him and yelling, "You are going to wish you never heard the words, Black Power!"

17 gestures toward the history of white sexual exploitation of black women that Angela Davis illuminates (26). Leah is distraught because Jason fails to properly legitimize their relationship, pointing to a history of black women serving as concubines for white men. Well into the relationship, Leah confesses that she is "bothered" that she cannot identify herself as Jason's "significant other" or "girlfriend" and further admits to him that she has been routinely warned by family and friends that Jason "couldn't be serious" about her because he is "just using her" (313).

The historical anxiety that Foster points to is compelling, but is also unfortunately consistent with the trend of blaming black women for being single, including criticizing their "'attitude', weight, high expectations," and fails to account for all the cultural impediments to black female/white male relationships as well as their disproportionately low rate in comparison to black male/white female courtship (Lucas). Controversial public reports and popular cultural representations of black women as less desirable and more masculine than women of other races,
as well as dominant beauty standards which continue to sideline black women, also contribute to this imbalance. Leah confirms the link between race and beauty when she sees a picture of Jason's ex-wife, admitting to feeling "a bit chilled inside as a new insecurity attacked her. In light of such wholesome blond prettiness, she wondered what it was Jason saw in her" (223). Black women's anxieties about white male sexual exploitation are also compounded by popular cultural discourse highlighting white men as more frequent perpetrators of racism than white women. When Jason first reveals that he is a police officer who works with troubled black youth, Leah admits that she is "thinking about a lot of young Black men killed senselessly by the police. White police" (66). His profession evokes the Los Angeles riots sparked by the acquittal of the White male LAPD police officers in trial for the videotaped beating of Rodney King, which occurred three years prior to when the novel was published. Likewise, Jordan admits that he was raised to believe "the White man always had a secret agenda" (38). Textual emphases on White male racism "reify long-standing images of white women either as passive creatures without agency or as moral women who, unlike their black sisters, hold fast to the core of American belief of ‘color blindness'" (Hill Collins 265). Overemphasizing white male racism in these texts justifies the minimal resistance a character like Jordan faces for his interracial partnership and increases the burden placed on Leah and Jason’s relationship.

Leah and Jason's relationship mirrors an uneven class dynamic often found in literary and popular culture representations of interracial intimacy. For example, Flipper, the black male protagonist in Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* (1991) is an architect and Kenya McQueen in *Something New* (2006) is an accountant. This is surprising given that professional blacks have often had a more difficult time proving they are not "sell-outs" than working-class blacks, and interracial relationships would only compound this burden of racial authenticity. Fictionalized depictions
of interracial relationships frequently include white partners with lower paying jobs or less prestigious careers than their black lovers; for example, Kenya's White boyfriend is a landscaper, Flipper's White lover is his secretary, and Rachel Marron (Whitney Houston) in *The Bodyguard* (1992) is a singer/celebrity, while her White boyfriend is a bodyguard. In Dickey's text, Jordan is a computer programmer at CompSci Enterprises and Kimberly, his white male love interest, is an artist, while Leah in Kitt's novel is a graphic designer and Jason, her white partner, is a police officer. Ralph Richard Banks, *Wall Street Journal* contributor and Stanford law professor, insists that unmarried black women "often end up with Black men who are less accomplished than they are. They are more likely than any other group of women to earn more than their husbands. More than half of college-educated black wives are better educated than their husbands" (Lucas). He goes on to suggest that black intraracial marriage divorce rates are high because of the "prevalence of relationships between professional black women and blue-collar black men" and he insists that college-educated black women "have less in common" with the guy they grew up with who may be" driving the UPS truck and more in common with the white guy who sat next to you in history class in college" (Lucas). Banks' claim is at odds with the representation of black/white interracial intimacy in popular fiction and film, where blacks regularly choose and share commonalities with blue-collar white partners or whites who are not corporately employed. As Banks' assertion, in common with the marrying up convention, suggests, the aforementioned black middle-class partners appear more attractive in a dating pool, especially by those with lower paying jobs and less prestigious careers, but their class may counterbalance the diminished racial capital they have. Likewise, working-class white partners have less dating capital, but their white privilege may serve as a substitute for the perceived financial imbalance in the relationship or their less prestigious career possibly diminishes their
power and creates a more equal relationship. Nonetheless, it would seem that black men and women are unable to afford a white partner until they have achieved middle-class status, just as buying black often incurs a larger financial burden that makes it less viable for the black working-class.

The burden associated with black male and white female courtship reflects a history of black male lynching arising from interactions with white women, including consensual encounters fabricated as rape. Despite the tremendous danger associated with the memory of black men and white women in interracial relationships, black men seemingly do not suffer the same anxiety claimed to be a part of black women's resistance to white men. The history of racist anti-miscegenation laws influences the depiction of black men seeking sexual and political freedom through white female partners. Celia R. Daileader insists that popular culture’s (especially popular film’s) rendering of the black male/white female courtship or what she calls "Othellophilia" has become a near obsession, evidenced by movies such as *Jungle Fever* (1991) and *Save the Last Dance* (2001), and among other things, public fascination with the O.J. Simpson trial (114). It would seem that statistics substantiate the popular characterization of black-white love relationships, as the US census reports that in 1992, there were 246,000 black-white marriages, and 163,000 of these were between black men and white women (Craig-Henderson 10-11). African-American boxing champion Jack Johnson is a striking example of this, as he married three white women and was known for flaunting them in the face of white men. Johnson helped make the black male/white female relationship a symbol of black masculinity through boldly parading his expensive clothes, jewelry, cars, and White girlfriends and wives, "at a time when southern blacks were assaulted or killed for no better reason than that they had begun to achieve some material success" and "the majority of black men felt compelled
to wear a mask of submissiveness" (Franklin 118). Though many middle-class blacks abhorred Johnson’s behavior, many "poor and working-class blacks celebrated his exploits" (Franklin 119). Malcolm X, a figure Jordan has framed on his wall at work, verifies the celebration of black male/white female relationships, as he admits in his autobiography that having a white woman was a "status symbol of the first order" (Haley 70). After ending his relationship with a black woman in order to date a white woman, Malcolm recounts that when he "paraded" his white girlfriend around, the "Negro men loved her" (Haley 70-71). Johnson and Malcolm exemplify how black male defiance of anti-miscengenation laws can reproduce racist hierarchies idealizing white women.

Jordan's biracial love interest, Kimberly, who passes as white, declares that although her black family ridiculed her, they all "wanted to sneak and get some the 'the pinkness'" (239) referring to her black cousin's attempts to rape and sexually assault her. The historical taboo associated with white women intensifies their desirability and helps sanction the rising trend of black male/white female courtship, despite its clear contradiction of black nationalist ideals. "Black is beautiful!" is the Black Power Movement’s well-known catchphrase, but in 1968 Village Voice readers wrote in proclaiming that the Black Power Movement is "just another subterfuge to aid the Negro male in procuring a White woman" (Kennedy 115). Another reader wrote in, "The White man is marrying the White woman. The Black man is marrying the White woman. [W]ho’s going to marry me?" (Kennedy 116). In Ebony magazine, Mary A. Dowdell is more forthright, declaring that "Black males hate Black women just because they are Black" (Kennedy 116). And one can hardly forget Black Power leader Eldridge Cleaver, who substantiates Dowdell’s claim in declaring, "when I put my arms around a White woman, well, I'm hugging freedom. The White man forbade me to have the White woman on pain of death....
will not be free until the day I can have a White woman in my bed" (189). Transgression against
dominant society's rules regarding love and courtship is Cleaver's marker of freedom, while
Jordan marks Kimberly's Whiteness as evidence that he is "liberal-minded" (293). Echoing
Cleaver's pronouncement, Jordan admits that Kimberly's newly uncovered Black identity
disturbs presumptions about his freedom, declaring he was "not as free" as he had thought (293).
Jordan confesses that his relationship with Kimberly did not mean he "thought it was okay when
I saw other brothas or sistas with somebody White" (293), positioning his contradictory criticism
of interracial relationships against a liberal-minded ambition to ignore racial differences. For
Jordan, uncovering Kimberly's black heritage means he is still unknowingly invested in
intraracial relationships and not "free", despite his belief that the political value of such
relationships is depreciating.

Upon first meeting Kimberly, Jordan regretfully admits, "If she was a sista I’d be asking
for her phone number, offering a dinner date later in the week. If she looked like me" (17). Not
only does Jordan imply that Black women are more easily able to attract black male attention,
but also that their allegedly natural desirability puts an end to the need for the Black Power
Movement’s "Black is Beautiful" politics. In other words, there is no longer a need to affirm
black female beauty against dominant beauty standards, as black women or "sistas" are offered
dinner dates just because they are black. Jordan’s lukewarm attraction to Kimberly seems to
confirm black women’s beauty and his race loyalty, which proves to be important because of the
black middle-class angst about racial solidarity in courtship, which, as I argue earlier, replaced
the declining buy black ethic in the Post-Black Power period. When listening to the popular
singer, Rachelle Ferrell, in Kimberly’s apartment, Jordan says he loves Ferrell’s "strong, black-
woman look, her got quite-a-few-octaves voice, her full lips, the arousing way her mouth moved
when she hit all those sexy notes as she crooned. Part of the reason I was attracted to J’nette was because she has that same look. Ain’t nothing like a strong black woman. Nothing" (14). His desire for or potential fetishization of black women, including his current lover J’nette, weakens the motives behind intraracial relationships that challenge idealized white feminine beauty. Jordan seeks to prove that, despite his decision to take on a white lover, black femininity still retains capital and his race loyalty remains intact.

When Jordan discovers that Kimberly has a black father, he ends the chapter saying, "I gathered my things and left another black woman in her bed of lies" (282). Jordan insists that his disappointment is due to Kimberly’s deceit rather than her racial passing, but nonetheless he categorizes her deception as part of a long string of lies black women have told him. The depiction of Kimberly as a black woman 'passing' for White evokes the historical representation of the tragic mulatto popular in 19th and 20th century literature and film, including Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1919), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929). Typically unable to find acceptance among blacks or whites, the tragic mulatto's fate often ends in death or other misfortunes. *Milk in My Coffee* imagines extraordinary strides in racial progress, as 19th century tragic mulattos were often shunned by whites for their mythical "one-drop" of black blood in order to maintain a pure, white race, but Kimberly takes great pains in describing how her black family tortures her, while her white family is said to merely "tolerate" her black father. Even after she identifies herself as black on job applications, it is white employers who erase her answer and check the box marked white or Caucasian; thus the imposter feeling she experiences with her black family is at odds with whites who embrace her. Although Jordan is initially upset when he discovers Kimberly's racial identity, they eventually
resolve their differences because Kimberly's acceptance in the white community, visits to Africa, light skin color, voluptuous body, ethnic hairstyles, and black father, supposedly provide her with just enough racial cachet for both black and white identities.

Kimberly and Jason are depicted as excellent lovers and sensitive partners, despite the history of sexual exploitation between whites and blacks, while Jordan and Leah are symbolic of how the black body ostensibly becomes the object on which to vent racial frustrations. In Kitt’s *The Color of Love*, Leah characterizes her relationship with her black lover, Allen, as unromantic and predictable, describing his kiss through the image of him "forcing her mouth open to receive his aggressive, rough tongue" (42). Likewise, Jordan describes his black lover’s body as "cold" and her kisses "mechanical" (27). Historian Jacquelyn Jones points out that while racism can "bind the family together," it can also amplify "tensions among people who had few outlets for their rage and frustration" (Jones 32, 34, 103). Jordan’s sexual vignettes with Kimberly, his white love interest, could not be more different than his encounters with J’nette, his black lover, as he describes Kimberly’s body as "soft", "hot", and even emitting a "glow" (46). During Leah’s love scene with Jason, her white partner, she similarly comments that "everything about him felt hot" (204). She begins crying after he puts on a condom, because she says that her black partner never put one on and she never asked; she is "stunned" by Jason’s "consideration and awareness" (204). In Dickey’s novel, Kimberly is characterized as the easy-going and understanding White girlfriend, as she does not interrogate Jordan when she calls him late at night and his ex-girlfriend, J’nette, answers his phone or when she sees them in a cab together the next day. Instead she waits and confronts him in a modest tone and manner over a glass of wine. When J’nette discovers that Jordan has begun dating someone else after they have broken up, she shreds photographs of Jordan and Kimberly, screams at him, and closes the evening.
threatening him with a knife. The stereotype of the "black bitch" helps to bolster the case for the Black male’s attraction to the allegedly more submissive white woman and to disqualify black intraracial relationships from the romantic love ideal, while reinforcing appealing myths about white sexual partners. Although by the end of *Milk in My Coffee*, Jordan learns that Kimberly is biracial, Jordan’s ex-girlfriend J’nette works perfectly as the foil and stereotype because she is aggressive, treats Jordan poorly, rarely calls him or returns his phone calls, visits him only for sexual romps, and is emotionally unavailable to him. Jordan complains about J’nette's behavior, but he makes excessive attempts to salvage their relationship, constructing a line of sympathy between Jordan and the intended readers who, largely black and female, might otherwise sympathize with J’nette. Moreover, her harsh treatment of Jordan during and after their relationship helps him assuage his own guilt. A central character in Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) comments on this kind of dynamic, saying, "I hate the way they [black men] think white girls epitomize beauty and femininity" (177). The supposedly added "benefits" of White partners portrayed in these texts are reminiscent of the famous black businessman John H. Johnson’s assertion that black consumers who have "turned with increasing alacrity to white establishments" are offered "extra services, luxury atmosphere, and a degree of glamour for the same dollar" that they might have spent at a black-owned business (Weems 74). Similarly, in discussing their Empowerment Experiment, John and Maggie Anderson reveal their African American friend’s belief that "black-owned businesses were inferior to white-owned enterprises" (Gregory). Idealization of white-owned business is analogous to the depiction of black/white interracial intimacy in Dickey and Kitt’s fiction.

The idealization of intimate interracial relationships is widespread in popular culture, countering the well-known representations of such relations in African American literature. In
the film, *Something New*, Kenya McQueen’s (Sanaa Lathan) passionate sex scene with her white landscaper severely contrasts her date with Mark Harper (Blair Underwood) where they sit alongside one another working on their laptops, recalling what black feminist critic Ann duCille calls a "sexless meeting of the minds and sociopolitical ambitions" (10). It is even Kenya’s white lover who "liberates" her by persuading her to remove her hair extensions and give up her beige wall paint for more vibrant colors that her mother concludes are for whores or kindergarteners. Kenyan initially appears to confront the same kinds of issues regarding sexuality that Helga Crane encounters in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1969). Helga visits her White relatives in Copenhagen and is encouraged to wear bright colors, which symbolize her sexuality, but she fears bright colors may be "too gay", as her black U.S cohorts have deemed them too "vulgar" (68, 17). Helga takes on a relationship with famous White artist, Axel Olsen, but in contrast to *Something New* or *The Color of Love*, Helga ends her relationship with him because while he may desire her, he is unable to abandon his racist ideas about black women’s sexuality. Helga’s decision first appears to substantiate the argument that black intraracial partnership is advantageous for the way it increases "the chances for mutual recognition and understanding" as "both partners recognize how the structure of racism harms both black men and black women, and does so through gender-specific mechanisms" (Hill Collins 252). But Helga’s dilemma lies in prioritizing intraracial marriage, children, and racial uplift over her sexual freedom and fleshly desires, which also comes with great risk. Black popular fiction’s representation of interracial courtship as a unique space for romance and sexual pleasure revisits the battle over black female sexuality as a site of racial politics.

Whereas Helga surrenders her sexual pleasure, Jordan and Leah choose romance and sexual freedom, as the political stakes of black courtship shift by the late 20th century. Leah and
Jordan can make this decision because their interracial romance can elude the amplified political claims invested in black courtship. Unlike for Helga, in these novels love is able to triumph over the problems of interracial intimacy, but unable to function similarly for black intraracial relationships. For all the criticism directed at Spike Lee’s *Jungle Fever*, his film does not idealize interracial sex as liberatory to the degree that the aforementioned texts do because in Lee’s film black intraracial intimacy is depicted as vigorous and spirited, with Flipper’s daughter even commenting on hearing her parents’ lovemaking in the morning. Nevertheless, Flipper’s sexual encounters with his wife in their bedroom contrast his illicit sex scene with his white lover at work on his drafting table. Such representations are problematic in that white characters alone serve as catalysts for their black partner’s unfettered sexual expression. Exaggerated accounts of interracial passion underscore the sexual and romantic ennui associated with black relationships, revealing how political agendas supposedly stifle intraracial sexual passion.

Wahneema Lubiano’s contention that "black nationalist anxiety over racial virility, or its historical lack, plays itself out continually in black cultural production" (240) helps explain why black middle-class intraracial relationships must be depicted as completely insufferable, in order for protagonists to "fall" for a white lover who is nearby and willing to take on a black partner. Neither Jordan nor Leah is single and looking for a mate at the start of the novel; instead both are in failing Black relationships. Leah suffers through a relationship with her partner Allen, who acts as a perfunctory boyfriend while her White love interest, Jason, lingers around the front steps of her home. Leah repeatedly attempts to silence her misgivings about Allen, whom she describes as someone who "treats her well enough" (47). Allen’s aggressive and forceful bedroom manner makes her the "unwilling recipient of his frustration" and leads to a postcoital scene where a usually timid Leah orders him to "get out" (108). Finally, Leah discovers Allen
has been sleeping with her sister and feigning love for her. In Dickey’s novel, Jordan’s relationship with J’nette is the source of his emasculation and discontent, as their intimacy is marked by her unwillingness to pleasure him and her cold responses to him reflect an aloof and masculine attitude. He declares that intercourse with J’nette feels like "making love to a commanding officer" (29), echoing the overused stereotype of the emasculating black woman buttressed by *The Moynihan Report* (1965). The dire circumstances of these relationships dispel accusations that Leah and Jordan are race traitors. Journalist and frequent contributor to *Essence* magazine, Jill Nelson, asserts that the "more cautious" black men insist that it’s not that they consciously ‘chose’ a white woman, they ‘just fell in love.’ They conveniently cloak themselves in an adolescent notion of love as a state independent of history, politics, and cultural conditioning that we inadvertently ‘fall’ into, like a sinkhole” (Hill Collins 264). According to Nelson, black men construct an ahistorical and apolitical fairy tale version of love that denies their agency in choosing a white partner. Nelson’s pronouncement about single black men (though we can include Black women) not purposely looking for a white partner holds true for Jordan and Leah, who are appropriately hesitant about interracial courtship and do not seek it out. Kimberly, the white and uninhibited and self-employed artist, is conveniently available during the closing stages of Jordan and J’nette’s relationship and Jason is on "stand-by" for Leah when her relationship with Allen ends.

Connie Briscoe’s highly popular *Sisters & Lovers: A Novel* (1994) similarly suggests that black intraracial courtship must be unbearable before characters are able to consider interracial relationships or "fall" for a white partner. Beverly, a magazine editor approaching 30, begins feeling anxious about the possibility of never having a child and never finding a suitable black male partner. She hesitantly agrees to go on a date with a black male coworker, whose dinner
proposition includes taking their wine to his "king-sized brass bed" where they can "make love" and "have each other for dessert instead of cheesecake" all before the wait staff produces the bill (211). After Beverly presses him about his dating patterns and sexual history, he admits a disregard for monogamy and a laissez-faire safe-sex ethic that involves using a condom only if the woman wants it. Thereafter, she agrees to a blind date with another suitor, who, as she is finishing her meal of chicken wings, announces that he wishes "she would do him like [she] do them wing bones" (242). His gauche sexual innuendo is enough to make her leave before the bill is paid and want to write off dating anyone else. Predictably, Beverly’s pessimism about ‘dating black’ grows, but she does not go out in search of a white male partner; it is only after she is in a car accident with a white male motorist that she seriously considers interracial dating. Though *Sisters & Lovers* does not end with a burgeoning interracial romantic affair, Beverly, Leah, and Jordan’s "fall" into love supports American culture’s characterization of romantic love as "irrational rather than rational, gratuitous rather than profit oriented, organic rather than utilitarian, private rather public" (Illouz 2). Black/white interracial intimacy legitimizes itself as "true" love by emerging as an organic and serendipitous union.

One of the most notable differences between intraracial and interracial romance fiction is a fear of fetishization by white partners. Black intraracial romance in popular fiction may suffer financial problems, infidelity, or incompatible gender roles, but fetishization is rarely an obstacle. For example, the protagonist of Jenoyne Adams' *Resurrecting Mingus* (2001) accusingly asks her date if her biracial identity is the sole the reason he asks her out (37) and in Kim McLarin's *Meeting of the Waters: A Novel* (2001) one of the reasons white men desire black women is their belief that black women will do all the things they could not get "uptight flat-assed white girlfriends" to do in the bedroom (252). In these cases, white male fetishization of
black women helps to animate long-standing stereotypes about black women's licentiousness. In Dickey's text, the speculation surrounding Kimberly's black ex-husband prompts Jordan's friend to ask him if he believes Kimberly to be a "white freak chasing brothers just like the rest of 'em" (293). White female fetishization of black men similarly mobilizes stereotypes about black male virility and sexual excess.

The value of Dickey’s and Kitt’s fiction lies in its willingness to expose how anchoring black sexuality to a narrow political agenda can produce an uncritical acceptance of the marry-black convention that can force Black men and women to suffer dysfunction, unhappiness, and exploitation in silence. Leah’s justification for staying with Allen is her lack of "choices" (47) and even after Leah’s sister, Gail, asks Leah if she loves Allen "that much" (47), Leah emphasizes the luxury of love and romance, declaring that "Love isn’t the point" (47). Leah’s devaluation of love demonstrates the growing political burden of intraracial black intimacy, as pleasure and romance increasingly become extravagant and antithetical to politics. While intraracial partnership once seemed to offer a sanctuary from racism and sexism, these forms of oppression are also identified as detrimental to black relationships. With financial problems often touted as one of the primary reasons for divorce in the US, statistics such as the 14 percent unemployment rate for blacks in 1992 versus 6 percent for whites reveal why black relationships are particularly vulnerable (Chideya 17). In 1992, the median black income stood at $21,550 versus the median white family income of $37,780 (Chideya 116). These disproportionate figures exacerbate the anxiety surrounding black intimate relationships, as black women and men must also contend with racism. Another way to think about how racism affects black intraracial relationships is to consider the perceived benefits of black/white interracial relationships. In her ethnographic book-length study, *Interracial Marriages Between Black Women and White Men*
(2008), sociologist Cheryl Judice interviewed five African American women who reveal that society treats them better because they are married to White men (58). One respondent confesses that "having a white husband sometimes protects [me] from other forms of white racism" and another woman admits that" there have been times when [I] have gotten better treatment or service because [my] spouse is white" (58-59). As much as these responses expose the power of white privilege, they also lay bare the vulnerabilities of black intraracial partnership.

The obvious question that arises is whether it is appropriate to demand that romance novels fully explore the racial politics implicated in interracial courtship. There is an expectation that the genre's broad emphasis on "escape" or its 'love conquers all' ending will triumph over the messy historical and political details of interracial intimacy and thus entail a reductive portrayal of the sociopolitical hurdles connected to interracial courtship (Ramsdell 5). Dickey's and Kitts' fiction falls back on trite and cliché stereotypes of black women and men, and rather than fully resisting the sociopolitical and historical contexts of interracial intimacy, shapes them to meet the deterministic limits of the genre. In Dickey's novel, Jordan's black girlfriend is too masculine, especially during lovemaking, while his white girlfriend is appropriately feminine. In Kitt's novel, Leah's black boyfriend is violent and aggressive, while her white boyfriend, who is also violent as a police officer, is attentive and caring with her, eventually saving her from black male violence.

The marrying black dynamic in these novels is reflective of the Post-Black Power period in that it signals the fragility of the 1960’s black nationalist legacy, which characters invoke only to eventually reveal its political and cultural irrelevance. Leah and Jordan negotiate the demands of Black Power Nationalism by assuaging their guilt about race (dis)loyalty, though they are unable to fully confront what major black nationalist figures have outlined as the economic and
sociopolitical weight of their romantic choices. Eldridge Cleaver’s bind of freedom with white womanhood and Angela Davis’s linkage of white manhood and sexual exploitation are circumvented, marking the waning politics of Black Power Nationalism at the turn of the twenty-first century. The rise of the black middle-class and its subsequent integration makes race loyalty the biggest Post-Black Power era obstacle for black interracial partners. Dickey and Kitt reconstruct a residual Black Power Nationalism that demands racial loyalty and relies on recycled black stereotypes. A modified version of Carlos Cooks’ buy-black ethic lingers in these texts, as characters are easily able to maneuver around the marry-black code, thereby resolving the racial guilt associated with interracial relationships and affirming a superficial notion of black nationalism. Dickey and Kitt’s market-driven popular fiction must also preserve a “buying Black” ethic or intraracial transaction between a predominantly black readership and black authors, while portraying emotionally satisfying interracial relationships. They are able to do this by depicting unbearable black relationships with stereotypical characters, as protagonists fall for, not choose, irresistible white partners. Nonetheless, the Post-Black Power era permits a version of interracial intimacy in black popular fiction that is indifferent to the 1960s emphasis on racial exploitation, but invested in precarious ideologies about race loyalty.
My dissertation concludes with an exploration of what it means to use “marrying” as an organizing motif for my project when the denouement of the black romance novels I have explored is precisely not marriage. The inaccessibility of the heterosexual marriage ideal calls for an examination of Sapphire’s highly popular novel *PUSH* (1996), which stands as an exception to many of the texts examined in the core chapters of this dissertation. Indeed, *PUSH* features a black female protagonist, Precious Jones, deeply interested in upward mobility and attracted to the black nationalist symbols of Malcolm X, Minister Louis Farrakhan, and the Nation of Islam, like many of the novels analyzed in this dissertation. Nonetheless, unlike the main characters in many black popular romance novels, Precious is mistrustful of patriarchy, and thus opens new possibilities for black female subjectivity that go beyond traditional narratives of heterosexual coupling and marriage.

When Charlotte Sheedy, agent for Sapphire's *PUSH*, auctioned off a half-completed version of the novel, a potential editor asked if the protagonist "was going to lose weight and find a boyfriend" by the end of the novel (Giles). Implicit in this query is concern about whether *PUSH* will conform to a typical popular romance ending; as the Romance Writers of America explains, "two basic elements" of every romance novel are a "central love story and emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending" (The Romance Writers of America). Henry Fielding's wildly successful 1996 popular romance, *Bridget Jones Diary*, is exemplary of these two fundamental
elements as it illustrates the title character's struggle with dating, but ends with Bridget finding a boyfriend, Mark Darcy, a character drawn unsurprisingly from another classic romance, *Pride and Prejudice*. The romance fiction is the bestselling genre in the United States and black female popular romance writers were some of the most successful black authors in the late 1980's and 1990's, justifying the undisclosed editor's question about the connection between *PUSH* and the romance genre (The Romance Writers of America). Terry McMillan's third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), was on the *New York Times* Best Sellers list for 24 weeks and in 1995, Forest Whitaker adapted *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) into a commercially successful film, grossing $67 million in the US and opening at number one its first week at the box office. The same year Knopf published *PUSH*, Terry McMillan's fourth popular romance novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), was on the *New York Times* Best Seller List. McMillan's commercial success is due to the literary acclaim of fiction writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who were propelled by brilliant prose as well as the Women's Liberation Movement and black political activism of the 1980's and 90's, which increased attention to black women writers. Morrison and Walker, among others, helped open the field of black women's writing and black popular romance writers capitalized on the growing audience serviced by Morrison and her literary cohort.

The literary heritage Sapphire imagines for *PUSH* further justifies her rejection of the conventional happy ending of romance fiction. Rather than take her literary cues from Terry McMillan or Connie Briscoe, Sapphire declares that she "wanted to let this whole new generation who's [going to] read *PUSH* know that it was born out of *The Color Purple* (1982) and other books I mention. I don't think I could have written *PUSH* if Alice Walker had not written *The Color Purple*, or if Toni Morrison had not written *The Bluest Eye* (1970). They
kicked the door open" (Rountree 139). Despite Sapphire's insistence on mapping *PUSH* alongside prominent literary giants, critics still define her work by the narrow literary constraints of realism that Walker and Morrison transcend. Literary critic Janice Liddell, for example, argues that *PUSH* fails to sustain verisimilitude because it is at odds with "documented sociological data", though she does not identify the sociological data she has in mind (Liddell 145). Certainly, *PUSH*’s "realistic" portrayal can be traced to its first-person narration and its use of vernacular, but it also acknowledges its own position as literature by referring to other literary texts. Mimicking Alice Walker's short story "Source," *PUSH* includes allusions to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Ann Petry's *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955), *Malcolm X* (1993) by Arnold Adoff, *A Piece of Mine* (1984) by J. California Cooper, *Selected Poems* (1959) by Langston Hughes, and *Pat King's Family* (1977) by Karen McFall. "Source" references historical figures and books, including "Eleanor Rigby", *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: A Tale of Southern Slave life* (1861). Deborah McDowell asserts that inclusion of these texts within texts "establish and announce the narrative's self-conscious insistence on its own fictionality, its own textuality" (McDowell 130). If Sapphire indeed considers Walker and Morrison to be her literary ancestors, she knows that African American literary criticism has vehemently opposed scholarship attempting to transform African American literature into sociology.  

Since the late 1980's, the growth of black women writers have overwhelmed the broader genre of African American literature. In their categorization, bookstores see little difference between a novel by Toni Morrison and Terry McMillan, as they are grouped together on bookshelves, simply segregated from other books by race. Nonetheless, Sapphire's raw and
unapologetic depiction of Precious creates a chasm between *PUSH* and the novels written by Terry McMillan and her contemporaries, who generally portray black women's love stories. While, Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* offers readers an ambiguous ending that is not completely satisfying, the novel conforms to the romance genre through its depiction of a heterosexual love story between Zora and her boyfriend Franklin. Popular romance by McMillan and her peers often depicts characters "rewarded with relationships with men . . ., or in lieu of a mutually exclusive relationship, enough in the way of material trappings that come to replace self-knowledge and self-awareness" (Beavers 273). Although at the end of *PUSH* Precious is in far better circumstances than she was at the novel's beginning, not all of her problems are repaired by the finale, nor do her resolved issues hinge on a "love conquers all" ending. As a result, Precious is not availed the heroism that is characteristic of romance protagonists, but instead is offered a round characterization of uncertainty and hope that provides her complexity. She is also not offered a heterosexual love interest, but instead provided two alternative "rewards." Her "love story" is defined by the love between her and her children, Little Mongo and Abdul. Emphasis on heteronormativity and marriage typically underscored in romance novels is also replaced with a "rewarding" homosocial relationship between Precious, her teacher, and diverse classmates, whom she identifies as her "friends and family" (95). Her diverse community of abused and victimized friends diminishes the importance of patriarchal family and its ability to correct inequality, which I discuss later. Precious reveals her friend and classmate, Rita Romero's story: "Rita's daddy kill her mother in front her eyes. Rita been on street selling pussy since she was twelve . . . Then Rhonda's brother raping her since she was a chile, her mother fine out and put Rhonda, not brother, out" (94). Political Scientist, Cathy J. Cohen, reworks the contours of heteronormativity which has historically operated on a paradigm
that identifies heterosexual identity as a site of privilege. Heteronormativity has typically been defined by "morally correct,' white, state-authorized, middle-class" heterosexual men, according to Cohen, as it excludes poor, black and brown men and women "portrayed as unable to raise their children with the right moral fiber; unable to find "gainful" employment to support themselves and their 'illegitimate children'; and of course unable to manage 'effectively' the minimal assistance provided by the state" (Cohen 41). Precious, along with the majority of the novel's characters, is excluded from heteronormativity and further distanced from the perceived benefits of romance, defined as "two protagonists forming some kind of committed relationship (usually marriage) by the book's conclusion" (Ramsdell 4).

Sapphire also use Precious and Mary to counter the romance genre's emphasis on protection and patriarchy. Precous's characterization as a supposedly "ugly," overweight, dark-complexioned black girl defies the connotation of purity and needing protection connected to her name and its utility within a genre which has historically characterized women as virtuous and delicate. Likewise, Mary's characterization as a sexual abuser contests the chaste connotation of her name. Further distancing PUSH from the romance genre is the number of obstacles presented for Precious to contend with, amplifying the fantastical relationship between Precious and her dreams for marriage and a middle-class life. It is quite clear on the first page of PUSH that the novel is not a romance and perhaps could be more appropriately categorized as horror, as Precious declares, "I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver" (3). Rather than have men yell catcalls at Precious as they do in many popular romance novels, men exhibit disgust for her. In response to Precious walking down the street, one nameless man yells "That bitch crazy man!" as she is on her way to alternative school (25). Precious's life reads more like the biblical story of Job than a heroine in a romance novel. Instead of featuring the
middle-class protagonists that McMillan and her peers favored, *PUSH* focuses on a poor black girl living in the New York City housing projects with her single mother. She is described as overweight and ugly, a poor single mother, victim of paternal and maternal incest, raising a child with Down Syndrome, illiterate, expelled from high school, and diagnosed with HIV. Each problem reduces Precious's investment in getting a boyfriend or losing weight, as these priorities seem less important in the context of her more dire problems. Popular romance's black middle-class female characters do not always end with marriage, but Precious's hyperbolic problems amplify the luxury of marriage for single, poor, black heterosexual women who are often ignored in public discourse about the alleged "black marriage crisis."^19

Sapphire's understanding of the novel's setting also subtly refuses the link between *PUSH* and popular romance. When asked if *PUSH* conforms to a blues motif, Sapphire responds:

> While I would categorize Precious' experiences as blues experiences, I'd classify the novel as the blues / hip hop / jazz novel because while there is acceptance, submission, and transcendence in the blues (and a lot of other things), it is in hip hop, the music of Precious' generation, that we find the open defiance, visibility of the formally invisible (ghetto youth), and the movement from the periphery of the culture to it's [sic] center, that characterizes some of Precious' life as she is being 'born again'" (Rountree 1).

Sapphire's insistence on a variety of musical influences suggests that she is trying to rescue the novel from the easy and broad categorization that many African American novels are subjected to. More specifically, the musical pastiche that Sapphire weaves through Precious's narrative in her explanation counters the literary expectations that *PUSH* will concede to a romance finale. If we think about these musical genres layered upon one another in the novel, their cacophony resists the linear form typical of romance novels. Janice Lee Liddell calls attention to Sapphire's resistance to linearity, insisting that *PUSH* suffers from "...arbitrary shifts in point of view, linguistic inconsistencies, and some structural faults..." (Liddell 145). Albeit negative,
Liddell’s criticism corresponds with Sapphire's multifaceted description of *PUSH* as well as her intentions to avoid the genre most popular among her African American female literary peers in the 1980's and 1990's. The novel's urban setting, marked by Precious's menacing and brutal descriptions of the New York City housing projects, is more suitable for the linguistic discrepancy and structural incoherence that Liddell perceives than the picturesque Caribbean beaches described in McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.

Precious's staccato vernacular is also starkly different from the elaborate prose typified in romance. In her journal, Precious describes her New York City neighborhood:

> turn from vaykent lot n is vaykent pepul with kraters like what u see wen you look at spots on the moon. wen you see moon on space movies is holes on it, kraters. Thas on dope addicts arms—kraters. Dese not crack addicts like on one-two-six. Dese people on 1-2-4 is HAIRRUN shuters. There eyez is like far away space ships. They don see you, only smell pepul go buy for money. They money dogs. If they sniff money they will try to take it. I guess. Thas whut I always here (105).

Her "urban unlettered vernacular" does not abide by the gentility and optimism often folded into the language of romance novels (Liddell 137). Instead, Precious's aspiration toward literacy replaces the common desire for male companionship in romance novels. After being under Ms. Rain's tutelage, Precious scores a 7.8 on her TABE reading test. In detailing how far she has come, Precious says, "Before on test I score 2.0 then 2.8. The 2.0 days was really low days because I could not read at all (test just give you 2.0 even if you don't fill in nothing)” (139).

Precious's skill at reading and writing improves and allows her an opportunity to escape her abusive relationship with her mother and envision opportunities beyond welfare, demonstrating that her access to literacy will provide an emotionally satisfying ending, rather than heterosexual courtship or marriage.
Before Precious is able to reach her satisfying ending, she and Ms. Rain contend with the anticipated criticism directed at *PUSH* by entering the literary debates surrounding *The Color Purple*. After Precious confesses her love for *The Color Purple* because it gives her "so much strength" (82-83), Ms. Rain tells Precious that a "group of black men wanted to stop movie from the book. Say unfair picture of nigger men" (83). Precious does not let gendered critiques of *The Color Purple* hinder her appreciation, but unfortunately her fondness for Walker's novel does not shield *PUSH* from the kind of critical indictment that novels like *The Color Purple* and *The Bluest Eye* received. When these novels were published, black male critics attacked them for their negative portrayals of black men. For example, novelist David Bradley asserted that "Alice Walker has a high level of enmity toward Black men" (Bradley 36) and in "The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" Robert Staples argued that, unlike "happily married women" who do not need to unleash "pent up frustration," black female writers of the 1970's owe their mounting success to their ability to satisfy black women's "collective appetite for black male blood" (27). It is no coincidence that Staples refers to marriage as a pacifying influence on black women, who are to be rewarded for refusing to participate in a carnal feast on black men in literature. In pinpointing black women's "pent up frustration," Staples further implies that a stifled (hetero)sexuality causes, for example, Alice Walker to depict Mister's abuse of Celie. Deborah McDowell contends that black male critics repeatedly condemned black female writers if they did not "see themselves reflected favorably" and if their texts did not uphold the "ideals of masculinity and femininity" buttressed by the nuclear family (McDowell 126). Toni Cade Bambara concurs, asserting that, "The 'experts' are still men, Black or white. And the images of the women are still derived from their needs, their fantasies, their second-hand knowledge, their agreement with the other 'experts' . . ." (Bambara 9).
As the publicity for *Precious* (2009), the film adaptation of *PUSH*, amplified, prominent critics, such as Ishmael Reed, reveal their nationalist nostalgia by echoing earlier criticism of Walker and her peers for supposedly portraying black men in an "unflinchingly candid and often negative manner" (McDowell 118). Just as journalist Vernon Jarrett had compared Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf* (1975) to D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), Ishmael Reed insisted that *Precious* "makes D.W. Griffith look like a progressive" (Reed). Although Reed argues that *Precious* "includes the worst portrayal of Black women," he affirms that Precious' father, Carl, "is the real victim of the movie" (Reed). Unrelenting in his ad hominen attacks, Reed claims that black female professors who commend Precious are those "using university curriculum to get even with their fathers and teach courses in Black women’s literature" (Reed). According to Reed, black women's literary production or instruction is not tied to intellectual goals, but is rooted in revenge. Reed spends minimal time criticizing the film's portrayal of black women or the racism and sexism Precious endures, but goes on at length criticizing the film's negative representation of black men. Reed's disapproval of *Precious* reaffirms his critical forefathers who were reluctant to identify literary merit in the fiction and poetry written by black women writers.

Although Reed and Jarrett would not identify themselves as black nationalists, their condemnation of *PUSH* is consistent with the Black Aesthetic/Arts Movement, the literary arm of the Black Power Movement (BPP), and with the widespread nostalgia for BPP in the 1980's and 1990's. Disconnected from Black Power nostalgia, it would certainly seem bizarre that Reed would allow his disapproval of Carl's characterization to serve as a literary critique. While literary criticism compellingly argues that clichéd depiction of blacks incurs problems regarding racist stereotypes, it is troubling that Reed implies that a more "positive" representation of black
men would somehow make *PUSH* a "good" piece of literature. His review seems to rest solely on Sapphire's negative representation of black men and parallels Carolyn Gerald's 1969 essay, "The Black Writer and His Role", where she maintains that the black writer's task is to counter "white as the symbol of goodness and purity; black as the symbol of evil and impurity" (Gerald 132). Reed and Jarrett echo black nationalist emphasis on positive images of black identity, though they pay overwhelming attention to representations of black male characters. Reed's and Jarrett's litmus test for what counts as a "positive" representation indicates a nostalgia for Black Aesthetic codes for literature and their targeted interest in positive black male characterizations gestures toward a nationalist campaign for black men to reclaim their masculinity.

Through its descriptions of the minutiae of Precious's life, Sapphire's novel directly engages the growing nostalgia for black nationalism in the 1980's and 1990's. Set in 1987, Precious narrates her story more than two decades after the assassination of Malcolm X. Nevertheless, she wears an 'X' sweatshirt to school, reveals that Arnold Adoff's children's book, *Malcolm X*, is on her bookshelf, and when practicing phonemic awareness in her school journal, she equates 'X' with her "main man Malcolm" (66). Angela Davis argues that it became "no longer necessary to include 'Malcolm' in *Malcolm X*, for the sign is the X and that X is invested with an abstract affirmation of Black identity, Black dignity, Black resistance, Black rage" ("Meditations" 43). Some of the most obvious markers of this nostalgia during the 1980s and 1990s are certainly Spike Lee's 1992 film, *Malcolm X*, Anthony Davis's opera based on Malcolm's life, and the idolization of Malcolm in the "lyrics and liner notes—the "shout outs"—of rap nationalists like Public Enemy, KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions, X-Clan, Brand Nubian, Ice Cube, and Paris, . . ."(Cheney 81). But adulation of Malcolm went beyond film and music and functioned in a myriad of ways, including the deployment of his name in the most
conservative political spaces. Clarence Thomas's identification of Malcolm X as one of his role models and heroes serves as a sign to many of how Malcolm's image has been sanitized and overused. As Angela Davis remarks, Malcolm's slogan, "By Any Means Necessary," was used to "exalt abstract masculinist notions of political activism, with little to no reference to such indispensable aspects of revolutionary politics as strategies and tactics of organizing" (Davis, "Meditations" 42).

Precious amplifies the importance of Malcolm X and nationalism by exhibiting her reverence for Louis Farrakhan, saying, "First think I see when I wake up is picture of Farrakhan's face on my wall. I love him" (34). When she explains her inspiration for naming her second son, Abdul Jamal Louis Jones, she says "Louis [is] for Farrakhan" (67). The conflation of Malcolm, Farrakhan, and his religious organization, Nation of Islam, demonstrate the growing nostalgia for nationalism, as "the only existing mass black organization that can claim the so-called authority of having been there during the formative period of contemporary black nationalism, and therefore, of carrying forth Malcolm X's legacy, in the Nation of Islam" (Davis, "Black Nationalism" 293). Together, the representation of Farrakhan and Malcolm in PUSH reveals how Malcolm's evolving perspectives were reduced to his nationalist ideology in public discourse. The engraved "X" on everything from sweatshirts to coffee mugs in the 1980's and 1990's prevents a cultural understanding of Malcolm X that moves from Malcolm Little to Malcolm X to El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and instead binds his memory to his nationalist ideology. Malcolm's support of the Nation of Islam for the majority of his life helps justify the nostalgic pairing of Malcolm and Farrakhan, but also underscores their shared ideological insistence on black masculinity. In his diagnosis of the black family, Farrakhan contends:
The traditional nuclear family is an endangered species . . . Women are working more than men, so the women are providing for their children and even for the men, bringing home the money. Black men sitting home, lookin’ at soap operas, [and] she's talking with the man's voice. God's order has been turned around. Whenever the natural order of God is violated, there are serious consequences (Alexander 278).

Farrakhan's naturalization of the patriarchal family was used as an antidote to black poverty and oppression and his brand of rhetoric helped justify reductions in government programs for the poor.¹¹

Precious's idolization of Malcolm and Farrakhan is not just simplistic mimicry of her cultural environment, but draws attention to her race and gender politics, as she uses Farrakhan to echo black nationalist assertions that racism victimizes black men more than black women. In recounting a Farrakhan speech, Precious says:

> during slavery times the white man just walk out to the slavery Harlem part where the niggers live separate from the mansions where the white people live and he take any black woman he want and if he feel like it he jus' gone and do the do on top of her even if her man there. This spozed to hurt the black man even more than it hurt the woman getting rape—for the black man to have to see this raping (68).

Her synopsis of Farrakhan's speech urges an appalling reassignment of victimization, as black male oppression is created out of, and supersedes, black women's sexual abuse and trauma. Precious' all-encompassing veneration of Farrakhan, including naming her son after him, signals her loyalty to nationalism and its call for women to submit to and be protected by patriarchy. As I have mentioned before, Precious' name clearly denotes a fragility requiring protection. She announces that, "Everybody call me Precious. I got three names---Claireece Precious Jones. Only mutherfuckers I hate call me Claireece" (6). Precious's preference for being called Precious, rather than her first name, Claireece, signifies her deference, by highlighting her desire to be protected and treasured. In its promotion of black patriarchy, black nationalism encourages black female protection, so Precious' emphasis on identifying as Precious versus Claireece
indicates her willingness to work within a black nationalist paradigm which insists on black female protection. Black feminist, Joyce Green, asserts that, "black woman's strength has been blown out of proportion, so that now even the slightest degree of aggressiveness or non-dependency is regarded as threatening" and by demanding the use of her middle name, Precious attempts to counter the stereotypes about black female strength and its utility in constructing black women as intimidating and emasculating (173). Feminist debates expose how black female deference to patriarchy allows black men to serve "as the leaders of the family and the community in exchange for the benefits of femininity: protection and security" (Griffin 120). Admitting her desire for an unattainable femininity and its protection, Precious wishes she was "A pink virgin. A girl like Janet Jackson, a sexy girl don’t no one get to fuck. A girl for value" (112).

While some feminists might champion rejecting both protection and capitulation to feminine norms, literary theorist Farah Jasmine Griffin complicates our understanding of the choices available to black women. She acknowledges that, "patriarchal societies such as ours foster misogyny from which all women need protection," but goes on further to note that, "a racist patriarchal society is particularly dangerous for black women" (Griffin 121). In revealing this double oppression, Griffin identifies why the desire for protection is a fraught one for black women. Carl's "protection" of our aptly named protagonist, Precious, is replaced with monstrous abuse, demonstrating how the overemphasis on patriarchy cultivates a fertile ground for violence and transforms protection into a grotesque form of power. Carl and Precious also remind us of the way abuse is muted under patriarchy because of its supposed goals of protecting women. Despite the horrors of her abuse, Precious escapes into her daydreams about marrying her math teacher, Mr. Wicher, creating an alternative patriarchal family. After Precious orders a student to
stop causing a disruption in her Math class, she says that her teacher, Mr. Wicher, is "grateful" (6) that she is keeping "law and order", and in the next sentence she admits to pretending Mr. Wicher is her "husband" and they "live together in Weschesser, wherever that is" (6). Although Mr. Wicher represents for Precious an escape from her trauma, he also represents the racist and patriarchal society that Precious supposedly needs protection from. The double bind of oppression within the family and by society emphasizes how patriarchy becomes an asphyxiating force.

Precious's endorsement of nationalism begins to waver in the scene in which she is preparing to proudly detail Farrakhan's teachings about homosexuality in her Each One/Teach class. She is immediately confronted by her literacy teacher Ms. Rain who tells Precious if she does not like homosexuals, she also does not like Ms. Rain (81). Ms. Rain's challenge to Precious marks a significant rupture for her, as her alliance with Farrakhan and his conservative politics clashes with Ms. Rain's sexuality and jeopardizes her relationship with Ms. Rain. Precious goes on to convey Ms. Rain's assertion that "homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem" (81). As she reiterates Ms. Rain's revelation, Precious attempts to make sense of her conflicting allegiances to Farrakhan and Ms. Rain. Precious admits, "It's true. Ms Rain the one who put the chalk in my hand, make me queen of the ABCs" (81). This paradigm shifting scene challenges Precious's loyalty to the nationalist ideology represented by Farrakhan's homophobic speech and his conservative endorsement of heterosexuality because Precious acknowledges Ms. Rain's tremendous role in teaching her to read and write and escape her mother's abuse. Although Ms. Rain does not explicitly identify herself as a feminist, this moment of tension for Precious conjures up the friction between black nationalism and black feminism, historically perceived as
"oil and water" (White 123). In the course of her developing love for and acceptance of Ms. Rain, Precious inevitably distances herself from nationalist constructions of race and sexual identity.

The enduring cultural importance of black nationalist discourse has been reinforced by a long history of political anxiety surrounding courtship, marriage, and patriarchal family. In a brief sketch of this history, I start with Darlene Clark Hine who reveals the stakes of motherhood during slavery, noting that "a woman who elected not to have children . . . negated through individual or group action her role in the maintenance of the slave pool" (Hine 34-35).

Exemplified by Margaret Garner, a black female slave, who committed infanticide rather than have her child enslaved, black women resisted economic and sexual exploitation by refusing to have children that would be eventually sold into slavery. Demonstrating the post-emancipation pressure around motherhood, historian Kevin Gaines contends that black women could not "exist for themselves, but only insofar as they serve the utilitarian project of race building" (231).

Race-building was particularly important for the black middle-class invested in expanding its middle-class or "Talented Tenth" as well as countering dominant society's perception of a homogenous black America. In furthering the value placed on the role of the family, W.E.B. Du Bois even indictes slaves for failed black patriarchy by blaming what he called the "lax moral habits of the slave regime" for the high number of black matriarchal families in the late nineteenth century (Du Bois 27). Du Bois went on to claim that, "the Negro American is the furthest behind modern civilization is in his sexual mores" (Du Bois 27). Although Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* more than fifty years after Du Bois' claims, Moynihan's assertions about the black matriarchal family as a destructive pathology complement Du Bois's description of the black family and reinforced the
supposed need for black patriarchal families. *The Moynihan Report* (1965) is consistent with Farrakhan's assertions about the failures of the black family, as both argue that cultural deficiencies, represented by the black matriarchal family, are a hindrance to black socioeconomic mobility. Together, black nationalist discourse and *The Moynihan Report* shaped and influenced government policies in the 1980's and 1990's that focused on preserving the patriarchal family.

Political Scientist Nikol Alexander Floyd contends that "through the legitimation and circulation of political narratives, black nationalism can become ideologically complicit in state projects and, therefore, wield the power of the state" (Alexander-Floyd 77). For example, Louis Farrakhan's popular belief that black men need to reclaim their rightful position as head of the household aligns with George W. Bush's Fatherhood Initiatives, which allocate funding "for projects designed to promote marriage, promote successful parenting and the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, and help fathers improve their economic status by providing job-related services to them" (Alexander-Floyd 5).

Moynihan's contention also harmonized well with the 1980's and 90's racialized debates on welfare and influenced new legislation affecting Black family formation, including reform of what he called the "welfare mess" in the United States (Patterson 113). During his 1976 presidential campaign, President Ronald Reagan famously spoke of a Cadillac-driving "Chicago welfare queen," a woman who "has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income is over $150,000” (Neubeck and Cazenave 127). Reporters were never able to find Reagan's mythologized "welfare queen", but his description was appropriately racialized so voters could easily connect a Cadillac-driving
welfare swindler with black women whose behavior is condoned within their communities. 

Reagan's racial codification of welfare proved convincing even after his two presidential terms, as a 1990 University of Chicago survey found that 78 percent of white Americans believed that blacks prefer living on welfare (Smith). As Reagan's campaign manager, Lee Atwater, explains, "You start out in 1954 by saying, 'Nigger, nigger, nigger.' By 1968 you can't say 'nigger'—that hurts you. Backfires. So you say stuff like 'forced busing,' 'states' rights,' and all these things that you're talking about are totally economic things and a by-product of them is [that] blacks get hurt worse than whites" (Herbert). Welfare recipients, particularly the welfare mother or "queen," became a metonymy for single black mothers on government assistance allegedly abusing tax payer money without Reagan having to explicitly identify welfare queens as black. Thus, a culture of poverty, highlighted by the black matriarch and welfare reform, became a central political issue for Reagan, George Bush, and Bill Clinton, as it served to encourage the "increasingly anxious middle class to blame social programs, the deficit, and the poor, instead of the profit-driven policies of business and the state, for a falling standard of living" (Abramovitz and Withorn 167).

Moynihan's claim about black family pathology and the influence of his ideas on subsequent welfare reform resonates with PUSH through Precious's explicit references to family formation, welfare, motherhood, and her role as a daughter. Precious and her mother, Mary Johnston, are illustrative of the deviant matriarchal family accused of reproducing black inequality in 1980's and 1990's. In a scene where Precious refuses dinner after Mary hits her, Mary responds by saying, "Ain' nothin wrong with your shoulder, I barely touched you! Go get a plate and stop acting stupid 'fore I do hurt your shoulder" (20). Mary is domineering, forcing Precious to eat when she is satiated, is physically, verbally, and sexually abusive to Precious, and
demands her to forego school for welfare benefits. After Mary discovers that Precious is attending school, Mary instructs Precious to "Forget school! You better git your ass on down to welfare!" (56). Even when Precious explains that she can receive a stipend for school, Mary's response is unchanging: "Fool fuck a stipend! What's that. I said take your ass down to welfare NOW!" (56). Mary is representative of nationalist constructions of black mothers as aggressive and destructive, but Mary's domination specifically targeting Precious is not reduced to emasculating black men. Through this shift in focus, popular discourse on black masculinity is replaced by emphasis on black womanhood and the larger cultural and institutional forces that inform it, such as school and welfare. As it encourages an understanding of black womanhood that goes beyond culture and behavior, *PUSH* also diminishes the importance of black masculinity mobilized by Black Power nostalgia. Moreover, Mary's relentless abuse of Precious does not result in the pathology that Moynihan recognizes in working-class matriarchal families. While Precious does not overcome all of her problems, she does not imitate her mother by abusing her children and she resists her mother's order that she sacrifice school for welfare. She admits, ". . . I don't know if I want check. I wonder what reading books be like" (51). Precious's refusal to repeat her mother's vicious behavior challenges Moynihan's contention about the vicious and self-perpetuating cycle of black cultural pathology, gesturing instead toward institutional explanations for poverty and success.

In some respects, Sapphire's depiction of Mary Johnston verifies Reagan's appraisal of "welfare queens," as Precious reveals that her mother erroneously claims that she cares for Precious's child in order to increase her welfare benefits, explaining, "After I come home from hospital baby go live over on 150th and St Nicholas Avenue with my grandmother, even though Mama tell welfare the baby live with us and she care of it while I'm in school" (19). Laziness
often surfaced as justification for reducing the welfare rolls in the 1980's and 90's and Mary's welfare deception is multiplied by her indolence, as she never looks for a job or provides a reason, acceptable or otherwise, for sitting in her apartment all day. Nonetheless, Sapphire complicates the depiction of Mary and Precious's as welfare recipients. Certainly, Precious and Mary do not exemplify the idea that one can easily earn $150,000 on welfare, but their dinner of "collard greens and ham hocks, corn bread, fried apple pies, and macaroni 'n cheese" is not completely representative of abject poverty (19). Their elaborate supper is made possible by Precious having to go without breakfast and steal chicken from a local restaurant on her way to school, validating the 1990 census data indicating that fifty-one percent of black female-headed households were below the poverty line (Quadagno 180). *PUSH* portrays Mary as the stereotypical lazy welfare swindling mother, but it does not depict government welfare benefits as a route toward wealth, as Reagan alleged in his campaign rhetoric, instead suggesting that significant economic barriers for the poor remain unchanged.20

In addition to her controversial portrayal of the welfare mother, Sapphire's depiction of Carl's sexual abuse further risks reinforcing popular discourses on black family pathology. Carl repeatedly rapes Precious and she has two children as a result of his sexual abuse. The depiction of Carl's sexual abuse calls for a discussion about Toni Morrison's influence on Sapphire because so much of Morrison's *oeuvre* is concerned with male sexual violence. Feminist theorists have posed incisive questions about audience voyeurism and participation in rape narratives, which further dehumanize and objectify rape victims. In revealing her discontent with the portrayal of rape in literature, Morrison contends:
I've read rape scenes all my life—but they always seemed to have no shame. [. . . ] There was this male pride attached to it, in the language. [My writing] took it out of the realm of the fake, sensational romanticism in which rape is always played. We all say, 'Oh my God, rape!', but when you look at the language, it’s the language of pride. There is something about it, from the rape of Lucretia all the on—so I just wanted to sabotage all of that. (BBC Radio 4, 2003).

The "shame" and "pride" that Morrison describes parallel the concern regarding the ethics of writing and reading rape narratives. Morrison's desire to challenge typical representations of rape coalesces with "radical readings" which "confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence in ways that are themselves shocking and uncomfortable and break the mould of the victim/perpetrator binary that dominates patriarchal discourse and much of the subsequent feminist debates" (Gunne and Thompson 3). The call for new depictions of rape and radical analysis of rape narratives serves as a rejoinder to Reed's and Jarrett's criticism of black male representation in *PUSH*, a critique, as I noted earlier, that is rooted in the Black Power nostalgia of the 1980's and 90's. Carl is not offered the pride that Morrison connects to typical rape scenes. Not only does Mary Johnston give Precious a bottle and Carl her breast, instead of offering it to Precious, but she is able to maintain her milk supply because of Carl's suckling (135). Mary goes on further to explain that she, Carl, and 3-year-old Precious occupy the same bed and she witnesses his sexual abuse of Precious. Mary's description of Carl drinking her breast milk precedes Carl's first attempt to sexually abuse Precious, demonstrating the "uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence" (3). Perhaps coincidently, Carl's breastfeeding scene evokes Farrakhan's assertion about black male dependence on black women where he argues that women cannot respect a man "living on her breast" (Alexander-Floyd 124). Within the terms of this analogy, Carl's suckling is emasculating and could possibly be seen as weakening his culpability in Precious's rape; by this logic, Mary's act of offering her breast
constructs her as an emasculating matriarch. Nevertheless, the maternal relationship between Carl and Mary suggests an Oedipal complex and highlights the shame tied to his violence as his infantilization denies him a language of masculine pride of rape linked to nationalist discourse.  

The victim/perpetrator binary is further disrupted by Precious' sexual and emotional desires, which signal her agency and illustrate a complexity rarely bestowed on depictions of rape victims. *PUSH* avoids the depiction of rape as the novel's defining framework as Precious negates the nationalist construction of black women as always needing protection. Precious declares that "All I want before is Daddy get the fuck off me! But now I think about that, you know, that being fucking a cute boy" (109). Preventing a reading which only understands her sexual desires through her rape, Precious purposefully creates distance between the two acts by framing her abuse as past tense, using "before," and marking her desires as her present tense through the use of the word "now." Asserting sexual desire allows Precious to move beyond the characterization of a rape victim requiring the protection of patriarchy, as authorized by nationalism, and instead serves as another way she challenges Black Power nostalgia for conventional gender roles. She admits that she does not share all her journal entries with her teacher, Ms. Rain, because she does not want her to know if she writes "about SEX" and she goes on further to write that if she has sex "wif a kute coot boy thas my own age [she] wil____" (102). The vacancy she leaves at the end of her sentence is reminiscent of Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple*, who identifies her husband as Mr______. In *PUSH*, Precious's blank line signifies a private space for future sexual encounters that she has claimed for herself from Ms. Rain as well as her readers. A few pages later she says she does not care if "boyz love" her, but she does care about "STAYING HEALTHY" and "sex (____)" (109). Again, after underscoring sex, she
leaves her thoughts unspecified within closed parentheses, establishing a sanctuary for her future sexual relationships, which works in stark contrast to her having bared so much to Ms. Rain, her class, Ms. Weiss, and her readers. After she learns that she may have HIV, Precious asks, "Where my Black love? Where my man love? Woman love? Any kinda love? (87). Unlike a typical romance, Precious does not restrict her desires to heterosexual love, indicating that she has moved beyond the conservative sexual politics of Farrakhan. She says, "At least when I look at the girls I see them and when they look they see ME, not what I looks like. But it seems like boyz just see what you looks like" (95). Moreover, Precious's desire for a loving, intimate relationship after rape, HIV, and emotional abuse, among other ordeals, suggests that her victimization has not rendered her craving for love and sex invisible or unnamable. She defies the characterization of black women as the "beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb" (Spillers 153). Her yearnings for intimacy demonstrate her agency, resistance to patriarchal rule, and rejection of a subjectivity defined by narrow victim/perpetrator categorization.

As Carl rapes Precious, he declares "I'm gonna marry you" (24) and in his premature utterance, he weds the institution of rape to the institution of marriage through name and act. Carl's pledge to marry Precious is a tool used to sanction his incestuous rape, but also identifies marriage as a site legitimizing patriarchal power. Inasmuch as family is a synecdoche for the nation, Carl's violence accompanied by his promise of marriage suggests a contaminated patriarchal family and a defiled nation. Carl's declaration, in context of sexual violence, not only mocks Farrakhan's nationalist claim that the patriarchal family is the epitome of "natural order,"
but his actions also weaken legislative appeals for "law and order". Consider the Welfare Reform Act or Personality Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) passed into law in 1996, which contends that:

(1) Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. (2) Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society which promotes the interest of children. (8) The negative consequences of an out-of-wedlock birth on the mother, the child, the family, and society are well documented. [...] (10). Therefore, in light of this demonstration of the crisis in our Nation, it is the sense of the Congress that prevention of out-of-wedlock pregnancy and reduction of out-of-wedlock birth are very important Government interests (U.S. 8).

The sole "marriage proposal" Precious receives in the novel blatantly contradicts this kind of official endorsement of patriarchal marriage. The idea that a patriarchal family consisting of Carl, Mary, and Precious can serve national interests, by solving the mounting dilemmas in the novel, is rendered absurd.

The coupling of marriage and rape in the aforementioned scene also calls attention to the ways in which marriage is overburdened as a representation of sociopolitical agency in the escalating discourse surrounding out-of-wedlock births and black teenage pregnancy during the 1980's and 90's. For example, in 1990, writer Georgie Ann Geyer insists that racial problems in the Post-Civil Rights era are no "longer . . . a story of 'rights'; it is a story of 61.2 percent of Black births today being 'out of wedlock" (Coontz 235). PUSH is set in 1987, one year after Bill Moyers, CBS docudrama, The Vanishing Black Family, where he reaffirmed the major arguments in The Moynihan Report, as he highlighted black teenage pregnancy and black indifference to marriage, declaring that "Black teenagers have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrial world, and in the inner city, practically no teenage mother gets married" (Patterson 151). Such crisis-ridden discourses bolstered the assumption that the problems of teenage pregnancy, including poverty, could be remedied by marriage rather than by addressing the
mounting issues of housing, unemployment, and welfare reform. During the same year the National Council of Negro Women held its first National Black Family Reunion Celebration on the Washington National Mall in Washington D.C. Held in "response to the negative publicity regarding the vanishing Black family," the event was characterized as a "positive, culturally-based event that would celebrate the enduring strengths and traditional values of the African-American family" (NCNW Black Family). Although NCNW organized an event they intended as a counter-hegemonic tool, they invoked the "traditional values" characteristic of nationalism as their standard for representing "the Black family," falling back on the same flawed criteria used to indict blacks by dominant society.

Positive representations of black families are further disrupted in Sapphire's novel when, in an attempt to absolve herself of the guilt of participating in her daughter's abuse, Mary exclaims to Precious' social worker, Ms. Weiss, "I love Carl, I love him. He her daddy, but he was my man!" (136). Mary's hierarchical assignment of Carl's role as "her man" above his position as father underscores his responsibility as a lover first and father second. Switching this hierarchy risks emasculating Carl by assigning him the maternal duties attached to parenting and threatens the conventional gender roles buttressed by nationalism which identify mothers as biological nurturers and fathers as natural breadwinners. Masculinity intact, Carl's exalted role as Mary's lover and his diminished role as father fosters Carl's abuse of Precious. Precious even suspects that her rape preserves the sexual relationship between Mary and Carl, saying, "probably thas' what he require to fuck her, some of me" (24). Eventually, Carl's growing disinterest in Mary and simultaneous rape of Precious justifies Mary's belief that Precious destroys her relationship with Carl. In her analysis of father-daughter incest in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Hortense Spillers notes how Matty, the young incest victim, is "made to effect a
sexually competitive posture between husband and wife" (Spillers 237). In a parallel move, Mary shouts, "Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut . . . Fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch. He done quit me. He done left me 'cause of you . . . "(19). Carl's role as father is completely eclipsed by his hypersexual masculinity, which produces a characterization of sex as a by any means necessary tool used to keep and appease men, including tolerating incest.

In her 1995 article in *Harper's*, Katie Roiphe categorizes Sapphire's *PUSH* as "incest fiction" and attributes its popularity to its "politically trendy" topic. Roiphe's claim echoes that of numerous other scholars who note how father-daughter incest became the "zenith of child sexual panic in the 1980's and 1990's" (Harkins xi). Fictional accounts and talk show confessionals of father-daughter incest thrust child sexual abuse into the national spotlight. Roseanne Barr and Oprah Winfrey both identified themselves as incest survivors and critically acclaimed fiction such as Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991), and E. Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News* (1993) included themes of incest. The escalating attention to incest stories led some to question the validity of abuse claims, including resurrected memories of incest, but incest stories continued to find an growing national platform including on *The Sally Jesse Raphael Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, among others. *PUSH* was certainly not the first novel by a black woman writer to take on the theme of incest within the black family. Toni Morrison depicts father-daughter incest in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Celie, the protagonist in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, reveals that she was raped by her stepfather. Perhaps the strongest connection Winfrey has to these two texts is her starring role in Stephen Spielberg's...
1985 film adaptation of *The Color Purple* and her 2000 Oprah Book Club selection of *The Bluest Eye*. Sapphire's *PUSH*, whether intentional or not, capitalizes on the late 20th century attention to incest and child sexual abuse.

One important function of the rising popularity of the incest narrative is that it disrupts the nostalgia for nationalism. An idealized black patriarchy that is impotent in the 1980's and 90's, seemingly has nowhere to go but within the family, where it menaces rather than protects its most vulnerable members. Unchecked and excessive patriarchal dominance becomes a consequence of the increasing emphasis on nationalism and breeds the kind of power and sexual violence. Precious's father, Carl, carries out against Precious and Mary. Included in the Nation of Islam's *Student Enrollment* catechism is their origin myth about racial identity where they claim, "The Original Man is the Asiatic Blackman, The Maker, The Owner, the cream of the planet earth, God of the Universe" (Alexander 60). Precious restates Farrakhan's deification of black masculinity, insisting that Carl rapes her because he "forgot he is the Original Man! So he fuck me, fuck me, beat me, have a chile by me" (34). The "tangle of pathology" that *The Moynihan Report* (1965) uses to derisively characterize black matriarchal families is shown here to be equivalent to a "tangle of patriarchy" buttressed by nationalism. Sapphire's attraction to Farrakhan further suggests a link between his insistence on patriarchy and the public discourse surrounding father-daughter incest. Scholars in the 1980's and 1990's proposed various theories of culpability for father-daughter incest, which included "collusion by the mother" (Bolen 30). The mother's abdication of her domestic and sexual "duties" was argued to be a reason for father-daughter incest (Bolen 30). Farrakhan's directives about gender roles are consistent with this reasoning. He argues, "You don't let that man be involved with the changin[g] of that girl. What the hell—that's what you for. Change that damn diaper! Clean that dirty behind. And, tell the
man go 'bout his business . . . [he] don't need to be wiping no vagina!" (Alexander-Floyd 124-125). Not only do such claims and insinuations attack black women for their inability to carry out their "natural" gender roles, but they also verify the larger stereotype of the emasculating strong black woman and refocuses attention away from the perpetrators. Black female breadwinners are characterized as taking on a masculine posture by being too independent and rejecting gender specific duties in the home and thus, the emphasis on father-daughter incest becomes a way to condemn black motherhood and to continue to overstate the "Black male crisis," as it ignores the inequalities affecting girls and women.

Precious's ultimate rejection of the nationalist emphasis on patriarchal family and romance conventions leaves other narrative conflicts open for analysis. Institutional and political culpability, as demonstrated by the novel's explicit references to welfare, education, and employment, are underscored as central thematic concerns. Precious reveals her social worker's intentions for her to participate in a workfare program as a home attendant (119) and through her classmate's calculation, she finds that as a home attendant she would be paid roughly $1.12 an hour, work six days a week, would have to discontinue school, and see her son, Abdul, only on Sundays (121). In her analysis of _PUSH_, literary scholar Gillian Harkins insists that the social worker's plans for Precious reveal "how the state uses incest and other family violence to feed its need for inexpensive labor" (Harkins 122, 222). Precious's victimization is duplicated through the state's indifference to her abuse and its exploitation of her poverty and abuse in order to sustain low-wage labor.
In his critique of public discourses pathologizing the black 'underclass' family, political scientist Adolph Reed asserts that discursive attention is erroneously paid to methods for increasing the amount of "marriageable" men rather than to "pay equity, universal day care and other initiatives to buttress women's capacities for living independently in the world" (Reed 168). The novel's disregard for depicting courtship or attempting to find Precious a male companion highlights how institutional obstacles, widely ignored in popular discourse, prevent her from living independently. Moreover, this thematic concern distinguishes *PUSH* from the scores of popular romance novels by black female writers published in the 1980's and 1990's. Interest in marriageable men and the patriarchal family are typically effective diversions to economic exploitation, as a myriad of books, television programs, and magazines publicizing the black marriage crisis have monopolized conversations about black female identity in the US. I leave the verity of the alleged "black marriage crisis" for social scientists to dispute, but rather take issue with the way public discourse about nationalist conceptualizations of the black family has overwhelmed discussions about black women's oppression in the US. While marriage is used to impugn poor and middle-class black women, public discourse about helping black women get married by either marrying outside their race or performing gender norms is primarily focused on black middle-class professional women. My argument is not to focus more attention on getting more poor and working-class women to the altar, but I do want to point out how this elitist neglect mirrors racial uplift ideology asserting the importance of reproducing the black middle-class. Moreover, the discursive abandonment of black working-class and poor women highlights Precious's invisibility, justifying Sapphire's depiction of Precious as overweight, dark, "ugly" with a catalog of problems. Indeed, Sapphire's hyperbolic characterization is necessary to render Precious visible. Precious combats her institutional invisibility, but the popularity of *PUSH* as
well as its critical reception demonstrates another way Precious is made visible and consequently a target for Reed, Jarrett, and other critics. Precious's visibility is facilitated by _PUSH'_s engagement with Black Power nostalgia, but Sapphire's ultimate betrayal of its codes illuminates the masculine assumptions undergirding it. Precious's eventual visibility at Each One/Teach One, among a community of women, counters nationalist arguments to characterize an oppressive past of white racism and an indistinguishable "revolutionary" future of black female subservience and black male dominance.
NOTES


2 Although Terry McMillan is often credited with pioneering the genre of black popular romance, Frank Yerby established the marketability of black historical romance in 1946 with his bestselling novel, *The Foxes of Harrow*.


5 For example, African American college student enrollment more than doubled between 1970 and 1977 and 15.3 percent of the African Americans employed worked in white-collar jobs in 1988, while 25.9 percent of them worked in white-collar positions in 2000 (Bowser 103).

6 In 1998, there were 51.1 million romance readers and 6.72 million or 11 percent of the readers were African American (Dawson and Fleet 294). African American households increased their expenditures for books by 26 percent between 1988 and 1991, and between 1968 and 1994 the number of African American publishers increased from seven to seventy-five (Richards 18).

7 For example, in 90 percent of divorce cases, mothers are awarded sole or primary custody of the children because the primary caregiver during marriage should ideally continue that role after divorce, maintaining some consistency for the children. <http://www.expertlaw.com/library/child_custody/fathers_rights.html> It is important to note that this unequal gendered responsibility is encouraged in society at the same time that the absence of black fathers is used to explain why black children drop out of school, join gangs, and commit crimes disproportionately more than white children. Many sociologists believe this reasoning helps take the blame off institutional practices of discrimination.

8 See Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint’s *Come on, People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2007) xvi.

10 Additional examples include artist Tupac Shakur, who reiterates Biggie's caginess, rhyming, "ever since the movies, these hoes try to do me / If they can't screw me, they find a way to sue me" in his 1993 song, "Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z." The suspicion of black women intensifies in "Skandalouz", where Shakur raps, "Won't be no bullshit, no ass-kissin / This bitch'll have ya wakin up with all your cash missin".

11 The reference "duffle bags" is taken from the song, "Duffle Bag Boy" by Playaz Circle, featuring rap artist, Lil' Wayne, produced by M16 in 2007. The song uses the symbol of the 'duffle bag' to highlight unconventional and illegal routes to excessive black male wealth and economic mobility.

12 See Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" on their Fear of a Black Planet album produced by Def Jam in 1990. Also see, Boogie Down Production's album By Any Means Necessary produced by Jive Records in 1990.

13 See Billie Holiday's 1956 song "Sophisticated lady" released on All or Nothing At All by Verve Records in 1958.


16 It is difficult to miss the irony in having Kenya’s white love interest introduce her to "color" and accept her "natural" hair.

17 Leah borrows from Tillie, the Black maid in Guess Who's Coming to Dinner (1967) who exclaims, "You bring any trouble in here... and you just like to find out what Black Power really means!"
For example, in his 1979 essay, "Teaching Afro-American Literature: Survey or Tradition," Robert Step to insists that methods of teaching and thinking about African-American literature were "antiquated," because African-American literature was understood by many as simply "an agreeable entree to black history, sociology, and politics."


See Jill Quadagno's The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty for examples of the widespread cutbacks directed at the poor in the 1980's. For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development decreased financial support for low-income housing from 50 million in 1977 to less than 9 million in 1988 (Quadagno 178).

Carl's masculine pride can be tethered to black nationalist pride gained by black male rape of white women. This is exemplified by Eldridge Cleaver's insistence on raping black women as "practice" for raping white women in order to reclaim masculinity in Soul on Ice.
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