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Senior Honors Thesis

*Is Beauty Really in the Eye of the Beholder? A Look into the Ways
Beauty Oppresses Women of Color in Western Culture*

*“And I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world,
a beautiful little fool.”
- The Great Gatsby*

*“it is a trillion-dollar industry that would collapse
if we believed we were beautiful enough already
their concept of beauty is manufactured
i am not”
- human*

The famous proverb: “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder” has proven time and time again to belong to the white, heterosexual, privileged man within the patriarchy. Current Western society has created patriarchal beauty standards that objectify and oppress all women on many different fronts. The media, which is a largely male-dominated industry, over emphasizes beauty and sexuality, which results in oppressive standards of beauty women feel compelled to follow. Thus, women make choices about their beauty to appease men, who reinforce such patriarchal beauty standards. As Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* suggests, “Beauty is a currency system like the gold standard... in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact” (12). Thus, women are subjected to these unattainable standards, which send messages to women that their worth and value is determined by their beauty.

These standards continue to permeate current culture and have detrimental effects. Jennifer Siebel Newsom’s documentary *Miss Representation* discusses the sexualization of women in the media, media’s limiting portrayals of certain beauty images in pop culture and advertisements, and body shaming that takes place throughout media, which result in the pressure for women to conform to these standards. Filmmaker Jean Kilbourne states, “Girls get the message from very early on that what’s most important is how they look, that their value, their worth, depends on that. And boys get the message that this is what’s important about girls. We get it... from everywhere we look. No matter what a woman does... their value still depends on how they look.” Additionally, society, even women themselves, judge women more harshly as a result of these constant images. However, women of color in particular have pressure to follow beauty standards that undermine or destroy their agency and power. This pressure is reinforced through representations of women in the entertainment media.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how works of media art argue that all women in general are oppressed by patriarchal beauty standards, and that this oppression is felt even more acutely by women of color, who face a double oppression for having to endure the standards imposed on all women in addition to even more oppressive factors due to colorism and racism. For the sake of this paper, beauty will be analyzed in terms of the way it functions in Western culture, which will be discussed with regard to physical appearance through the lens of beauty oppression that all women face: women as objects of feminine beauty; women as objects of sexualized beauty; women and beauty-related narcissism; and beauty reinforced by oppressors. Because women of color face these oppressions as well as additional beauty pressure, this paper will then turn to beauty specific to women of color, which will be examined through various American works of fiction that feature women of color from the late 20th and early 21st century. The works of art chosen represent different genres of media representation: Gina Prince-Bythwood's film *Beyond the Lights*, Beyoncé's music video and song lyrics from "Formation," Josefina López's play *Real Women Have Curves*, and Justin Simien's television series *Dear White People*, all of which were produced in the last thirty years that show women of color in the lead roles and that deal with issues of beauty. Additionally, memoirs are used as critical texts that will help in analyzing the works of fiction. Furthermore, the fictional texts were selected because each of them is from a different genre in the humanities: film, music, drama, and television, which shows how the issue is widespread among various types of media. In addition, these particular texts were chosen because finding women of color as the principal character is rare; they not only had women of color in the lead role, but they also deal explicitly with issues of beauty.

Women as objects of feminized beauty

Femininity is always implicit when looking at beauty and women. One aspect of beauty is femininity, and entertainment media constantly displays beautiful women as feminine. *Miss Representation* mirrors this idea when American author Jennifer Pozner says, "...the only options available to women mimic the 1950s model of femininity, in which women's only power was her beauty." This standard of femininity is emphasized in the advice Helen Gurley Brown gives to her readers in Nora Ephron's essay, "If You're a Little Mouseburger, Come with Me. I Was a Mouseburger and I Will Help You." Ephron writes about Helen Gurley Brown, explaining, "She wears Rudi Gernreich dresses, David Webb jewelry, a Piaget watch, expensive hairpieces, custom-cut false eyelashes..." (84). She further describes her as wearing earrings, wigs, and stockings, although "... it never quite seems to come together properly" (84). Each of the fashion items that Ephron describes are feminine objects, utilized by Brown to highlight her femininity.

Similarly, in *Beyond the Lights*, Noni is portrayed as feminine, as she wears many of the items described by Ephron. She wears a long, wavy blonde or purple weave and long, acrylic nails. Her outfits are coded as feminine, as she wears flowing skirts, dresses, colorful cropped tops, high heels or stilettos, extensive amounts of jewelry and make up, and other very feminine outfits throughout the film. She wears visible makeup such as eye shadow, fake eye lashes, and lipstick. In several scenes before Noni performs or talks to the press, she has a make up team working on her face or fixing her hair to ensure that her appearance is always intact. In several scenes, fans or paparazzi refer to her as "pretty" or "beautiful," reinforcing the fact that when Noni appears feminine, her beauty will be praised. These ideals of femininity are also mirrored in Josefina López's play *Real Women Have Curves*, in which Hispanic women characters make dresses that are also coded as feminine. In one scene, Estela and Carmen are talking about Estela's date with

el Tormento, in which Carmen asks her what she is going to wear for the date, saying, “Don’t go dressing like a scarecrow now” (32). Estela remarks, “He doesn’t care how I dress” and Carmen replies, “Estela, let me make you a dress, horitita te lo coso” (32). Carmen wants to sew Estela a dress for her date, insinuating that she must look beautiful for el Tormento and thus, a feminine dress is the appropriate look. Although at first, Estela tells her mom “No,” shortly after, Estela is described as holding up a pink dress to her body, pretending like she is wearing it. López writes, “She dances slowly with it, imagining herself dancing with el Tormento,” despite telling her mother she does not want her to make a dress (37). This scene depicts the feminine beauty standards that women are subjected to, which is further reflected in the dresses they make for other women as well as for the dresses they imagine for themselves.

Women as subjected to standards of feminine beauty is discussed by Roxane Gay in her article “Bad Feminist.” Gay writes, “We see this tension in socially dictated beauty standards – the right way to be a woman is to be thin, to wear make up, to wear the right kind of clothes (not too slutty, not too prude, show a little leg, ladies), and so on.” This standard is depicted in the opening scene of Episode IV in *Dear White People*, when Coco is bleaching her upper lip and getting ready in front of a mirror. Her attempt to make her upper lip hair lighter is an act of trying to maintain her femininity, as upper lip hair is seen as masculine. Furthermore, the scene shows Coco’s colorful feminine outfits, shoes, high heels, and her different long-haired wigs on her dresser. This scene also parallels the opening scene of *Legally Blonde*, when Elle Woods, a Caucasian woman, is getting dressed in a pink dress, combing her hair, painting her nails, and putting on her pink, high heels. The use of similar elements in both films demonstrates how women are held to oppressive, feminine beauty standards, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Women as objects of sexualized beauty

Society sends messages to women that their power lies in their beauty and that they are objects for a man's pleasure. This theory is reflected in Susan Gubar's critical essay "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," in which she writes about women as beautiful, sexualized objects. She argues that throughout most of Western tradition and European literature, women have always been the work of art and never the artist. They have been further objectified as sexual vessels for men's pleasure. Gubar references Margaret Atwood's "The Mud Women," in which two young boys make a woman out of mud solely to have sex with her – they only build her a torso and give her larger hips and breasts. This example is a work of art that is literally turning a woman into a sex object, so men can utilize her for their own gratification (244). Gubar argues that because women are valued for their beauty, they are being set up to be objectified and used sexually as objects. This objectification is what invites sexual behavior upon women, as men use them as "beautiful objects" (244).

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf expands on this idea, arguing that beauty is often tied into sex. Wolf explains, "Images that turn women into objects or eroticize the degradation of women have arisen..." over the years (142). Women and sexualized beauty are also discussed in Jennifer Siebel Newsom's documentary *Miss Representation*. The documentary reveals that the media has commodified women's bodies in many different ways. Dr. Caroline Heldman states, "Throughout any type of mass media there is, we see the widespread acceptance of women as sex objects... women are basically just body props there for young male viewers." Heldman talks about a concept known as the "fighting fuck toy," which refers to women in films who may appear empowered, but they are really the objects of men and their needs. Heldman further explains this woman character, saying, "... even though she is doing things supposedly on her own terms, she

very much is objectified and exists for the male viewer.” This concept is portrayed throughout films where women are initially seen as the protagonist, the heroine, and the one engaging in all of the action, yet, they are functioning as a sexual object. This objectification is portrayed through women’s use of sexually revealing clothes, hypersexual behavior for and towards other men, and at times, even nudity.

An example of a woman protagonist as the “fighting fuck toy” archetype is Noni in *Beyond the Lights*, who exemplifies the sexualization of women in different types of media representation. Noni, although not a “fighting” woman literally, is a warrior in the battlefield that is the cutthroat world of music. As such, when protagonist Noni is thwarted from becoming the artist she desires to be, her beauty is given more priority and validation than her talent, and in each of the songs she is told to sing, she is used as a prop for other male artists to look good. Noni functions as Kid Culprit’s “fuck toy” and is used as a “prop” for Kid Culprit’s fame and success. She functions as a back up dancer and wears revealing clothing throughout the male artist’s “Masterpiece” music video. The lyrics underscore her objectification when she sings, “I got what them boys want/He say I’m a masterpiece.” This song becomes a success, and she becomes more famous when she is included in Kid Culprit’s songs as his personal prop. Her dance moves are sexualized, her outfit is skimpy and revealing, men are touching her throughout the video, and Kid Culprit is caressing her or is on top of her in several clips. She wears a set of leather overalls that scarcely cover her nipples and she is even seen eating food sexually and licking her fingers, all to seduce Kid Culprit. At the end of the video clip, a man is heard yelling, “You killed that shit! You killed that!” She receives messages from the music industry and her fans that her body is a vessel for a man’s pleasure, like Atwood’s Mud Woman, and portrays this idea in her art. Ultimately, when Noni is confined to being the art, she is treated as an object.

In another scene, Noni is taking pictures in a photo shoot when she is asked to remove her top, exposing her breasts. Everyone is cheering, and one woman even yells, “Go Noni!” This validation is a societal message telling Noni that she will look beautiful and be successful if she portrays herself as sexy. In this case, beauty relates to sexuality and Western culture enforces this idea of being sexy. Wolf coined the term “beauty pornography,” which refers to the linkage between “a commodified *beauty* directly and explicitly to *sexuality*,” which undermines “women’s new and vulnerable sense of sexual self-worth... and control over our [women’s] own bodies” (11). Wolf further discusses beauty and sexuality, explaining that “...falsely interlocking the two makes it seem doubly true that a woman must be ‘beautiful’ to be sexual” (150). As a result, Western culture tells women that if they are not beautiful, they cannot be sexy. This idea is discussed in the conversation between Noni and her mother at the end of the film, in which Noni tells her mother, “You know, I always wondered when I’d do a shoot or something, and they’d tell me to hike my skirt up more or take off my shirt, and I’d look to you to see if it was OK, and it was always OK,” in which Macy remarks back, “Well, would you look around you? It is OK.” Thus, society tells women if they dress sexy, they will in turn be beautiful, much like is the case for Noni.

Women and beauty-related narcissism

Women are socialized to believe that beauty is so important that when they become artists, their art is mired in beauty-related narcissism. Gubar explains this theory in her essay, arguing that when women finally get to become the artist, their work has echoes of narcissism, as this is the revelation that a woman’s body essentially makes the art (249). Gubar talks about metaphorical mirror images, in which women attempt to reconstruct their own image, yet their “creativity has been deformed by being channeled into self-destructive narcissism,” without them even realizing

this is happening (249). Gubar utilizes Judy Chicago's artwork of the V-shaped dinner table to demonstrate this notion, as the V-shape represents the vagina. The art that women produce consists of many sexualized suggestions in its imagery, as they are reflections of the sexualization they have been subjected to over time (245). This sexualized imagery is in part due to the fact that, historically, women have received messages that their power and agency comes from their beauty and their bodies.

Miss Representation also explains that women learn to engage in self-objectification from the treatment they receive from both men and the media. Scholar Meenakshi Gigi Durham states, "There is a real unequal power relationship going on there where it's the girls whose bodies are on display, and the boys get the power to arbitrate and judge whether their bodies are acceptable or not acceptable, desirable or not desirable." The idea of women receiving powerful messages from their objectification is also portrayed with Noni's character in *Beyond the Lights*. When Noni functions as the artist, her art work reflects the narcissism of beauty she has been subjected to. Because she repeatedly receives validation and messages that her power and worth come from her beauty, she finds the need to portray art that reflects this vanity.

Similarly, Lena Dunham's chapter "Diet is a 4-Letter Word" in her memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* reveals that women's beauty standards create self-defeating narcissism. Dunham is the artist writing her memoir, and her work is mired in narcissism. In the chapter "Introduction," she writes how societal forces believe that "personal writing by women is no more than an exercise in vanity..." (xvi). Ironically, her writing is an exercise in vanity, as she writes the memoir solely about herself, her sex life, and her life long struggle with her weight. For example, throughout "Diet is a 4-Letter Word," Dunham talks about her hardships with maintaining her weight and diet. Like Noni, Dunham, as a famous woman in Hollywood, is held to the harsh beauty standards that

define her as overweight. The idea that a woman must be thin to be successful pervades Western culture, especially for famous women who are constantly in the spotlight. Wolf, however, explains that these pressures not only affect famous women, but also all women in America, saying that "... thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal" (10). Like these women, Dunham's memoir suggests that her struggle to lose ten pounds has been a life-altering event for her, which reveals the excessive pressure placed on her to be beautiful. Dunham talks about her strict dieting and weight loss routine, writing, "This journal is a place to record all the conflicting, intense emotions I have about food and to free myself of them. It's about more than calories. I decided I will weigh myself every Sunday, so I know I'm on the right track" (90). The overwhelming feeling she faces to conform to these standards ultimately oppresses her. Thus, Dunham becomes narcissistic and overemphasizes beauty, writing solely about herself, her body, and even includes several cartoons of her body *as* food or of her body *on* food throughout her memoir. Dunham asks herself, "Who is this lady you've become?" (87). She was ultimately against being the aesthetic, but she eventually fell for it. Dunham, along with other women, have to write about themselves because they are oppressed, and her work shows this oppression. Like Dunham, Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*, writes in her diary, creating art about herself as a result of the oppression she faces. She is constantly told she is overweight by her mother. She tells Estela, "I'm keeping a journal so when I become 'rich and famous' I can write my autobiography" (36). Like Dunham, Ana is forced to write about herself, revealing the narcissism she embodies because of the oppressive, patriarchal forces around her. She creates art about herself, believing one day, people will be interested in reading solely about her life. This idea, validating Gubar's theory, demonstrates that when women

have been oppressed for so long and left out of creating art, when they finally get the pen, all they know is to create art about themselves, much like in the cases of Dunham and Ana.

Beauty reinforced by oppressors

Women often function as patriarchal oppressors in terms of beauty, and as a result, they self-sabotage. This theory is revealed in Leslie Heywood's and Jennifer Drake's book *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Heywood and Drake write, "I saw firsthand how easily the status quo image of female beauty was perpetuated – and by women, at that! Here were women who actually had the power to reduce the damaging pressures on girls... yet they were unwilling to take the risk" (91). Helen Gurley Brown acts as a beauty oppressor in Nora Ephron's essay, "If You're a Little Mouseburger, Come with Me. I Was a Mouseburger and I Will Help You." Ephron, a well-known writer, filmmaker, and feminist, writes about Helen Gurley Brown, who was a business woman and most known for her role as editor-in-chief of the *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Brown prioritizes beauty and gives her readers "motherly" advice about beauty that buys into the standard imposed by patriarchy. Ephron describes her as wearing expensive outfits and jewelry, custom-cut false eye lashes, and expensive hair pieces and wigs (84). Ephron notes that "Helen Gurley Brown relentlessly talks about her flat chest, her nose job, her split ends, her adolescent acne, her forty-minute regimen of isometrics and exercises to stay in shape" (84). Brown is beauty centric and attaches value to her physical appearance, having been a *mouseburger* herself at one point: "unpretty, unspecial, unformed" (Dunham, xvi). Ephron continues, "She is demonstrating, rather forcefully, that there are well over a million American women who are willing to spend sixty cents to read *not* about politics, *not* about the female liberation movement, *not* about the war in Vietnam, but merely about how to get a man" (86). Brown puts too much value on beauty,

giving her readers extensive advice on how to make themselves more physically appealing for men. Helen Gurley Brown further advises her readers, “You’ve got to make yourself more cupcakable all the time so that you’re a better cupcake to be gobbled up” (85). Brown claims that looking beautiful and getting a man makes a woman successful, and she puts value on herself for catching handsome men. Betty Friedan also discusses this notion in the *Feminine Mystique*, in which the American suburban housewife was expected to be, above all, beautiful, and that their sole fight was to “get and keep their husbands” (2).

While some may argue that Brown only wants to help other women who do not feel beautiful, she is buying into the same standards made to objectify women in the first place. This idea is explored by Heywood and Drake in their book, in which they write, “... this engenders debate about whether... it is empowering to utilize blatantly our sexuality, or whether it is simply falling prey to societal demands to objectify ourselves and make our looks the most important thing about us” (220). While both perspectives are valid, many would argue that Brown is doing whatever the beauty industry tells women looks good and buys into this oppressive standard first hand. Brown’s views are further portrayed in her book, *Having It All*, in which Lena Dunham is very critical. In the “Introduction” of her book, *Not That Kind of Girl*, Dunham discusses some of Brown’s advice, which she describes as “absolutely bananas,” such as “encouraging her readers to eat fewer than a thousand calories a day,” to pursue “married men,” and to “be blow job ready at all times” (xv). Ultimately, Brown is not promoting self-help for women to feel more confident or empowered, but rather she is telling them to look pretty so they can appeal to men. Her advice underscores the societal message that a woman can be successful if she is beautiful, and if she is not, she will not be valued as much. This idea speaks truth to current culture; women get messages all the time about what is beautiful. If mainstream culture considers a woman beautiful, she is

going to receive better treatment and certain privileges will break more her way. According to *The Beauty Bias: The Injustice of Appearance in Life and Law*, author Deborah L. Rhode states, that “... a wide array of research documents a phenomenon that psychologists describe as ‘what is beautiful is good,’” which emphasizes the value currently placed on beauty (48). Rhode posits that more attractive individuals are simply treated better in all facets of life, such as in jobs and politics (49). This preferential treatment is detrimental, nevertheless, because women with this beauty privilege, such as Brown, are still trapped within the patriarchy.

The notion of women reinforcing oppressive beauty standards is especially common with mothers or motherly figures, who are often times the most prevalent patriarchal oppressors. For instance, Noni is forced to submit to certain beauty standards by her mother, Macy. Noni is surrounded by her mother’s oppressive nature, which exploits her for her fame and success. Macy makes her into an image that would essentially appeal to the male gaze. In one scene, Noni is asked to remove her top during a photo shoot, and she looks to her mother to see what she should do. Macy gives her a look of approval, urging her to remove her clothes, since these images will sell and appeal to the public. Macy also does not seem to have a problem that Kaz and other males are present in the room. In another scene, Noni’s mom scolds her after her performance with Kid Culprit at the video music awards, despite being exploited on stage by Kid Culprit. Kid Culprit pushes Noni onto the bed prop and forces himself on top of her, holds her head to his genital area, and rips off her outfit in front of the audience despite the many attempts by Noni to keep her outfit on. In response, Macy tells Noni that she is a “bloody cliché” because the performance was essentially ruined, which is harmful to Noni’s publicity and image, although the disruption was Kid Culprit’s fault. She blames Noni for the embarrassing performance, giving her messages that Kid Culprit’s exploitive, sexualized behavior is appropriate. The beauty standards her mother

holds her to and the messages she receives from society make Noni accept this treatment, which is detrimental to her self-esteem and self-concept.

Like Noni's mother, Ana's mother, Carmen, reinforces patriarchal ideals of beauty, as depicted in *Real Women Have Curves*. Carmen gives her daughter subtle messages about beauty, such as when she constantly tells Ana she is fat. Carmen says, "You know, Ana, you're not bad looking. If you lost 20 pounds you would be very beautiful" (58). This message reflects the value society puts on women who are thin, and that the only way to be beautiful is to have a smaller body size. Carmen continues, "Last time you lost weight you were so thin and beautifuller" (58). Carmen conflates thin and beautiful, as if the two go hand in hand. As discussed by Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*, in order to be deemed beautiful by current society, a woman has to be thin (184). However, weight and body shape represent both an ideal of beauty and a way of being shamed by society. This idea is mirrored in *Beyond the Lights* when Noni's mother regulates what she eats and takes away the potatoes on Noni's plate. Similarly, when Ana tells her mother she does not want to go to the bakery and does not want any bread, her mother replies, "That's good, at least you won't get fatter" (9). The women's mothers' regulation of their carb intake reflects the idea that Noni and Ana have to be slim and maintain a certain figure in order to live up to the acceptable images portrayed in current culture. In another scene, Noni scrolls through comments on Twitter about her, looking distraught as most of them are critical and hateful, one of them reading: "#DamnNoni noni's a fat ass away from being anorexic." These Twitter comments insinuate she is considered to have a body part that is "too fat," yet at the same time suggest she has an eating disorder, which makes her alarmingly thin. This example underscores the contradicting beauty standards she is subjected to, which further makes breaking out of her oppression difficult, much like Ana who is stuck in a similar oppression that deems her body as not beautiful. In one scene

during the press conference after Noni's suicide attempt, she jokingly admits that Officer Kaz Nicol is able to pull her up from the balcony "even with all of this extra," slapping her butt and making a joke at the expense of her own body. Her comment about her "fat" back side shows she has internalized her mother's oppression, whereas Ana was able to escape it.

The idea that women should look beautiful for men and not for themselves is also revealed when Carmen tells Ana to make herself pretty and to make herself a "trophy" so a man will take care of her. Carmen explains, "At this age young girls should try to make themselves as attractive as possible... But I'm already married" (58). Ana retorts, "Is that it? Make myself attractive so that I can catch a man" (58)? Ana understands the advice her mother gives her about making herself prettier to marry a man, despite the fact that this advice did not work for Carmen. Carmen is ultimately pushing Ana into this arrangement that has not worked for Carmen at all. Carmen's husband abused her and constantly wanted sex more than she did. She even gained weight, thinking that if she was heavier, he would not find her attractive anymore, and thus would not want to have sex with her. This did not work because every time he went up North for work, he got her pregnant so men would not look at her nor want her (57). Carmen is buying into this patriarchal idea and imposes it on her daughter, one that has oppressed her for years. Thus, Carmen and Macy transformed from the oppressed to the oppressor. Macy is from a very poor region in the U.K. She became pregnant with a black man, and as a result, was kicked out of her home by her parents. Noni's father then left Macy, and she was forced to support herself and Noni all on her own. She was oppressed throughout her life, and although she works hard to make her and her daughter wealthy and powerful in a patriarchal world, it is at Noni's expense. Carmen and Macy have internalized their sexism and oppression and force oppressive, patriarchal standards of beauty unto their own daughters.

Women function as patriarchal beauty oppressors of general beauty, but also as oppressors in terms of racialized beauty. In Justin Simien's Netflix series *Dear White People*, Coco also acts as this beauty oppressor who reinforces oppressive standards that have racial undertones. In one scene, she talks to her sorority sisters in a racist manner by confronting the women, and telling one of them that she is dumb and that the only reason she is attending the university is because of Affirmative Action. She insults the other woman by telling her that she is a slut and she further insults her sexuality by exclaiming, "...your pussy's got a four-star rating on Yelp!" Coco is reinforcing all of the stereotypes she points out to Sam; she plays into the stereotypes that black women are overly sexualized and unintelligent. Like Macy, Coco is both the oppressed and the oppressor. When a woman is oppressed, the way she lashes out is often to become the oppressor, since this is all she knows and all she has been taught. Essentially, she reinforces this to show how oppressed she really is: Coco grew up in poverty and has struggled with racial issues all her life. She tells Sam multiple times that colorism hurts her, as she has always been treated differently as a result of her darker skin tone and race. She says, "People take one look at my skin, and they assume that I'm poor or uneducated or ratchet." Her oppression causes her to evoke patriarchal oppression onto other women in attempt to reclaim power.

Specific beauty standards for women of color

Women of color not only have to deal with the oppression of general beauty standards, but also they have additional, specific oppression due to their race and color. This racialized beauty is depicted in the aforementioned scene, in which Coco insults one of the three women, saying that her "underarms are not [her] strong suit" and that she smells like "slave socks." Not only does she attach her to slavery, but she also buys into patriarchal beauty standards that proclaim women are

supposed to smell good all the time. Coco plays into the stereotype that women are all supposed to smell “pretty,” and she oppresses this woman by saying she smells like the worst smelling object, which is coded racially. This scene speaks to the fact that women of color have to deal with supplementary, specific, and oppressive beauty standards. This theory is examined by Dr. JeffriAnne Wilder in the chapters “The Continuing Significance of Colorism in the 21st Century” and “Breaking Silence and Going Public: Shaming, Naming, and Circulating Truth” in her book *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century*. Certain physical features, especially skin tone, hair texture and facial features, are components that distinguish one black woman from another and are used for purposes of discrimination. Wilder explains that colorism is a “form of internalized racism,” which favors features that are in close proximity to Caucasian features (6). This notion allows black individuals to exercise power over one another, which has perpetuated the light-skinned versus dark-skinned dilemma and how light-skinned individuals are automatically regarded more highly and as more “valuable” (5).

Wilder asserts, “In this age of a theoretically color-blind, ‘post-racial’ society, my daughter – and countless other black women and girls like her – will inevitably deal with the subtle and at times blatant challenges attached to her race, class, gender, *and* skin tone. This magnified moment demonstrates the reality of racism *and* colorism in the 21st century, affecting black women in more distinctive ways than black men. Like racism, colorism remains a part of everyday life for many black people, particularly women” (5). Wilder maintains that all African American women have color stories of their own, stories that demonstrate women-specific colorism. She shares her own “color story,” describing her skin color as darker – in fact, she has been called names such as “caramel,” “dirty red,” and “fried-chicken brown” (2). Her personal relationships and daily routines have been affected as a result. Additionally, Wilder chooses to wear a relaxer in her hair

instead of wearing it “naturally,” which has caused her to be discriminated against by her black counterparts, as they believed she was giving in to the “very hegemonic, white racial ideals of female beauty” (27). Wilder states that these expectations are the reason why colorism has become a pervasive problem, as it is further reinforced by black individuals who buy into this oppressive system, one that “promotes bias and favor for light skin, European features and ‘good (i.e. straight) hair’” (6).

Beyoncé’s song, “Formation” contains many ideas about colorism and beauty standards that Dr. Wilder discusses. Wilder mentions that Beyoncé has received criticism for her light-skin privilege, and according to many, this has contributed to her fame within the music industry (12). Beyoncé attempts to combat colorist and racist ideals by behaving “unapologetically black”¹ throughout her song (Workneh). Beyoncé’s hair, along with all black women’s hair, is central to her identity and is seen as a political statement; thus, she wears her hair differently throughout “Formation.” Her women back-up dancers simultaneously have fros at one point while Beyoncé wears long braids or cornrows, all of which are popular styles in black culture. One of the strongest scenes is when three women are standing in the middle of a hair shop, who are all different skin tones and are each wearing different colored wigs, one woman stroking the wig on a mannequin. By including this, Beyoncé emphasizes the role that hair plays in society and defies the unfair beauty standards women of color are held to. She demonstrates that all hair can have the same “redemptive quality” that people assume only light-skinned hair can have (Wilder 5). Similarly, Wilder argues that these expectations prove the need to eradicate colorism and colorist standards of beauty.

¹ African American individuals and several news sources refer to Beyoncé as “unapologetically black.” Beyoncé has used this term to describe herself as well.

African American women from the time they are young girls learn that they are going to be judged by their skin color and physical features. In “Formation,” Beyoncé’s daughter is also featured dancing next to two dark-skinned girls. Her child has received much ridicule for possessing her father’s dark-skinned features, specifically her larger nostrils, lips, and so called “nappy hair” (Andrews). Likewise, Wilder received comments about her daughter’s darker skin, particularly her ears, and her resemblance to her own features rather than her father’s lighter ones. Wilder says, “...within hours of her entrance into this world, I received a few messages about how brown my daughter’s ears were compared to the rest of her newborn color. This was a dead giveaway” (6). This form of colorism is also reflected in the opening scene of *Beyond the Lights* when Macy takes young Noni to a hair salon and frantically tells the woman stylist, “She’s singing in a talent contest tomorrow and I don’t know what the bloody hell to do with her hair!” Her words speak to the value attached to hair, particularly African American hair. Noni’s mother, Macy, is worried that Noni’s hair is not acceptable for the competition and that she will be judged more harshly by the judges than the other girls competing, who all appear to be white. Moreover, Noni loses to a less talented white girl performer. Such colorist undertones suggest that Beyoncé’s, Macy’s, and Wilder’s daughters were unfortunate to have non-European features and darker, brown skin; thus, their “value” is diminished (Wilder 5). Beyoncé rejects this colorist standard by singing, “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.” These affirmations about her daughter’s qualities are attacks against a system of oppression which determines that her features are less beautiful than another black girl’s.

Furthermore, Beyoncé makes references to her light skin in order to reject colorism and its beauty standards. She sings, “I stunt, yellow bone it,” which is a term used to refer to a light-skinned Black person. By singing this, she reveals that colorism exists and that she is aware of the

privilege society has attached to her skin tone. In one scene, she wears a purely white gown in an all yellow room to accentuate this idea of “lightness.” Along with this, she refers to herself as a mix of “negro with that Creole” to underscore her black heritage, thus rejecting the rule that claims she does not have the right to acknowledge her privilege because she is “light-skinned.” Similarly, in *Dear White People*, Coco calls out Sam’s light skin privilege, telling her she is not a “real sista.” In one scene, Coco tells Sam, “You get away with murder because you look more like them than I do. That’s your light-skin privilege. Until you acknowledge that, shut the fuck up about who’s woke or not.” Sam says nothing in return, appearing ashamed and in shock, as she knows the privilege associated with her skin tone. Nevertheless, Sam acknowledges her light skin. During one scene, she tells her friend Joelle that she “loves/hates” her shirt, which reads, “Black: No Sugar No Cream.” Joelle remarks, “Well, what’s to hate?” in which Sam responds, “I can’t wear it, I have cream.” She confirms her privilege and fully embraces her “blackness” through her advocacy and her radio talk show, in which she speaks about racial issues that take place on her college campus.

Beyoncé’s defiance and Sam’s shame reveal the “double consciousness” that affects African American individuals. Nonetheless, Sam is ambivalent; while there is shame associated with her light skin, there also appears to be an acknowledgement. The different responses from these women speak to the fact that colorism is an issue. Wilder discusses the inconsistencies she has faced in her life because of colorism, explaining that no one is ever satisfied with her life decisions, in which some claim are not in line with her “anticolorism activism and advocacy” (27). For example, she received criticism for studying colorism while choosing to relax her hair and date a light-skinned, biracial man. At the same time, however, Wilder received criticism for shedding light on colorism, as black individuals believe this will only cause more problems for their

community (28). She illustrates that many black individuals do not believe that they have the capacity to be racist and many even deny the existence of discrimination within their community. These responses and different emotions show that this is an anxiety-producing issue, which speaks to the fact that it must be addressed.

These beauty standards, which are rooted in both racism and colorism, are also reflected in the way Coco is treated throughout the series. In the opening scene of Episode IV, Coco has a memory from when she was a little girl in school and the kids were instructed to play. She runs up to a toy box filled with dolls, and she grabs a white doll. Another young black girl grabs the doll out of her hand, and remarks, “No, you take the ugly one,” referring to the black doll that is left in the box. This scene reinforces Wilder’s theory in which light skinned individuals are valued more highly and are considered more “beautiful” than darker skinned individuals. Furthermore, this racist notion is also portrayed when Coco is invited to the Midsummer Nights Dream Party, which is a party where girls show up and wait for boys to claim them in order to “make out” with them. In this scene, all of Coco’s white friends are chosen by the men at the party first, and Coco is left there by herself, not chosen by any of the men. This act further emphasizes Wilder’s argument that lighter skin is valued more, and that both white and black men buy into this oppressive idea. These examples highlight racism, which is the underlying foundation of colorism. In another scene, the head of a black sorority on campus invites both Sam and Coco to an event. During this interaction, the sorority sister, Karen, tells Sam, “Your hair, it’s everything. Where’d you get it?” Sam, who is mixed race, confusingly responds, “My head.” This dialogue highlights the fact that Karen assumes Sam’s long, curly hair must have been a weave, and attaches value to her hair through complimenting her. When Coco joins the conversation, saying, “Mine too,” referring to her hair also being “real,” Karen sarcastically remarks, “Obviously,” insinuating that Coco’s hair

resembles African American hair, and that it is not “everything,” like Sam’s hair is. After this interaction and getting invited to an event by Karen, Coco decides to get a weave. She is shown getting her hair done, which is incredibly painful for her, and she tells Sam, “This weave is going to change my life,” which accentuates the importance of hair among black women. Sam calls her out on this later in the episode, remarking, “Dear white people, if you wanted to demoralize us with your European beauty standards, mission accomplished.” She then mocks Coco by tapping her head and repeatedly saying “ow, ow, ow,” as Coco kept saying “ow” as the weave was installed. Sam and Coco’s fight, as well as Coco’s agonizing experience with getting a weave, speaks to the pain of beauty oppression, which she faces as a result of colorism.

Colorism and the harsh beauty standards women of color are held to are also depicted in *Beyond the Lights*, in which Noni upholds white beauty standards, which is revealed when her mother pushes her to get a weave. Towards the end of the film, Noni confronts her mother, asserting, “So what, you give me a new nose, new body, some Indian chick’s hair. New and improved.” Noni’s weave mimics Caucasian hair, and her beauty is validated by those around her, such as in one scene when a black woman at the awards show yells, “Love the hair!” Noni turns around and looks ashamed at this comment, knowing that her hair is not “real” and that her beauty is a product of her mother’s oppression. In another scene, Noni decides to remove her weave and wears her hair naturally. She is embarrassed to show her boyfriend, Kaz, thinking he will reject the “real” her. She buys into this colorist notion by assuming that Kaz, her boyfriend, who is also black, will not accept her the way she is, ultimately needing a man’s approval to confirm how beautiful she is, as her opinion is not enough for her. This notion is also paralleled in an episode of *Dear White People*, when Coco is having sex with her boyfriend and he pulls her hair, accidentally ripping off her weave. She immediately reacts by hiding under the covers, saying, “I

need you to leave. Now,” thinking her boyfriend would negatively react to her having a weave. Just as Noni decides to shed her weave to become in touch with her real self, Coco becomes empowered to take out her weave after her boyfriend tells her that she would still look beautiful without it. Both women, however, seem concerned of the way their boyfriends will react to their real hair, as Coco also appears timid when she walks up to Troy without her weave. Essentially, both women look at themselves through men’s eyes and white standards, thinking the men will buy into these standards, to further confirm how beautiful they are. Despite Coco having the agency in deciding to wear her natural curls and to become in touch with her real self, towards the end of episode IX, Troy and Coco get into an argument, and she tells him, “I can’t believe I gave up my hair for you.” Although at first it seems as if Coco chooses to wear her natural hair, this is not necessarily the case. Not only is she dictated by Western beauty standards, she is influenced by Troy, who is a man and represents the patriarchy. Rather than taking her weave off for herself, she figures Troy would appreciate her more if she were not wearing her weave, which relates back to Wolf’s argument of women making choices about their beauty to appease men, who reinforce patriarchal beauty standards. These scenes reveal both women, Noni and Coco, buying into the beauty standards that exclusively oppress African American women.

Final thoughts

Beauty standards oppress all women, regardless of race or ethnicity, by reducing them to objects of feminine beauty, as objects of sexualized beauty, as narcissistic as a result of beauty, and as oppressors who reinforce beauty. Women of color, particularly African American women, however, have to deal with additional beauty standards that oppress them. Media representations display the beauty pressure they face, which is more complex and compounded by racism and

colorism. These standards deem their skin color as less valuable and hold them to certain beauty standards that come from Western European culture.

W.E.B. Du Bois once wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (80). Du Bois’s notion of “double consciousness” refers to the identity that is formed in the struggle oppressed people face in their oppressor’s world (Bruce 299). Du Bois coined the term to represent his experience along with the experience of African Americans in general in viewing themselves through the lens of the white-dominated, oppressive society. Double consciousness also speaks to the experiences of women of color, who have to face beauty standards of all women in addition to specific race-related beauty standards. These specific standards of beauty show the added burden beauty places on women of color, who are not only confined within the sexist patriarchy, but who are also trapped within a system of racism and colorism – which is known as “triple consciousness,” as devised by Black Feminist Theory (Henry). The black woman is stuck in a cycle of triple consciousness, in which she is oppressed by her own people, by all men, and by society as a whole. This effect is reflected when Coco gets her weave, and she winces, saying “ow, ow, ow.” Each “ow” is a layer of consciousness: sexism, racism, and colorism. These layers ultimately relate to women and beauty because women, specifically women of color, are subjugated to oppressive standards of beauty with race, beauty with colorism, and beauty reinforced by patriarchy. Therefore, Coco’s three “ow’s” speak to the pain of triple consciousness and shows that these layers of oppression are exclusively meant to confine and oppress women of color.

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