

*Sexing the Colorlines: Black Sexualities,
Popular Culture, and Cultural Production*



Black Love is Not a Fairy Tale: African American Women, Romance, and Rhetoric

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In 2009, the public witnessed an upsurge in media discussions about the marriage rates of African Americans. In particular, the media was focused on the lower marriage rates of professional black women. The trigger for these discussions seemed to be the spectacular rise of Barack and Michelle Obama to the White House (glamorous, highly publicized representatives of successful black love) and a study produced by Natalie Nitsche and Hannah Brueckner for the Yale Center for Research on Inequalities in the Life Course. Nitsche and Brueckner report “that black women are twice as likely as white women to never have married by age 45 and twice as likely to be divorced, widowed, or separated”(2009). National news organizations were subsequently filled with stories about the inability of professional black women to find marriage partners—NPR (Keyes 2009; Brown 2010), *The Washington Post* (Brown 2009), *Time* (Desmond-Harris 2010), *The New York Times* (Roberts 2010), and *Nightline* (2009) all featured stories that asked the question: “Why can’t a successful black woman find a man?”

Unpacking popular discourses is always useful because they reveal how ideologies are circulated and maintained. In the Unmarriageable Professional Black Woman discourse, the American Dream rhetoric is shorn up by the privileging of psychology over empiricism. Popular media stories on the topic reflect a tension between demographic and psychological accounts of the lower rate of professional black women’s marriage and reproduction. Demographic data clearly illustrates why a marriage disparity might exist (King and Allen 2009). Black men are incarcerated at a rate over six times higher than white men, and one in eight African American men in their

twenties are incarcerated (U.S. Bureau 2010; Sentencing Project). African Americans—particularly men—have higher rates of mortality from homicide and disease (COSMOS 2002). Americans tend to marry people with similar educational levels (Blackwell and Lichter 2004), and of the African Americans completing degrees in higher education African American women earn approximately 75 % of bachelor's degrees, 70% of Master's degrees, 60% of doctorates, and are approximately 62% of law school enrollments in the top 50 law schools (JBHE 2006). Their education notwithstanding, African American women may be less likely to marry interracially because of choice and because they are somewhat less likely to be identified as desirable partners by men of other races; they thus have had fewer options on the dating market. While empirical data easily accounts for much of the racial disparity in marriage rates, the psychological account has dominated much of the popular discourse. In this popular psychology model, black women's or black men's pathological behavior causes these marriage disparities.

The marketability of black pathology is hardly new, but the shape it takes is always instructive in terms of how material inequalities are elided in social discourse. While empiricism can never answer everything, its absence in many popular discussions of marriage inequality, or as social demographer Averil Clarke frames it, “love inequality,” illustrates how marketable the pathological account is (Alexander 2009). The discourse is, in many ways, the Mars-Venus populist framing of gender difference with a black pathology twist.

An important qualifier here is that “heterosexual” is never uttered, which is one of many erasures in a discourse that ignores the complexity of black life and the variations in desire and circumstance. Lesbians are erased empirically and affectively. Statistics are not adjusted for women who do not want husbands, either because they desire women or because they may sexually prefer men but remain single by choice. State and social forces mandating compulsory heterosexual, monogamous relationships clearly shape this broader discourse of the Unmarriageable Professional Black Woman, and a queer critique of this rhetoric would highlight the erasures of queer subjects (except in terms of a pronounced anxiety about men “on the downlow”) and attack the centrality of the heteronormative ideal in state and cultural discourses.

However, this paper is not about attacking the transparent heteronormativity of the discourse; I can leave

that work to other theorists. I am invested in exploring articulations of a heterosexual, and somewhat heteronormative, black female romantic imagination in the twenty-first century, and unpacking how the ideals and pathologies that subjects with various agendas attach to this imagination reveal the complex interplay of western romantic love narratives, black feminism, legacies of the Moynihan Report, and liberal individualism. Instead of proffering a queer reading of this discourse that questions and challenges the desire for heterosexual marriage as a productive end, I accept the desire of some heterosexual black women as one of many acceptable preferences in a spectrum of wished-for interpersonal relationships. One reason to care about the lower marriage rate of African American women is because of the economic, psychological, and possible health costs of the inequality. These costs do not have to be intrinsically linked to marriage; as Cathy Cohen explains, the state cares about the two-parent household because the nation wants this model of the family to “have the resources necessary to pay for child care, health care, and other basic resources such as food, shelter, and safe physical space,” thus lessening the obligation of the state (2010, 96). However, the psychological costs are not easily remedied by the state.

Through discussions of three prominent representations of the romantic desires of ambitious and successful black women in popular discourse, I explore how the heterosexual African American woman’s romantic imagination has been idealized and derided. The idealization reflects the ways in which feminism has done significant work in updating the romantic fantasy even as patriarchy’s presence is transparent, while the derision illustrates the disciplinary work of patriarchy and a broader national ideology that suggests that individuals are always responsible for not attaining their heart’s desires.

Investing in “unreal estate”: The African American Princess Narrative

The association between “unrealism” and “African American women’s romantic fantasy” may frequently emerge because African Americans are firmly tethered to the real. Even as many fantasies contain imaginative reworkings of black bodies for comedy, horror, and nationalist fantasies, fantasies in which black people are protagonists are always vulnerable to claims of racism—not only because of what may be present in the narrative, but

also because of what is erased. In other words, the history of black representation is so overrun with negative stereotypes it can be difficult to produce a narrative that does not gesture to some racist history—particularly when fit into the conventional generic narratives that dominate the mass media. Sidney Poitier and the Cosby family can serve racist representations because they represent ideals that do not reference the larger plight of African Americans. Representations of African American gang members and drug dealers, no matter how thoughtful, rarely completely escape accusations of racist characterization because that is the predominant stereotype in U.S. culture. These representations require nuance in genres that are defined by archetype and excess. I am not arguing that we cannot critique racist representations, only suggesting the pitfalls inherent in doing black versions of generic narratives. Escaping from black history is challenging for the knowledgeable reader, and if the reader is not knowledgeable, that can produce even more disturbing results.

The Disney adaptation of *The Princess and the Frog* is a perfect example of the challenges of fitting black people into generic fantasies. The first black princess was heralded as a momentous event, but the project started drawing criticism almost immediately. The film was initially called *The Frog Princess*, which was condemned because of the traditional association of African Americans with animals. The heroine's name was originally Maddy, which critics said was too close to "Mammy." Maddy was to win her prince from her employer; an early version of the script positioned her as a maid to a spoiled southern white girl in 1920s New Orleans. This plot was condemned because of the traditional association of black women as maids (Barnes 2009). In response, Disney changed her name to Tiana, whose goal was not a prince but to open a restaurant—a dream she shared with her deceased father. Quite improbably, she is a friend of the spoiled white girl, who wants to marry the prince, Naveen, from the mythical country of Maldonia. Tiana spends much of the movie as a frog going on adventures with the frog prince, but is restored at the end and gets her man and her restaurant.

This revision also garnered a number of negative criticisms. The relationships between whites and blacks in this film were free from racial discrimination and violence, a recasting of southern history that is a disturbing erasure for a young audience that will most likely not be educated about that history. But it is a fairy tale. At what age do we expose children to a story of devastating discrimination

and racial violence as entertainment? If you acknowledge black history, the maid might be a more representative representation that would have allowed the filmmakers to couch the racism experienced by “Maddy” in a framework familiar to fairy tale consumers—the spoiled rich girl. Tiana is also missing her father, matching a stereotype about black families, but an absent parent is what propels almost all Disney characters into action and adulthood. She spends much of the film as a frog, erasing her black body from the black princess tale, but on the other hand, are not princess tales often critiqued for their treatment of the body? Does the elimination allow us to focus on the heroine’s character as opposed to her looks?

The catch-22 of racial representation becomes apparent when we try to imagine a non-problematic version of this generic fantasy. Tiana pairs up with a non-black prince, who some read as white, but the light-brown-skinned Naveen clearly has an ambiguous racial heritage. Naveen, fulfilling a particular stereotype of rich playboys, but also of some men of color, is, as Tiana describes him, a “no account philanderin’ lazy bump on a log” while she is obsessively focused on her career goals. The film reworks a particular stereotype of the professional black career woman, as she is so busy working she does not focus on building a relationship and family. Tiana makes a sacrifice to support him and he, in turn, supports her in her dream of building a restaurant. Tiana then becomes the first Disney Princess who takes off her tiara at the end of the day and then needs to reconcile her business’s receipts.

Tiana joins the ranks of some of the other Disney Princesses of color who have labor to do outside of that produced by marriage to an affluent man. The first three princesses, Snow White, Cinderella and Aurora are unsurprisingly focused on mates, but the “modern” fairy tales were updated by Disney to reflect (post)feminist sensibilities. The first princess of the modern era, *The Little Mermaid*, is brave but makes the disturbing choice to give up her voice to win her mate, while Belle of *Beauty and the Beast* begins to show the spunkiness associated with the contemporary Disney heroine as she rehabilitates an emotionally abusive hero. Disney subsequently produced four princesses of color, Jasmine, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana. Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Mulan all perform functions for their states or communities, but it is the Pocahontas narrative that best illustrates the impossibility of fitting the historical specificity of the experiences of women of color into the western princess mythology. The Disney account of the life of the only “real”

Disney princess is almost entirely false—a few names are accurate. Radically rewriting the history of colonial encounter, they aged Pocahontas into an age-appropriate love interest for John Smith, with whom she shared a friendship in real life as a child, but no romance. Pocahontas was the first princess not to get her man in the theatrical wide release, but they gave this real historical figure her “happy” ending in the straight-to-video sequel in which she meets and marries John Rolfe. The film omits her Christian conversion, name change, possible reasons for her marriage that likely had little to do with romantic love, and her death from small pox at twenty-one, which are not the makings of happily-ever-after. Placing people of color into western fairy tale frameworks inevitably reveals historical erasures that must take place to construct fantasy.

Ann duCille has discussed the incongruity of placing people of color within western fantasy frameworks. In her discussion of *The Philadelphia Story*, she argues that “like all good fictions,” the movie “creates a make-believe world—an ‘unreal estate,’” in which “signs and symbols seduce us into willing suspension of disbelief” (2001, 410). There is an indelible marking of U.S. fantasies by the nexus of class and race that non-whites will inevitably disrupt the make-believe world. She describes a scene in which the two exes, played by Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn, reminisce about the yacht they travelled on in their honeymoon, Grant says, “‘My, she was yar,’” to which Hepburn replies, “she was yar, all right” (2001, 412). Ann duCille asks various groups to imagine this exchange of dialogue taking place between African American actors Angela Bassett and Laurence Fishburne and says she is routinely met with laughter. The implausibility here signals how some language and stories, some signs and symbols are so ineradicably white that an African American frame cannot fit comfortably into the “unreal estate,” which is the U.S. romantic imagination.

The inevitable problems of casting people of color into generic western fantasy molds should be readily apparent, but people still persisted in thinking there was a right way to do *The Princess and the Frog*. In response to the controversy about the initial plan for the film, Rodney Hinds, a commentator for the black British newspaper *The Voice* argued, “[We] have our own dreams and stories like everyone else, and we want them to be portrayed positively. This is about how people are perceived and a princess is normally a positive character who most people aspire to” (Akbar 2008). And yet the princess and the frog

is “not our own story” and the princess is a fairly problematic model for all girls, as the narrative traditionally suggests that prince charming can solve a girl’s problems and, as Laura Vanderkam commented, “rescue you from your labors” (2009).

In striking contrast, *The Princess and the Frog* is antithetical to most princess narratives, as Tiana is still clearly working very hard after marriage. She and her prince husband buy a rundown building and are visibly seen rolling up their sleeves and rehabbing the building alone. Tiana later swans around in gorgeous attire in her now elegant restaurant—befitting a princess—but as she sings that “dreams come true in New Orleans,” the dream is clearly both her husband and building her business. On the one hand, the progressive politics of a princess narrative in which the princess still works—and wants to—defy the traditional logic of the genre. On the other hand, if one of the pleasures of the princess narrative is the lightening and elimination of labor, the film illustrates the singularity of an African American in the princess role as Tiana is the only princess whose “happily ever after” clearly involves labor outside of that required by heterosexual marriage (Naveen is also the only prince who is “broke,” having been disowned by his parents for his spendthrift behavior). Is this simply another progressive move to modernize the princess tale, or might we also read this as yet another sign of how impossible it is to imagine the black fairy tale romance where the black princess wins her man and simply gets to rest?

The Princess and the Frog illustrates how challenging it is to visualize African American women within generic narratives of privilege and leisure, but as problematic as the narrative is, a working princess with desires outside of marriage may illustrate a more progressive and feminist representation of romantic love. Moreover, as some critics desired a Disney princess narrative for African Americans *and* possessed a seeming willful blindness to the incommensurability of blackness and fantasies outside of material histories, the contradiction demonstrates the contentious relationship many have to understanding the consequences of what it means to exist as a hybrid subject. Cultural critics sometimes adhere to notions of black identity without acknowledging it is, as Paul Gilroy and others have taught us, inescapably hybrid. Imagining African American desire and pleasure outside of a western imaginary requires a rigid conceptualization of blackness that does not match the reality of lived experience. Thus as people attempt to articulate a black heterosexual ideal of

romantic love, they must acknowledge that it is not uniquely black, nor untouched by other cultural desires. This may seem like an obvious claim, but as some media discourses about the heterosexual professional black woman's romantic imagination illustrate, a virtual industry has emerged to describe black women's unique—and pathological—fantasies.

Tired Black Men and Clueless Black Women: Schooling Black Women about Destructive Desires

If fairy tales are a mechanism through which women are schooled to fantasize about certain things in interpersonal relationships, self-help relationship texts are also a means of educating them as adults. In 2009, African American men produced an unprecedented number of self-help texts—at least three books and a film—aimed at helping African American women understand their emotional shortcomings. While *The Princess and the Frog* presented a modified idealized narrative of African American women finding love and erasing history in the process, this new strand uses history as a means for diagnosing black women's dysfunction.

In 2009, filmmaker Tim Alexander released the film *Diary of a Tired Black Man*. The film moves between real on-the-street interviews with black men and women and a fictional look at the relationship between a black man, James, and his wife, Tonya, who is constantly angry and verbally abusive, or, as he states, “always acting so strong.” Alexander's account of the “problem” is that African American women have poor relationships with their fathers or no relationship and have subsequently made poor choices in men. They thus carry disproportionate anger to their relationships with good men. Alexander creates a syndrome, the “Angry Black Women Syndrome,” to explain the pathological presence he believes they bring to relationships. Alexander rejects demographic claims about the dating pool, choosing to argue that black women's dysfunction is the cause of their romantic unhappiness. While he acknowledges that there are some African American men who behave in unproductive ways in relationships, Alexander believes that black women are primarily to blame for failed black heterosexual relationships, because of their anger and desire for thugs and combative interactions.

Alexander is one of a number of African American male entertainers who claimed to have insights into the problems with black heterosexual relationships, and more specifically, the problem with black women. Comedian Steve Harvey began a new career as a relationship “expert” with *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man: What Men Really Think About Love, Relationships, Intimacy, and Commitment* (2009), a comedic self-help book designed to teach women about the way men’s minds work. Jimi Izrael, a reporter and cultural critic also published a set of humorous essays, *The Denzel Principle: Why Black Women Can’t Find Good Black Men*, exploring African American women’s allegedly unrealistic relationship to romantic fantasy. Actor Hill Harper wrote *The Conversation: How Men and Women Can Build Loving, Trusting Relationships* (2009), a more serious tome directed toward both sexes to address relationship challenges between black men and women. Because of these “credentials,” Harvey, Harper, and Izrael were featured on an April 2010 episode of *Nightline* seeking to answer the question, “Why can’t a successful black woman find a man?” Actress Sherri Shepherd and television personality Jacque Reid faced off against the men. While framed as a give and take about what African American men and women do not understand about each other, the overall thrust, as it sought to solve the stated problem—was what black women do not understand or do wrong in relationships. The men presented essentializing frameworks about the nature of men and women. Harvey referenced what is in the “DNA” of men, Izrael claimed that men are “visual creatures” who are “not that complex,” and Harper stated that “The feminine wants to be adored and the masculine wants to be believed in.”

The black men’s perspective was that African American women have unrealistic expectations and standards, particularly in that they are unwilling to acknowledge the potential in men when women have outpaced men professionally. Izrael’s book was focused on this point. He claims that African American women

are not drawn to real men, but to the idea of the ideal man, to watered-down Denzel Washington types who are long on charm and short on manliness. . . His on-screen macho seems seasoned with just enough of the kind of softness that makes women think he might suddenly call in off patrol, lock up his gun, tie on an apron, wash the dishes, and cook up a casserole. Spend the rest of the evening with the tip of his chin embedded in

her asshole as he licks the lining out of her pussy, only getting up to do her toes while he asks about her day. . . It's the kind of wish-wash fantastical reworking of manhood that women embrace. (2009, 16).

Izrael's depiction of black men's sexual and domestic subjection to African American women is characteristic of rhetoric that positions black men's intraracial victimization. This rhetoric depends upon the accompanying discussion of black men in crisis. The crisis seems to suggest that patriarchy is never in effect. Women are condemned for trying to renegotiate the established terms of masculinity, a claim that ignores the constant regulatory work of patriarchal power. While Izrael writes that white women also have high expectations, he claims that they "don't seem so intent on remaking their men into a fantasy character" (2009, 17). Izrael provides no evidence other than the anecdotal that this is the case, when the impact of media representations of idealized relationships is inconclusive at best. For example, one set of studies exploring the relationship of media exposure to idealized relationship narratives and relationship satisfaction found that those not in relationships were less satisfied after watching an idealized representation of a relationship, while those in a relationship reported *greater* satisfaction, perhaps primed to reflect on the positive aspects of their own relationships (Holmes and Johnson 2009, 130). Women who consume a great deal of media with "unrealistic" representations are more likely to express unrealistic expectations, but that could likely mean that those with unrealistic expectations are drawn to these kinds of texts. In either case, Izrael's argument that black women disproportionately have unrealistic desires is resting on his anecdotal claims, anecdotes that also ignore the idea that men can have unrealistic expectations as well.

The regulatory narrative that emerges here is one that privileges black men's reading of black relationships, and faults black women for their unmarried status. When the women in the "Face-Off" continued to talk about their desire for an equal partner, they were ridiculed for their understanding of equality. This rhetoric is a gendering machine that faults black women for failing to recognize the potential of African American men, and allowing feminist models of equal partnership to muddy what a "natural relationship" should look like. Natural relationships are governed here by traditional binaries

outlining gender roles. Harvey tells women that they need to look to their skill set, being “sexy, sensuous, nurturing,” a skill set that does not include intelligence or any other non-gendered category. The *Nightline* episode is a classic example of the dangers of treating experience as the source of all knowledge. The men were treated as the subjected population whose experience creates real knowledge, but the effect of treating experience in this way results, as Joan Scott famously argued, in taking “as self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented” and thus naturalizing the black male difference (1991, 777). In this essentialist framing of the difference between black men and women, “questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured—about language or discourse and history—are left aside” (1991, 777). This discourse acknowledges structural pressures on the shaping of black identity, but only to shore up essentialist understandings of black manhood and black womanhood that have been damaged by racism.

External stressors such as discrimination and poverty clearly can have a significant impact on relationships, and has impacted the varied models of the black family. But this twenty-first century narrative is only recasting the pathological Negro family narrative produced in the twentieth century. African American women are still emasculating monsters, but now they are also delusional. All too often in this discourse, the delusion is resistance to essentialized framings of womanhood and masculinity. Steve Harvey advises women to stop trying to get men to communicate, as “we men aren’t in the talking business . . . from the moment we come out of the womb, we’re taught to protect, profess, and provide. Communicating, nurturing listening to problems and trying to understand them without any obligation to fix them is simply not what boys are raised to do” (2009, 52). Harvey treats men’s behavior as biological but then immediately follows up with arguments about socialization. The irony of his claim is that communication is cited as one of the most significant factors in maintaining a marriage (by researchers, if not comedians) even as men and women are often found to have different communication styles. Characterizing a black woman’s desire to communicate as foolish in the face of black men’s commonsense model to living shores up a pathological reading of women’s desires. Who, then, is perpetuating a fantasy that is most destructive for black heterosexual relationships?

I am not merely reversing the blame here, suggesting that the problem with black relationships is black men. Nor do I intend to suggest that some African American women do not bear responsibility for failed relationships, nor claim that that the legacies of discrimination and racism have had no effect of black psyches. What I am contesting is the industry that emerged in 2009—one related to a long history of demonization of African American women—that focused on blaming professional black women for their successes and desires. The industry emerged because many heterosexual black men and women are unhappy with the state of straight intraracial relationships, and we must interrogate what can be done to address this pain and dissatisfaction. This discourse valorizes more than the normative desire for marriage, it celebrates singular ideal models that the professional black woman allegedly fails to recognize as ideal. Rigid mandates for relationship models cannot solve the contemporary “crisis.”

Do Black Women want the Fairy Tale? : The Discourse Surrounding Barack and Michelle Obama

The problem with normative claims is that they are inherently disciplinary, although the regulatory nature of normative models is sometimes masked by a progressive sheen. Such is the case with the marriage of Barack and Michelle Obama, held up as an ideal for many couples, not only for African Americans. However, constructing their marriage as a real “fairy-tale” model for everyone can also function as a rhetorical act of aggression toward professional African American women.

After Barack Obama’s inauguration, *Ebony* magazine ran a story in which author Harriette Cole claimed, “Real black love is no longer a fairy tale in the public eye. It doesn’t just exist in *Cosby Show* reruns anymore . . . Their love is real, and many of us only wish we had it that good” (2009). Cole is not claiming that black love does not exist, only that it is never represented. The Obamas’ relationship, heavily marketed in the campaign, captured the imagination of many Americans, and not only those of African descent. Their public intimacy was unmatched by any presidential candidate and spouse documented in the modern era of political media coverage. Their youth, beauty, style and adorable children were compared frequently to John and Jackie Kennedy, the other

glamorous White House couple. They marketed black heteronormative values, and the media celebrated it.

But if Michelle Obama represents the ideal successful African American woman, it would be an unrealistic and problematic model for many women—and not for the reasons some might think. Becoming First Lady is an unachievable goal for most women, but it is the structure of the marriage itself that we might not want to treat as the ideal model to which every woman should aspire. Michelle Obama's reluctance to becoming a political wife is now well documented, and they have both spoken of the stress his career placed on the marriage (Kantor 2009). They had a commuter marriage for twelve years, which required Michelle Obama to build a support system outside of her marriage to help with raising the children. Like many wives in two-career families, Michelle Obama was responsible for a disproportionate amount of domestic labor. Unlike many two-career families, she performed this labor despite the fact that she made more money than her partner. Michelle Obama has given up her career, stating, "Clearly Barack's career decisions are leading us. They're not mine. That's obvious. I'm married to the president of the United States. I don't have another job, and [if I did] it would be problematic in this role" (Kantor 2009). A Harvard educated lawyer who had worked in the health care industry, neither of Michelle's public platforms as First Lady—eating healthily and military families—reflect the specialized professional knowledge she brings to the White House.

Thus, while many black women may wish they had it "so good," many other heterosexual African American women have partnerships that could probably be interpreted as more equal, in which the male partner is home more and has done a greater portion of the domestic labor. In pointing out the specific challenges Michelle Obama has confronted as a political wife, I am not suggesting that the Obamas have a poor marriage. By all accounts they seem to be in love, work hard at their marriage and have a highly functional relationship. Nevertheless, Michelle Obama herself has pushed back against the idea that her marriage is the ideal marriage model for everyone. It is not the kind of traditional marriage she had planned to have, and it has not been flawless. To suggest their marriage is flawless, Michelle Obama argues, is "unfair to the institution of marriage, and it's unfair for young people who are trying to build something, to project this perfection that doesn't exist" (Kantor 2009).

Treating the Obama marriage as the kind of marriage every professional black woman should aspire to can be another act of hostility toward this group, as a woman giving up her career to allow her male partner's career to guide their lives would not make financial or emotional sense to many couples. To treat their marriage as the moment when happily-ever-after began ignores the conflict and labor involved in maintaining the relationship. We should recognize how even the positive treatment of a black couple can be what Wahneema Lubiano has called "ideological war by narrative means," because treating the specificity of the Michelle Obama model as the ideal for everyone is part of what seems to have triggered the onslaught of stories about unmarried African American women (1992). Michelle has done it—why can't you? Hill Harper treated them as a paradigmatic couple, arguing that Michelle Obama recognized the potential in a man who had a hole in the bottom of his car, even though she made more money and was initially his supervisor. This is the problem with African American women—many of you would have rejected Barack!

Coda: Life is Not a Disney Movie

This narrative about poor choices in love and in mates is essential in a society that privileges both liberal individualism and the heteronormative nuclear family as the means for economic and social security. If someone works hard for what she wants and still does not attain what she desires, that foundationally places into question the idea that the nexus of hard work and free will ultimately lead to success, regardless of identity. If the hard working black woman cannot achieve the life she desires, she clearly has been making the wrong choices—choosing to work when she should have sought a husband, choosing the wrong men when good men are available, choosing to be an "angry black woman" when with a loving partner, choosing to ignore the potential of men who do not yet have success. This is the real fairy tale, ingrained in U.S. citizens throughout the nation's history—that individual choices, regardless of structure, always determine the outcome. The discourse of liberal individualism inevitably serves to deflect from the material inequalities that limit options.

Given this national investment in liberal individualism and hard work providing the solution to all challenges, including the interpersonal, Tiana's story begins to seem

like an authentically “American” fairy tale after all, that the erasures required to make her story an enjoyable fantasy mimic the erasures consistently embedded in U.S. storytelling about success and romantic love. When Tiana sings in the finale that “In the South Land there’s a city/way down the river” where “they got music/it’s always playing” and “there’s sweetness going around,” the audience is meant to ignore the structural racism that would have made the interracial club she has built impossible, the laws that, if Naveen was read as white, would have made Tiana’s marriage illegal, and the foreshadowing of what it would mean for blacks to live in a city “down the river.” Tiana is successful because she works hard and lives in a city where “women are very pretty” (thus able to attract mates), “and all the men deliver” (wedding rings, financial security, and happiness). The historical erasures and self-determination narrative that undergirds this tale is a message many venues in U.S. culture mean to send to African American girls: Work hard. Be pretty. If you make a sacrifice for your man, you’ll get your heart’s desire. We don’t teach the phrase “structural inequality” to children. This is perhaps because it is hard to find a rhyme.

However, adults have fewer excuses for such a limited vocabulary. And black intellectuals certainly have no reason to treat African American women who have struggled to find a life partner as purely delusional. After watching the *Nightline* face-off, Black public intellectual Boyce Watkins critiqued African American women for taking advice from comedian Steve Harvey, when they should be taking advice from relationship experts. This is a valid argument, but one that ignores that the media has treated Harvey as an expert—and Watkins himself is replicating many of the same “common-sense” arguments that Harvey makes. Watkins presents the allegedly commonsense claims about black women featured in popular discourse, that the problem is with the women themselves—their poor desires, their habit of engaging in a “pissing contest,” and resistance to gender roles. Given the statistics in black male mortality, incarceration, and education, and various obstacles to interracial marriage for African American women, the pool of what Williams Julius Wilson calls “marriageable men” is simply smaller than that for other racial groups. As Cathy Cohen notes, the “rhetoric of striving—striving to be married, striving to have two-parent households, striving to be heterosexual” ignores the “true norms of family life in the black community” and the empirical reality that “80 percent of

births to black women under 30 are to women who are not married”—trends that “are not going to turn around significantly in black communities any time soon, if ever” (2010, 98). My intent is not to state that African American women are rudderless victims in a sea of statistics who have no agency or hope of achieving what they desire in interpersonal relationships, but to place pressure on a naturalized discourse that privileges individual pathology far and above demographic, education, and economic data that reveals wide-ranging inequalities between races. When we capitulate to (or celebrate) pathologizing professional black women, we serve conservative state discourses that refuse state responsibility for black oppression. We also serve a broader national discourse that treats LIFE as a fairytale that suggests that if you are a good citizen all your heart’s desires will come to you.

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