Miley Cyrus was going through her dangerous phase. She had tattoos and piercings and dildos and so, of course, she also had to have some black affect to complete the package. It is all part of the pop star toolkit. I decided to write about it. Now, it is pretty common for people, sometimes lots of them, to respond to things I write. Sometimes they share heartbreaking stories of recognition. Other times, angry diatribes about what I get wrong while being black, a woman, and popular. But of all the things I have written, nothing has inspired more direct, intense emotional engagement than what I wrote about post-Disney pop star Miley Cyrus. What had me stuck—momentarily—wasn't just the heightened emotions of those who took me to task, but rather who was leading the charge.

I am accustomed to men and white people being angry with me. That is par for the course. But when black women are mad at me it is a special kind of contrition, and I take the time to figure out my responsibility. Something clearly wasn't registering in this scenario, because black women were giving me the business.[3]

Sisters weren't really angry about my breakdown of just how dangerous Miley Cyrus's performance on a televised award show actually was. They weren't exactly angry that I pointed out the size and shape of the black woman dancers behind her. What many black women were angry about was how I located myself in what I'd written. I said, blithely as a matter of observable fact, that I am unattractive. Because I am unattractive, the argument went, I have a particular kind of experience of beauty, race, racism, and interacting with what we might call the white gaze. I thought nothing of it at the time I was writing it, which is unusual. I can usually pinpoint what I have said, written, or done that will piss people off and which people will be pissed off. I missed this one entirely.

The comments were brutal and feedback wasn't confined to the internet. Things got personal. One black male col-

league emailed me to say how a black woman friend told him she did not want to read some trash article about how ugly I am when my accompanying picture belied the claim. It was, she insinuated, an appeal for public validation of my physical attractiveness. I did not think that was true, but I was raised right. I told him that was fair and drank myself to sleep. Someone else sent me a link to a Facebook group where many women, but especially more than a few black women, took me to task for hating myself. The person who sent it did not know that I was already a member of the group and had been watching the carnage for days. I never mentioned it.

A few months after the essay had been published, I was scheduled to deliver the Mason Sankora Lecture for the Department of English at my alma mater, a historically black college. It was a brutal experience because an HBCU is a special place. I am not the first to acknowledge that, of course.[4] You can learn all about the legacy, the culture, the challenges, and the faults of black colleges in books, articles, movies, television shows, and documentaries. But few of those things have ever described the primary reason why HBCUs are so special to me.

When I was eleven years old, my waist caved in and my breasts sprung out. I could not be left alone at the school bus stop anymore. It was dangerous because men can be dangerous. I had some preparation for that. My mother had been, I believe, sexually victimized as a child. She doesn't speak of it except when her sentences fade out in retelling certain stories. But it was there in how protective she was of me, an only child of a single mother. There were no men allowed in our house except for family and even then only under her direct guidance. "I wanted your home to be safe, made for children and not adults," she has told me. Only children learn to gauge their single parent's emotional needs. It is vital for your survival and, you eventually learn, necessary if you are going to help your only adult protection in the world keep you both safe. I intuited from my mother's caution that I should be cautious of men, defensive of whatever I was calling home at any given time—my heart, my mental health, my car, my bedroom, my checkbook, my dreams, my body. Decades before I valued myself enough to be careful for myself, I was careful so that my mother would not worry.

If I knew to be cautious of men, I did not learn early enough to be cautious of white women. The first time a white woman teacher told me that my breasts were distracting was in the sixth grade. Over the years, white women with authority over me have told me how wrong or dangerous or deviant my body is. As with that teacher, many of their comments focus on my breasts as opposed to, say, my ass. The next year I entered middle school, where you learn the rules of sexual presentation. That is where I started to discover that while my breasts distracted some of the boys and men, all distractions were not created equally.

As part of the last generation of Carolinians to attend the integrated schools that *Brown v. Board of Education* ushered into existence, I went to school with a lot of white people. Because of the racial composition of the districts drawn in my then-progressive school district, I also went to school with many South Asian and Latino kids. That racial and ethnic integration mattered to the rules I learned about being sexual, desirable, visible, and unseen.

Unlike home, where much of my social world was filtered through my mother's preference for African American

history and culture, at school I learned that nothing was more beautiful than blond. The first time it happened was middle school. I heard a white boy, a bit of a loser with a crooked haircut who acted out because he couldn't bear to be unseen, say "that's a real blonde" about a girl in class, and I was confused. The only hair coloring I knew of at fourteen years old was the kind my grandmother used to "fix her edges," where curly gray hairs did not blend in properly with her wig. I had no idea what a "real" or "fake" blonde was, but I could intuit, much like my mother's fears, that the slacker boy was communicating some valuable social fact.

Later, we watched the musical *Grease* in a high school English class. In the final scene, when Olivia Newton John's Sandy shows up at the carnival in shiny skin-tight pants, all the black kids tittered. She looked funny! There was so much space between her legs! A white boy too tall to be in the tenth grade reared back and shouted, "My hot damn, Ms. Newton John!" I remember the scene so clearly, because that was when I got it. A whole other culture of desirability had been playing out just above and beyond my awareness, while my mostly black and Latino friends traded jokes at

gapped thighs, flat behinds, and never trusting a big butt and a smile. And when the teacher, a middle-aged white woman not unlike the one who once told me my breasts were too distracting, looked at the too-tall boy, she smiled at him and rolled her eyes, acknowledging his sexual appreciation of Sandy as normal if unmannerly. He smiled back and kind of shrugged as if to say, "I just can't help myself." The teacher and the too-tall boy were in cahoots. Sandy, that strange creature, was *beautiful.*

Middle school moments—school dances and lunchroom strategies and weekend sleepovers—start to shake out the racial segregation of even the most utopian integrated schools. The white kids were your school friends, never your home friends. You took the gifted math classes together but you would not be on the lake with them over the weekend. We took that as normal. When we were together, politely sociable in classrooms and hallways, I learned what was beautiful. By high school, I knew that I was not it.

All girls in high school have self-esteem issues. And most girls compare themselves to unattainable, unrealistic physical ideals. That is not what I am talking about. That is the

violence of gender that happens to all of us in slightly different ways. I am talking about a kind of capital. It is not just the preferences of a too-tall boy, but the way authority validates his preferences as normal. I had high school boyfriends. I had a social circle. I had evidence that I was valuable in certain contexts. But I had also parsed that there was something powerful about blondness, thinness, flatness, and gaps between thighs. And that power was the context against which all others defined themselves. That was beauty. And while few young women in high school could say they felt like they lived up to beauty, only the nonwhite girls could never be beautiful. That is because beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the preferences that reproduce the existing social order. What is beautiful is whatever will keep weekend lake parties safe from strange darker people.

When white feminists catalogue how beauty standards over time have changed, from the "curvier" Marilyn Monroe to the skeletal Twiggy to the synthetic-athletic Pamela Anderson, their archetypes belie beauty's true function: whiteness. Whiteness exists as a response to blackness.

Whiteness is a violent sociocultural regime legitimized by property to always make clear who is black by fastidiously delineating who is officially white. It would stand to reason that beauty's ultimate function is to exclude blackness. That beauty also violently conditions white women and symbolically precludes the existence of gender nonconforming people is a bonus. Some of the white girls I went to high school with may not have been beautiful. They may be thin when they should be fit or narrow of jaw when it should be strong. But, should power need them to be, social, economic, and political forces could make those girls beautiful by reshaping social norms. As long as the beautiful people are white, what is beautiful at any given time can be renegotiated without redistributing capital from white to nonwhite people.

Feminists have chronicled the changing standards of female beauty over time. One of the more popular examples of this is reborn on the internet every couple of years. In the meme, readers are asked to guess what size dress Marilyn Monroe would wear today. One is supposed to gasp at the realization that the iconic popular culture beauty was a *size twelve*. Memes are just born-digital nuggets of

cultural norms.[5] Whether the LOLcat is funny or Marilyn is beautiful or a gif of a YouTube prank is gross all depends on the norms of the culture that produced the meme.[6] In the case of Marilyn Monroe's dress size, the meme assumes a western U.S. iconography. Marilyn is not just beautiful; she defines the beauty ideals of an entire era in U.S. popular culture. If you do not recognize that belief as your own, the meme will make no sense. The expectation that you should be shocked by Marilyn's dress size also relies on an audience who will share an idea about who is fat. And the audience must share the notion that fat and beauty are antithetical. Of course, fat has not always been juxtaposed against beauty in white western culture. Artists point to the Rubenesque female bodies of the seventeenth century as an example of how fat bodies were once the beauty ideal. They are also an ideal meant to lionize a version of white western history.

Naomi Wolf made the idea of examining beauty ideals across time a white third wave feminist cause du jour. In *The Beauty Myth*, Wolf excises the expectations of female beauty from the economic context that produces them, holding both

up for feminist critique.[7] As others have noted, Wolf does not do much work on how economic and political conditions produce a white hegemonic body as the ultimate expression of beauty.[8] More precisely, Wolf demonstrates that as the sociopolitical context of whiteness—the political, state-sanctioned regime—tussles with historical forces like falling stock markets, mass media, suburbanization, and war, it will reshape an acceptable beauty standard for women that adjusts for body types, but never for body color. That was not Wolf's argument, but the absence of such a critique rather proves the point: beauty is for white women.[9] It is a white woman's problem, if you are a feminist, or a white woman's grace, if you are something else not feminist. Beauty, in a meme or in the beauty myth, only holds as a meaningful cultural artifact through which we can examine politics, economics, and laws, and identity if we all share the assumption that beauty *is* precisely *because* it excludes nonwhite women.

Black women have examined where we are located in the beauty myth, examining the political economy through our bodies. If we could never be assumed beautiful in white culture's memes, histories, and feminisms, we could create other

standards. Like feminist critiques of Rubens's renderings of white jiggling flesh, we have turned to cultural production for evidence of how we can ever be beautiful. Patricia Hill Collins's *Black Sexual Politics* is the most notable shot across the bow.[10] Collins does not exactly wade into the complicated depth of race, class, nationalism, culture, economics, and the politics of how black sexuality is refracted through the racial hierarchy that precludes black women from being beautiful. She is, however, critical to defining a school of intellectual thought that gives us tools to understand these dynamics. Some of her most strident critique is saved for the compromises inherent in hip-hop culture. Here is a cultural product where blackness can be a critical feedback loop to the white mass media images of black women as caricatures. What Collins finds instead is a space where black masculine ideas about black women create ever more hierarchies of desirability based on body type, for example. Those hierarchies rarely go so far as to challenge the supremacy of white female beauty.

Black hip-hop feminists brought a deeper engagement with the complexities of hip-hop culture to bear on Collins's

critique. Joan Morgan's *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* locates a black feminist voice in hip-hop culture, however marginalized in mainstream media.[11] Despite arguing that the generation I claim is "misguidedly over-protective, hopelessly male-identified, and all too often self-sacrificing," hip-hop era feminists excavate a cultural history where we have tried to claim a space for black beauty. In 2014, comedian Leslie Jones performed a skit on *Saturday Night Live* about the complexities of claiming that space.[12] In the skit, she turns the pain of racist beauty hierarchies that academics on the order of Marcus Hunter have studied into the kind of joke that made Richard Pryor so great. For approximately three minutes Jones bemoans her singleness. It is a frequent well from which she draws in her comedy. The topic is the designation of Lupita N'yongo as *People's* Most Beautiful Woman. Jones says that she is "waiting for them to put out the Most Useful List because that's where I'm gonna shine." It is a painful comment but not unfathomable given what beauty means, even if it said to be embodied by dark-skinned Kenyan-Mexican actress Nyong'o.

Jones is flatly saying that she is not beautiful and cannot be beautiful but that she is useful. She is locating her value not in beauty but in her use value. The real criticism was directed at her turn to slavery: "back in the slave days I would've never been single. I am six feet tall and I am strong! I'm just saying back in the slave days my love life would have been way better. Massa would've hooked me up with the best brother on the plantation." It hurts to watch the video. It's the kind of humor located in pain, not unlike that mined by Richard Pryor a generation ago. But we allowed Pryor his pain. He was an addict with self-esteem issues. He could set himself on fire and turn "nigga" into an incantation, often for white audiences. But Jones was not allowed to talk about the pain of being undesirable.

Free but black in the white western beauty myth, Jones is laying bare how futile it can be to desire beauty as a black woman. Many people slammed Jones for making light of slavery, especially of the systematic rape of enslaved black women. The argument was that she was mining historical pain for white consumption on a program that its creator Lorne Michaels once intoned would never be an "urban"

show. I recall watching the skit and the ensuing social media firestorm about it with dismay. Not a single black woman that I read or followed seemed to empathize with Jones's obvious pain, whereas I had not been able to watch the video clip without pausing several times. Where others saw insult, I saw injury. The joke was not on enslaved black women of yesteryear but on the idea that it would take a totalizing system of enslavement to counter the structural violence that beauty does to Jones in her life today. Perhaps I caught what others missed because I am something different than Patricia Hill Collins or Joan Morgan or other important black women scholars of black feminism.

I am dark, physically and culturally. My complexion is not close to whiteness and my family roots reflect the economic realities of generations of dark-complexioned black people. We are rural, even when we move to cities. Our mobility is modest. Our out-marriage rates to nonblack men are negligible. Our social networks do not connect to elite black social institutions. When we move around in the world, we brush up against the criminal justice system. I am not located at the top of hip-hop's attenuated beauty hierarchy. I am,

at best, in the middle. As Michael Jackson once sang, when you're too high to get over it and too low to get under it, you are stuck in the middle and the pain is thunder.

We have yet to make strides toward fleshing out a theory of desirability, the desire to be desired, in black feminist theory or politics. There is indeed a philosophy in how Jones desires being desired. That Nyong'o was atop a list of the world's most beautiful people does not invalidate the reality for many dark-skinned black women any more than Mark Zuckerburg making a billion dollars as a college drop-out invalidates the value of college for millions. Indeed, any system of oppression must allow exceptions to validate itself as meritorious. How else will those who are oppressed by the system internalize their own oppression? This is what I did not yet understand that when I was watching Ms. Newton John: I was not beautiful and could never—no matter what was in fashion to serve the interests of capital and power—become beautiful. That was the theory trapped in my bones when I left for my mecca, my HBCU.

My first night as a college freshman at my HBCU, I ordered a pizza. The man-boy who delivered it stared too

long before he handed it over. I snapped and grabbed my pizza. As I did, he muttered something about my phone number. I would date him off and on for a decade. As I walked back into the lobby of Eagleson Hall, I turned just as the pizza man-boy caught the eye of our dorm supervisor, an older black man. The man gave him a look like the one the teacher had once given the too-tall boy overtaken by Olivia Newton John's spandexed thighs. I was Sandy!

At this institution I could be a kind of beautiful: normal, normative, taken for granted as desirable. It is one of many reasons that I loved my HBCU. Not because I got a few phone numbers or had a few boyfriends, but because I wasn't being defined by a standard of beauty that, by definition, could not include someone who looked like me. Don't get me wrong, the standard is complicated. It has the same economic costs to perform it as the ones white feminists argue that the massive global beauty industry exacts from white women. The costs may be even higher, because black women have fewer resources to purchase the accoutrements of thin waists, thick hips, tattooed brows, elegant contouring, red-heeled shoes, and femme styling that contemporary black beauty

standards require. Black women experience negative consequences for not performing it sufficiently, especially if they are not straight, cisgender, and otherwise normative. But, feeling desired opened up avenues of inclusion that shaped my sense of self.

That inclusion is what I was coming home to the day I delivered a lecture at my dear ol' NCC. After sixty minutes or so of talking about the things my hosts had asked me to discuss, I opened the floor to questions. The first one was from a young sister about halfway back and to my left. The lighting shadowed her face, but I could make out her body language. I speak black woman fluently. My body recognized hers and I stood up straighter as she took the microphone and said, "We read your thing in class and Miley Cyrus ain't even do all that. Just because you ugly don't mean all black women are ugly." The room lit up. It seems all the English professors in attendance had assigned that essay as an example of what I do. And everyone in attendance had thoughts and feelings about it.

I did a little verbal dancing, trying to explain how we critique popular culture, and then moved on to the next

question. Another young woman, another comment on how black and white people are friends now, unlike back in the day. Those black women are Miley's friends—and the white women I have written about who touch me in public are apparently doing so because they want to be my friend. Again, the idea of my body's value in social contexts was the a priori issue. These students were saying, in as many ways as they could, that I could not be ugly because white people find me desirable.

They were also saying, in their insistence and with their bodies, what more seasoned black women were saying to me in response to my essay. They were saying we had fought too long, worked too hard, come too far to concede that what white people have said about us is true. White people, as a collective system of cultural and economic production that has colonized nonwhite people across the globe through military and ideological warfare, have said that black people are animalistic. But, as sister bell hooks and many others have pointed out, animals with dicks can be useful. They can be "tall, dark, and handsome" if not also dangerous. There is no ideological exception

to anti-blackness for black women but through colorism. Mulatto, "mixed," high yellow, light—all euphemisms for black people whose phenotype signals that they may have some genetic proximity to whiteness. But, by definition, black women are not beautiful except for any whiteness that may be in them.

Black women have worked hard to write a counternarrative of our worth in a global system where beauty is the only legitimate capital allowed women without legal, political, and economic challenge. That last bit is important. Beauty is not *good* capital. It compounds the oppression of gender. It constrains those who identify as women against their will. It costs money and demands money. It colonizes. It hurts. It is painful. It can never be fully satisfied. It is not useful for human flourishing. Beauty is, like all capital, merely valuable.[13]

Because it is valuable, black women have said that we are beautiful too. We have traveled the cultural imaginations of the world's nonwhite people assembling a beauty construct that does not exclude us. We create culture about our beauty. We negotiate with black men to legitimize our

beauty. We try to construct something that feels like liberation in an inherently oppressive regime, balancing peace with our marginally more privileged lighter-skinned black women while refuting the global caste status of darker-skinned black women. Some of us try to include multiple genders and politics in our definition of beauty. This kind of work requires discursive loyalty. We must name it and claim it, because naming is about the only unilateral power we have.

When I say that I am unattractive, concede that I am ugly, the antithesis of beauty, I sound like I am internalizing a white standard of beauty that black women fight hard to rise above. But my truth is quite the opposite. When oppressed people become complicit in their oppression, joining the dominant class in their ideas about what we are, it is symbolic violence. Like all concepts, symbolic violence has a context that is important for using it to mean what we intend to mean. It is not just that internalizing the values of the dominant class violently stigmatizes us. Symbolic violence only makes sense if we accept its priors: all preferences in imperial, industrialized societies are shaped by

the economic system. There aren't any "good" preferences. There are only preferences that are validated by others, differently, based on social contexts.

These contexts should not just be reduced to race, class, and gender, as important as those are. Institutions that legitimize the "right" ideas and behaviors also matter. That's why beauty can never be about preference. "I just like what I like" is always a capitalist lie. Beauty would be a useless concept for capital if it were only a preference in the purest sense. Capital demands that beauty be coercive. If beauty matters at all to how people perceive you, how institutions treat you, which rules are applied to you, and what choices you can make, then beauty must also be a structure of patterns, institutions, and exchanges that eats your preferences for lunch.

Internalizing your inferiority is violent. Psychologically it cleaves you in two, what W.E.B. DuBois famously called the double veil. As our science becomes more advanced, we find that the violence may even show up in our bodies as stress. Structurally, that violence becomes coded in the social norms around respectability that we black people use to do the dominant culture's work of disciplining other black people's identities, behaviors, and bodies. It is rational to check me if I am doing this kind of work for the devil.

But lest we forget, the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing us that he does not exist. That is why naming is political. Our so-called counternarratives about beauty and what they demand of us cannot be divorced from the fact that beauty is contingent upon capitalism. Even our resistance becomes a means to commodify, and what is commodified is always, always stratified. There is simply no other way. To coerce, beauty must exclude. Exclusion can be part of a certain kind of liberation, where one dominant regime is overthrown for another, but it cannot be universal.

I love us loving ourselves under the most difficult conditions, but I must also write into my idea of truth and freedom. From my perch, trying to fillet the thinnest sections of popular culture, history, sociology, and my own biography, there isn't any room for error. I have to call a thing a thing. And sometimes, when we are trapped in the race

not to be complicit in our own oppression, self-definition masquerades as a notion of loving our black selves in white terms. More than that, critique that hides the power being played out in the theater of our everyday lives only serves that power. It doesn't actually challenge it.

When I say that I am unattractive or ugly, I am not internalizing the dominant culture's assessment of me. I am naming what has been done to me. And signaling who did it.

I am glad that doing so unsettles folks, including the many white women who wrote to me with impassioned cases for how beautiful I am. They offered me neoliberal self-help nonsense that borders on the religious. They need me to believe beauty is both achievable and individual, because the alternative makes them vulnerable. If you did not earn beauty, never had the real power to reject it, then you are as much a vulnerable subject as I am in your own way. Deal with that rather than dealing with me. Compared with the forms of oppression they can now see via their proximity to me, it may seem to privileged people that it is easier to fix me than it is to fix the world. I live to disabuse people of that notion.

But it is interesting to think about why many white women, a handful of white men, and a few black men rejected my claim. Their interests cannot be the same as those of black women, whose stake in my claim that beauty excludes me is deeply intimate.

White women, especially white feminists, need me to lean in to pseudoreligious consumerist teachings that beauty is democratic and achievable. Beauty must be democratic. If it is not, then beauty becomes a commodity, distributed unequally and, even worse, at random. This is a notion often ascribed to a type of feminism, be it neoliberal feminism, marketplace feminism, or consumption feminism. But well-meaning white women also need me to believe because accessing beauty is about the totalizing construct of gender, in this case femininity, in a world where other forms of lifestyle consumption are splintering.

You can use an app to buy the foods of the rich, the music of the cool, the art of the revolutionary, and the look of the aspirational. But femininity is resistant to appification and frictionless consumption. Femininity is not about biological sex, but about the traits that have become ascribed to

biological sex. And this set of traits carries a set of ideas and histories contingent upon the economics and politics of any given time. You cannot separate what it means to be a "woman," often used to mean a performance of acceptable femininity, from the conditions that decide what is and is not acceptable across time and space. We all do this kind of performance of ourselves, be it our gender or race or social class or national identity or culture. As we are doing it, we are always negotiating with powerful ideas about what constitutes a woman.

Beauty has an aesthetic, but it is not the same as aesthetics, not when it can be embodied, controlled by powerful interests, and when it can be commodified. Beauty can be manners, also a socially contingent set of traits. Whatever power decides that beauty is, it must always be more than reducible to a single thing. Beauty is a wonderful form of capital in a world that organizes everything around gender and then requires a performance of gender that makes some of its members more equal than others.

Beauty would not be such a useful distinction were it not for the economic and political conditions. It is trite at

this point to point out capitalism, which is precisely why it must be pointed out. Systems of exchange tend to generate the kind of ideas that work well as exchanges. Because it can be an idea *and* a good *and* a body, beauty serves many useful functions for our economic system. Even better, beauty can be political. It can exclude and include, one of the basic conditions of any politics. Beauty has it all. It can be political, economic, external, individualized, generalizing, exclusionary, and perhaps best of all a story that can be told. Our dominant story of beauty is that it is simultaneously a blessing, of genetics or gods, and a site of conversion. You can *become* beautiful if you accept the right prophets and their wisdoms with a side of products thrown in for good measure. Forget that these two ideas—unique blessing and earned reward—are antithetical to each other. That makes beauty all the more perfect for our (social and political) time, itself anchored in paradoxes like freedom *and* property, opportunity *and* equality.[14]

There is now an entire shelf among the periodicals at my nearby chain bookstore filled with magazines that will give me five meditations or three coloring book pages or nine

yoga retreats or fourteen farmhouse ideas or nineteen paper-crafting inspirations that, if purchased, will acculturate me to achievable "inner beauty." Mind you, the consumption is always external and public. These are quite literally called "lifestyle" magazines, which begs the question "Whose lifestyle?" These are ways of expressing a kind of femininity, a kind of woman, for whom beauty is defined to selectively include or exclude. These are consumption goods made for a lifestyle associated with white western women of a certain status, class, profession, and disposition. These are for women who *can* be beautiful, if only conditionally, and contingent upon the needs of markets and states—and the men whom states and markets serve most and best. All of the admonishments that I should "love myself" and am "as cute as a button" from well-intentioned white women stem from their need for me to consume what is produced for them.

What those white women did not know or could not admit to knowing is that I cannot, by definition, ever be that kind of beautiful. In the way that gender has so structured how we move through the intersecting planes of class

and status and income and wealth that shape our world and our selves, so does race. Rather, I should say, so does blackness, because everyone—including white women—have "race." It is actually blackness, as it has been created through the history of colonization, imperialism, and domination, that excludes me from the forces of beauty. For beauty to function as it should, it must exclude me. Big Beauty—the structure of who can be beautiful, the stories we tell about beauty, the value we assign beauty, the power given to those with beauty, the disciplining effect of the fear of losing beauty you might possess—definitionally excludes the kind of blackness I carry in my history and my bones. Beauty is for white women, if not for all white women. If beauty is to matter at all for capital, it can never be for black women.

But if I *believe* that I can become beautiful, I become an economic subject. My desire becomes a market. And my faith becomes a salve for the white women who want to have the right politics while keeping the privilege of never having to live them. White women need me to believe I can

earn beauty, because when I want what I cannot have, what they have becomes all the more valuable.

I refuse them.

I also refuse the men. Oh, the men. I wish I could save this for another essay that I would promise to write but never do. Women's desire for beauty is a powerful weapon for exploitation. Even if the desire is natural, in that it is rational and also subconsciously coercive, open wanting against a backdrop of predatory constructs of cross-gender interactions is dangerous for women. There is an entire industry of men, self-proclaimed pickup artists, who sell their strategies for landing women. One of the most common techniques involves negging. This is when a man approaches a woman whose embodied beauty exceeds his own status. She is "out of his league." His league is typically determined by height, penis size, sexual experience, body type, and money, but also can take into account tastes and preferences. Some men say they turn to pickup artistry when the preferences so well suited to their social position—say, voting for a reviled political candidate or playing certain types of video games—

are devalued in mate markets. Once a woman is identified, the pickup artist might compliment her style, but mention that her teeth are imperfect. This is supposed to destabilize the woman, make her question what power she holds in the exchange, and eventually mold her into a more docile subject for sexual conquest.

Good men love to mock pickup artists and negging as evidence of their goodness. But good men also consume beauty, contributing much to its value. Without good men, the socio-cultural institution of Big Beauty could not be as powerful as it is. Big Beauty encompasses the norms that shape desirable traits in a romantic partner but also acceptable presentations of women in work, at play, and in public. It is the industrial complex of cosmetics, enhancements and services that promise individual women beauty. The idea that Big Beauty is evil but good men are nice is part of Big Beauty's systematic charm.

Big Beauty is just negging without the slimy actor. The constant destabilization of self is part and parcel of beauty's effectiveness as a social construct. When a woman must consume the tastes of her social position to keep it,

but cannot control the tastes that define said position, she is suspended in a state of being negged. A good man need only then to come along and capitalize on the moment of negging, exploit the value of negged women, and consume the beauty that negs. It is really quite neat, if you think about it.

For black women who are engaging black men with the assumption that sexual engagement is within the realm of possibility, negging develops a new depth. I suspect this is true of all nonwhite male-female interactions shaped by sexual potential. They may be moderated by their proximity to whiteness—a fair-skinned Latina might have a different depth of this experience than a darker-skinned Afro-Latina—but the relations still hold: women who are not white must contend with beauty through the gaze of white men *and* nonwhite men.[15] This is perhaps the hardest of all these situations for me to describe. How do I distill something that is so diffuse across my life? That is what the relationship between my agency, the constraints of beauty, and the structure of race feels like—it has always been a part of the threads that are stitching me.

What these black men seemed to have wanted is the easiest way to suspend me between their wanting and my own. They needed me to reflect the duality of beauty regimes that exist in their corner of the social world. That's the corner where heterosexual masculinity does to them similar things that heterosexual femininity does to me but differently, at variable rates and with distinct political consequences. But unlike the space from which I emerge, these black men can poke holes in the walls that for me are impenetrable. They must travel through sexual ideologies about bulls and bucks, losing some skin as they scrape through the walls that beauty erects around social status. That is why it is so important for me, a sister and a sista, to reflect back at them the dominant beauty structure of white femininity *and* the subordinate beauty structure of black womanhood.

Black women have to both aspire to the unattainable paradox of white beauty and cultivate its counterparadox *because both must exist for black masculinity to retain the privilege of moving between two social spaces of potential mates*. If I reinforce the white beauty norm, then I reproduce it in a way that benefits white women. If black masculinity

can or may or does benefit from having the option of hitching its star to white beauty, then it needs black women to play our part. But where there is dominance, there is also subordination. Black people have a whole structure of class and income and wealth and tastes and preferences. It stands to reason that we also have a construct of beauty that shapes and stratifies good black women and bad black women, and so on. If black masculinity benefits from the option of hooking up with black women, then it has to value at least the performance of black beauty. Playing my part would look like espousing what a thick black stallion I am, while coveting the beautiful white woman I could never become. If I play my part, black masculinity benefits. White women needed me to neg myself and black men needed me to neg them at the expense of myself. Either way, I was losing and I knew it.

Repeatedly people have said to me in their own way, from within their own stratified statuses, that I need to believe I am beautiful or can become beautiful—not for my own benefit, but because it serves so many others. I reject the

implicit bid for solidarity from every single white woman and I reject every overture from a man who wants to convince me that I am beautiful. I want nice people with nice-enough politics to look at me, reason for themselves that I am worthy, and feel convicted when the world does not agree. God willing they may one day extrapolate my specific case to the general rule, seeing the way oppression marginalizes others to their personal benefit.

I do not have any issues of self-worth—well, no more than anyone who used to be young and now is not. I am sensible. I know the streets in pregentrified communities where old men will still look twice and someone behind a counter might give me an extra piece of something for free. I know that cute and attractive are categories that exist, with their own attended privileges. But none of these things negates the structural apparatus that controls access to resources and ad hoc designates those with capital as beauty's gatekeepers. When beauty is white and I am dark, it means that I am more likely to be punished in school, to receive higher sentences for crimes, less likely to marry, and less likely to

marry someone with equal or higher economic status.[16] Denying these empirical realities is its own kind of violence, even when our intentions are good.

They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that ugly is as ugly does. Both are lies. Ugly is everything done to you in the name of beauty.

Knowing the difference is part of getting free.

Dying to Be Competent