

WAITING TOO LONG TO EXHALE: DYSFUNCTIONAL LOVE IN AFRICAN-
AMERICAN FILM

BY

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ABSTRACT

The topic of this thesis aims to explore representations of romantic relationships in African-American film. My argument is that love, as expressed in African-American film, is portrayed as dysfunctional and problematic. The artifact serving as evidence of my argument and the source of my analysis is *Waiting to Exhale*. Due to the cross-disciplinary nature of this thesis, which intersects the disciplines of Communication, Film, and Sociology, the three scholars I have chosen to serve as a foundation to my argument and analysis are Eric King Watts, Stuart Hall, and Donald Bogle. Through cross-disciplinary conversation, cinematic and socio-cultural filtration and analysis, I explore the quality of the varying dynamics and relationships between the characters (functional/dysfunctional), as well as the characters' depth and whether stereotypes and relationship patterns in African-American film play a role in what is being communicated about love in *Waiting to Exhale*. While this thesis explores the four female characters in *Waiting to Exhale*, this thesis specifically focuses on representations of romantic love in African-American film, serving as a continuation of the larger conversation regarding African-American representation.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of this thesis aims to explore representations of romantic relationships in African-American film. A professor once told me that one could tell a lot about a scholar/researcher by what he or she spends most of his or her time studying/researching; in my case, it is true: I am a scholar of African-American descent, I love culture, and I love film. Film represents so many different aspects of the human experience: happiness, loss, culture, adventure, and fantasy, among many other facets. Film behaves as a mini time-capsule, expressing the time period(s), the roles and structure of a society, as well as the themes in everyday life. Most important to this thesis, film represents our ideas about love.

Being a part of the African-American culture, I have always been interested in witnessing how my culture, in particular, plays out on screen. There are so many differences within the culture that for any one film to capture all the differences and variety that the African-American culture embodies would be nearly impossible. However, as a fan of African-American film, what I find, and what other scholars have found, is that there are not many different narratives of the romantic experience being expressed in films with an African-American cast. Often, I ask myself, can I relate to the characters? Can I identify with their circumstances? Is this an accurate portrayal of what I know as love in African-American culture? My argument is no: more often than not, love, as expressed in African-American film, is portrayed as dysfunctional, problematic, and seldom a romantic fairy-tale.

The first big questions that come to mind when looking at representations of love in African-American film are: What and how is love defined in African-American films,

today? *Who* is defining love in these African-American films? Are these representations stereotypical? In order to answer those questions, I needed an artifact (film) from the last 30 years that I could utilize in defining what love is and how it is expressed in African-American film, today. In addition, this film would serve as evidence to my argument that love expressed in African-American film is dysfunctional and problematic. The artifact that I will use in this analysis is: *Waiting to Exhale*. *Waiting to Exhale* (1995) is a Forest Whitaker-directed film, based on the Terry McMillan fictional novel of the same name, that highlights the romantic, heterosexual relationships expressed through four female characters: Gloria Matthews, Savannah Jackson, Robin Stokes, and Bernadine Harris.

I chose film over television, in particular, because watching a film is still an event for consumers, as opposed to television. This means that, with all of the emerging technology, such as television programs being available on-demand, the presence of DVRs/TiVos, in addition to more viewing options (i.e. television programs being available on your smartphone, computer, tablets), television viewing is much more casual than it was, say, in the 1950s. Due the variety of available viewing options and shortening attention spans, many more opportunities for distraction are present, now making it less of an event; television is everywhere, and people are now paying attention to it solely whenever they feel like it.

This is not always the case with film, even in today's technological advances; one could watch a film on any one of the mediums previously mentioned, but consumers still go to the movie theaters, as evidenced by the still-high weekend ticket sales. Consumers are essentially still locked into watching a film for an average of two hours, without distractions, similar to the way original movie consumers viewed films. Imagine trying

to remember a specific episode in a six-season television series, compared to remembering a particular scene in a two-hour movie. In thinking about this project, it became less of a question of television versus film, and more about which film I would choose.

In deciding upon which films to pick, it was important for me to choose an artifact that was a non-independent project, originally released in theaters, and grossed fifty-million dollars or more in revenue; high-grossing films indicate a high theater attendance rate and reach. Of all the relatively recent (post 1984), high-grossing African-American films dealing primarily with love and released in theaters, *Waiting to Exhale* fit the bill. In the nineteen years since its release, *Waiting to Exhale* has made over eighty-one million dollars (Information courtesy of Box Office Mojo. Used with permission.) (boxofficemojo.com). To this day, it can still be seen airing on various television networks, including Black Entertainment Television.

In addition to *Waiting to Exhale*, I explore viewer consumption of these dysfunctional representations; I also explore historical images of African-Americans in the media. This is an important contribution to the communication field because romantic love in African-American film, either does not exist (at worst) or is highly underrepresented (at best) in academia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the cross-disciplinary nature of this project, which intersects the disciplines of Communication, Film, and Sociology, there is not one definitive scholar or theory that could be used as a theoretical foundation for my analysis of *Waiting to Exhale*. In order to get a full perspective for my analysis, scholars from the fields of

Communication, Film, and Sociology are essential. The three scholars I have chosen to serve as a foundation to my argument and analysis are Eric King Watts, Stuart Hall, and Donald Bogle.

Professor Eric King Watts is known for his discussions of representations of Blackness, public voice, and the idea of spectacular consumption. In an article written with Mark Orbe, Watts describes spectacular consumption as

...a process through which the relations among cultural forms, the culture industry, and the lived experiences of persons are shaped by public consumption...The illustration of blackness as sameness and blackness as otherness arises out of conflicted attitudes toward black culture...Furthermore, as an object of spectacular consumption, the meaning of ‘authentic’ black life and culture is partly generative of mediated and mass marketed images (Watts and Orbe 1).

Watts’ idea of spectacular consumption serves as a basis for putting love expressed in African-American film into a cultural context. I build upon Watts’ concept of spectacular consumption and answer, “What is love in African-American film from an overhead, removed view? How much does public consumption shape what we have come to know as African-American culture, and specifically love through African-American film?”

The late Stuart Hall was a scholar who is known for his contributions to ideas on “Blackness” in popular culture, specifically the sectors in which he claims African-Americans are “allowed” to thrive. Hall states,

I do believe these repertoires of black popular culture, which, since we were excluded from the cultural mainstream were often the only

performative spaces we had left, were overdetermined from at least two directions: they were partly determined by their inheritances; but they were also critically determined by the diasporic conditions in which the connections were forged. Selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions, alongside African heritage – this is Cornel West again – led to linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hair-styles, ways of walking, standing, and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie, and community (Hall 290).

This provides a great foundation as to how African-Americans are represented, and I apply this specifically to love in African-American film, which is a sector Hall has not addressed. I explore if and how African-American actors in film are relegated to dysfunctional love roles as a result of what is “allowed.”

Film historian Donald Bogle discusses in his book, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, the ways in which the depiction of African-Americans in film has changed and stayed the same. Donald Bogle’s vast amounts of research on African-Americans in entertainment throughout history serves an important guide for the historical representations of African-Americans in film. With his historical contribution, I explore whether dysfunctionality is something relatively recent in African-American films dealing with love.

METHODOLOGY

While cross-disciplinary scholars and theorists provide the foundation to my argument, the analysis of *Waiting to Exhale* is through a cinematic and socio-cultural lens. Filtering my analysis through these lenses extracts the defining moments and scenes that point to the presentations and representations of thought, emotion, expectation, passion, and “reality” with regards to love.

Utilizing a cinematic lens, the defining moments and scenes relevant to my argument can emerge. Following the concepts of the mise-en-scene, and paying attention to the visual and audio cues that change the trajectory of the film, important scenes can be explored further. Examples of visual cues can be examining which objects or characters are at the center of the scene, what objects or characters come in and out of focus, how the lighting may or may not change throughout a scene, and how movement (either by character or via camera zooming techniques) can play into the significance of the moment. Examples of audio cues include what is said (or not said) by the characters, how loudly or softly people are speaking, and whether the music (or any other sound) stops, starts, or repeats (sometimes abruptly) at a given particular moment. These visual and audio contributions to the film will serve as the precursor to the socio-cultural analysis of the film.

In using a socio-cultural lens, I explore what implicitly and explicitly is being communicated about love (norms and values) and how it is expressed and experienced; I also explore the quality of the varying dynamics and relationships between the characters (functional/dysfunctional); this includes the characters’ depth and whether stereotypes and relationship patterns in African-American film play a role in what is being communicated about love in *Waiting to Exhale*.

This thesis is a continuation of the larger conversation regarding African-Americans in film. I explore the four female characters in *Waiting to Exhale*, each analyzed in an individual chapter, focusing on their individual and specific journeys through love as African-American women. Through their stories, this project becomes a journey in itself: cross-disciplinary conversation, cinematic and socio-cultural filtration, and analysis of yet another African-American movie expressing dysfunctional, problematic, romantic love.

CONSUMPTION, REPRESENTATION, AND HISTORICAL IMPACT

It is Gloria's sleepover party birthday celebration, and all the four of the women are together, listening to soulful music and bonding under the influence of what appears to be a good amount of champagne.

Savannah: Whatever happened to the good old days?

Robin and Bernadine (in unison): What good old days?

Savannah: You know, the days where men actually flirted with you and asked you out on a real date, you know? Where they hiding?

Robin: They're not hiding; they're too damn scared to make a commitment.

Bernadine: Uh uh. They're with *white* women.

Gloria: They're gay.

Savannah: Or married.

Robin: They're ugly.

Savannah: They're behind bars.

Robin: Got bad credit.

Gloria: Got little dicks and can't fuck. That's what it is.

Robin: Or they got big dicks and still can't fuck.

Gloria: They wanna spank ya.

Robin: That's not always a bad thing.

Bernadine: Too possessive.

Gloria: They want you to be their mama.

Bernadine: And their daddy.

Robin: And they ugly.

Savannah: We already said they was ugly.

Bernadine: Yes, good and ugly.

Robin: Inside out ugly.

Savannah: If you're ugly inside, you're ugly outside.

Bernadine: Inside out. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

This is perhaps the best and most appropriate *Waiting to Exhale* scene. It sums up all four of the characters' relationship hopes, dreams, concerns, complaints, woes, and reasons behind their suffering. The amount of problematic dysfunction that these characters view as normal, all encompassing, and as fact, is quite a miserable and bleak outlook, especially considering that all of these characters, analyzed and discussed in later chapters, repeatedly engage in and accept this type of behavior in their romantic relationships. How do these messages conveyed in *Waiting to Exhale* fit into the consumption, representation, and history of African-American romantic relationships in film? The scholars below place it in the proper perspective.

SPECTACULAR CONSUMPTION

In examining a popular television commercial, Eric King Watts, along with Mark P. Orbe, discuss the idea of spectacular consumption, where "...the meaning of 'authentic' black life and culture is partly generative of mediated and mass marketed images" (Watts and Orbe 1). This idea can be applied to *Waiting to Exhale*. In an industry that has consistently glorified African-American stereotypes of violence, crime, poverty, and all types of dysfunction (romantic dysfunction included), the experiences depicted in *Waiting to Exhale* have meaning and are consumed as "authentic" of the African-American experience, simply because it is a marketed and mediated image.

However, spectacular consumption is a problematic reality because movies, individual or combined as a whole, cannot possibly come to symbolize all of African-American life, especially if these movies are depicting the same narratives and themes.

Digging further into that notion, Watts and Orbe argue that, “from the perspective of spectacular consumption, the intensity of the pleasure of consuming the Other is directly (and paradoxically) related to the replication and magnification of ‘authentic’ difference” (3). This signifies that there is a correlation between the repeating of the same, exaggerated images and how ‘real’ something is perceived and preferred to be (in this case, love in African-American film). The presence of these repeated images shape our outlook toward what is being perceived. “By destabilizing the ways through which we ascribe meaning and value to our experiences, the spectacle mediates our understanding of the world through commercialized signs. Although this process may not be conspiratorial (Hall, 1995), it is hardly random” (Watts and Orbe 4). The fact that these signifiers and media messages by the writers, producers, directors, and film companies are intentional at some level, or at any level, is alarming.

In the case of *Waiting to Exhale*, race plays one of the leading contributing factors to the messages surrounding love that are cultivated in the film. Watts and Orbe state that “indeed, ‘authentic’ blackness is *more* valuable to spectacular consumption than representations of blackness as sameness precisely *because* it is more anxiety producing” (Watts and Orbe 4). It is more valuable to see blackness, or otherness, via spectacular consumption because it is an entertaining way for dominant groups to “tour” a different structure of roles without necessarily having to actually “experience” it, themselves; this

is usually at the Other's expense or detriment (in this case, the Other is the idea of African-American romance).

Based on Watts and Orbe's ideas on spectacular consumption and the Other, representations of love in African-American film can be viewed in the same fashion as Dr. Chandra D.L. Waring's findings in "They See Me as Exotic...That Intrigues Them: Gender, Sexuality and the Racially Ambiguous Body." In her study, Waring examines, in part, the dating experiences of biracials under the umbrella of "exotic" or the Other. One of Waring's respondents, Rachel, revealed that her ex-boyfriend expressed an excitement when she wore her hair in braids because he had never slept with an African-American woman before (Waring 312); to that, Waring asserts, "Rachel's former boyfriend can experience sexual endeavors with a black-coded body once (or even a few times) and then he [can return] to interpreting her body as white" (Waring 312). Waring's findings correlate with this same idea of the mystification of the Other in spectacular consumption; Rachel was, at least temporarily, the Other. Instead of it being a shared intimate experience, Rachel became a fetish, a representation beyond her individuality, and a temporary experience at the pleasure of her partner of the dominate group (white).

REPRESENTATIONS

This attention and concern as to how African-Americans should be represented in the arts is nothing new. The conversation regarding representation goes back as far as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, when African-American art exploded onto the scene in a new and meaningful way. In Watts' essay, "Cultivating a Black Public Voice: W. E. B. Du Bois and the 'Criteria of Negro Art,'" he analyses the plight over African American representation in the arts.

To speak against such characterizations or for more diverse representations of black life was to risk violating an oppressive convention of one's 'proper place.' Indeed, one's very motives for speaking about the goodness of blackness could be derided as 'propagandistic' on the grounds that one's racial consciousness signified false (inauthentic) consciousness (Watts 185).

Here, Watts emphasizes this struggle to have a voice as an African-American artist aiming to progress in the arts beyond the constructed stereotypes. To put this in perspective, the Harlem Renaissance took place over 85 years ago, yet the discourse regarding African-American representation is still necessary, needed, and required.

In his journal article, "'Voice' and 'Voicelessness' in Rhetorical Studies," Watts defines "... 'voice' [as] the enunciation and the acknowledgement of the obligations and anxieties of living in community with others" (Watts 180). The most interesting aspect of voice when examining it in *Waiting to Exhale*, is primarily figuring out whose voice is actually being heard. On the surface, a viewer could easily assert that the voice of *Waiting to Exhale* is that of upper-middle class, African-American women. However, digging deeper, the argument could be made that the voice is that of a mediated, societal structure that has been put in place to construct an "idea" of, not only how African-American romantic relationships are, but a suggestion as to how African-American relationships are to *be*.

This concept of a cultivated, stereotypical perception points to the late Stuart Hall's critiques of "Blackness" in popular culture. In the cultural theorist's essay, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?," Stuart Hall notes the aforementioned "control

over narratives and representations [that are passed] into the hands of the established cultural bureaucracies, sometimes without a murmur” (Hall 289). Hall also historically contextualizes Blacks in media as essentially performing in spaces in which we were/are allowed (290). This not only applies to performance spaces, but in terms of entertainment, it also applies to the types of roles, programs, and films in which African-Americans actors have been/ are casted.

Hall argues that there are a lot of components that make up an identity, for example, “You can be black *and* British, not because that is a necessary position to take in 1992, but because even those two terms, joined now by the coupler ‘and’ instead of opposed to one another, do not exhaust all of our identities” (291). This is true, but even today, with African-American films often operating in these constricted spaces, the theme with the *Waiting to Exhale* women participating in and experiencing dysfunctional, problematic relationships with their romantic partners has become an African-American signifier in film, based on repeated portrayals of stereotypes. These dysfunctional relationships can be seen in films before *and* after *Waiting to Exhale*’s release; this includes movies like *The Color Purple*, *Baby Boy*, *Daddy’s Little Girls*, and *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*.

Hall also argues that, “...it is to the diversity not the homogeneity, of black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention” (292). Heightened awareness of the lack of diversity in the African-American experience in media/ popular culture, as well as the analysis and consideration of African-American romantic representation in film, is one of the foundational threads examined in this thesis that

serves as a connection, not only for the four characters of *Waiting to Exhale*, but also for the romantic African-American films as a whole.

In *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Simon Frith explains that it is easy to interpret culture and ascribe it social conditions (Frith 109); “the difficult trick is to do the analysis the other way around, to show how the base produced *this* superstructure, to explain why an idea or experience takes on *this* artistic or aesthetic form, and not another, equally ‘reflective’ or ‘representative’ of its conditions of production” (Frith 109). Frith, although he was referring to music, demonstrates the media’s responsibility and dominant role in the portrayal of culture. Applying this statement to representations of love in African-American film helps convey that the negative, stereotypical African-American representations are not necessarily a “chicken or the egg” concept.

HISTORY AND IMPACT

In the book *Toms, Coons, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film*, African-American film historian Donald Bogle explained that, upon its release, critics were not initially supportive of *Waiting to Exhale* (375). Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker*, “...like other critics, saw something else, which proved more important: *the audience*, which disregarded the critics and turned *Waiting to Exhale* into a hit” (375). Upon seeing the movie, I, too, recall the theater being filled with women *and* men; it was certainly a happening not to be ignored. Film historian Donald Bogle goes on to say that “*Waiting to Exhale* became something of a cultural phenomenon. The media reported on the large turnout of African-American women who saw the film with friends – and who saw the film several times, turning the viewings into an uninhibited pop communal experience” (376). I vividly remember the women of *Waiting to Exhale* making an

appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to promote the movie, a move that arguably added to its “cultural phenomenon” appeal.

What made this film such a stand out body of work in 1995? Looking back at the history of African-American film, most acting roles in the beginning were not favorable toward the African-American community, as most roles given to African-Americans were stereotypical and degrading. Stuart Hall recalls African-Americans in film; “In the 1930s black actors principally appeared in mainstream films in the subordinate roles of jesters, simpletons, faithful retainers and servants.” (Hall 252).

Stepin Fetchit was an example of a simpleton in film. In *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood*, Bogle describes the ironic meaning of characters, like Fetchit. “The arrival of Fetchit, more than any other personality, really led to the growth of Black Hollywood, the idea that a colored actor could have a highfalutin career in the movies – and could be every bit as flamboyant, as reckless, as talked-about, even as rich as his counterparts. As the silent era came to an end and the age of the talkie began, Fetchit, in many respects, fully embodied values shared by both the larger film colony and Black Hollywood” (95). Fetchit was regarded in the African-American sector of Hollywood as proof that African-American actors could make just as much money as white actors on the screen; for the larger, dominant media machine, Fetchit was viewed as a celebrated, stereotypical, negative character that served to keep and remind African-Americans of their suitable position in society.

Fetchit is just one of the many characters in the history of African-American film that was delegated solely to African-Americans. As Bogle’s book title suggests, the other roles African-Americans were allowed to have were Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies,

and Bucks. The tom, according to Bogle, “[is] chased harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, [yet] they keep the faith, n’er to turn against their white massas, and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless, and oh-so-very kind” (Bogle 4). The term “tom” is actually mentioned in a heated scene of *Waiting to Exhale*, which I examine in the Bernadine chapter. The coons, as Bogle describes, “...emerged as...those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language” (8). The next role was the mulatto. “Usually the mulatto is made likeable – even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt) – and the audience believes that the girl’s life could’ve been productive and happy had she not been a ‘victim of divided racial inheritance’” (9). The mulatto was of white and African-American descent, giving her a lighter-skinned appearance (9). The final degrading role for African-American women was the mammy. The mammy, asserts Bogle, “...is so closely related to the comic coons that she is usually relegated to their ranks. Mammy is distinguished, however, by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous” (9). The final degrading role for African-American men was the buck. The bucks “are always big...oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (13). As roles and characters and on screen power have gotten better and more diverse over the years, it is no wonder why, in a historical context, that the women of *Waiting to Exhale* were so widely celebrated in the theaters. While the film was not groundbreaking, *Waiting to Exhale* brought about “a shift in the tide for African-American actresses” (Bogle 372), and it was refreshing to witness. These women on the screen were not poor, they had fulfilling jobs, and on paper, their lives appeared normal, pleasant, even.

Bogle recounts the media's coverage of *Waiting to Exhale*: "'This audience, for the first time in history,' wrote *Entertainment Weekly*, 'is African-American women, who after years of seeing downbeat hood films, have welcomed a glossy portrait of their middle-and upper middle-class lives (and have enjoyed some pot-shots at the men who make their days difficult)'"(Bogle 376). This is not really the first time in history we have seen successful African-American women on the screen. While the stereotypes of yesterday are a bit harder to spot on the big screen, stereotypes of today (which I examine in each of the four main characters) are still present in African-American films, including *Waiting to Exhale*. These stereotypes and messages speak volumes (note *Entertainment Weekly*'s assumption of the dysfunctional relationship status of *Waiting to Exhale*'s African-American female audience, solely based on attendance).

Bogle analyzes *Waiting to Exhale*'s success: "Following *Waiting to Exhale*'s success, one might have expected a steady lineup of films centering around African-American women. Generally, Hollywood operated in cycles. If one type of film pulled in a huge audience, ten more versions of that same type were bound to be produced. That didn't happen" (Bogle 383); at least not right away. Slowly, but surely, more and more films centering around African-American women began to emerge. This includes movies like, *Set It Off* (1996), *Soul Food* (1997), *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998), *Two Can Play That Game* (2001), and a host of Tyler Perry films that have continued to emerge since the early 2000s. Historically speaking, while it did not win any Academy Awards, *Waiting to Exhale* has made an impact and has communicated a message, and in the following chapters, I examine exactly what that message is.

GLORIA

Gloria's romantic tale is, arguably, the least dysfunctional of the four characters, relatively speaking. Gloria is a single mother and salon owner in Arizona, presumably in her mid-forties. In *Waiting to Exhale*, she has a very close relationship with her son, Tarik, and pines away for the infrequent visits of Tarik's father, David. Gloria is tested when David reveals that he has been homosexual for years, while seventeen year old Tarik expresses interest in traveling to Spain. Eventually, Gloria confides in a new neighbor by the name of Marvin, who eventually becomes Gloria's love interest and helps Gloria to let go of Tarik and let him be a man.

In looking at the criticism of *Waiting to Exhale* with regards to Gloria, writer Tina M. Harris ascribes Gloria as the "matriarch," one of Patricia Hill Collins' four categories of characters that African-American women are appointed in media (Harris 191-2). "The matriarch is often presented as unattractive, overweight, and devoid of sexual identity" (192), all of which Gloria, indeed, encompasses in the film. The other three categories that Tina M. Harris lists as a part of Patricia Hill Collins' role definition of African-American women in media are the mammy, the welfare mother (breeder woman), and the Jezebel (191). The mammy is the submissive house help, the welfare mother relies on state welfare to live, and the jezebel is known as the assertive, promiscuous woman (191). The fact that Gloria's life and circumstances can be so easily categorized as a stereotypical matriarch in film, calls for higher scrutiny with regards to the role of media and how it affects our observations and awareness.

With media responsibility in the framing and ideology of Gloria's stereotypes, there is a larger dynamic at play with regards to African-Americans in film. John

Downing and Charles Husband, authors of *Representing 'Race': Racisms, Ethnicities and Media*, state that, “in this overall framework, the ongoing rolls of media in articulating racist frameworks and stereotypes are of central significance, because it is precisely their overall role *daily* to define and massage the present and the past for us” (39). In addition, while media viewers are witnessing and consuming these stereotypes on a consistent basis, these constructs, under which these characters thrive, set the tone for future “representations”. This is all occurring under the guise of performance and under the control of production companies, and in that context, Gloria, as well as the other three characters of *Waiting to Exhale*, “defines” African-American identity, romantic relationships, and womanhood. The media’s stereotypical cultivation of what it means to be an African-American woman in love is problematic mainly in that it is limiting, and as Professor Oscar H. Gandy Jr. articulates in *Communication and Race: A Structural Perspective*, “That cost is the biasing of our perceptions” (84). In examining Gloria’s scenes throughout the film, the characterization, development, and progression of the matriarch stereotype is pronounced. The themes in Gloria’s relationships between Tarik, David, and Marvin all show a type of disconnect, and there are key scenes in *Waiting to Exhale* in which dysfunctionality prevails.

The first scene between Gloria, and her son (Tarik), highlights the overall dysfunction between mother, father, and child.

Gloria: You know your father’s coming on Tuesday.

Tarik: And? First of all, he’s not my father, he’s my daddy, and there’s a big damn difference.

Gloria: Now, you watch your mouth!

Tarik: Look, I see the bastard once every two years and *I'm* supposed to get excited? *You* get excited. [Tarik walks away and mumbles.]

Gloria: What is that supposed to mean?

Tarik: Where'd he sleep the last time he was here? [Gloria looks surprised and hurt]. Ma, I'm sorry. [Tarik apologizes several times.]

Gloria: That's none of your business! (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

Through the dialogue in this scene, we are able to witness how Gloria has a skewed version of a cohesive family. This is not necessarily because Gloria and David are no longer together (there are plenty of families of divorce that work toward the best interest of the child), but because Gloria was not able to see that her ex is not consistent with regards to her (romantically) or her child (paternally). This scene represents a stereotype of the African-American home in film, in which African-American fathers are portrayed as dead beat dads or not present.

When David finally arrives at Gloria's home to visit Tarik, Gloria is in for a shock.

Gloria's Narration/Thoughts: When David was here, last time, he did me a favor by spending the night. Lord, let him be merciful again, tonight. [Gloria attempts to feed David and make him feel relaxed and comfortable upon arrival. David declines all efforts of Gloria's hospitality.]

David: So, where's Tarik?

Gloria: He's not here, right now.

David: I don't know why I continue to do this. He's almost grown.

Gloria: Yes, he is. Would you like some wine? [Gloria's breaths are short, indicating an emotional response.]

David: Oh no, thanks.

Gloria: You sure?

David: [Looks around] When exactly are you expecting him?

Gloria: Tomorrow. [David gets up to leave.] Wait. David. You know you can always stay here.

David: Here?

Gloria: Yeah. I thought maybe we...you know, we could...like last time. [Gloria looks down, then back at David, as if to look for reassurance.]

David: I should be honest with you.

Gloria: About what?

David: About me.

Gloria: What about you? Hmm? [David grabs Gloria's hands.]

David: Do you remember how I didn't respond to you last time?

Gloria: Of course. I remember. I...I thought it was because I gained weight and –

David: I have been bisexual for years.

Gloria: What? What?

David: You heard me right. But, I'm not anymore; I'm gay.

Gloria: [Gloria snatches her hands out of David's hands.] David. David, you don't have to go to this extreme just because you don't –

David: Gloria, I don't have to lie about this. I've lied too long as it is. I am. I'm staying at the Biltmore. And if...he ever wants to see me, he has to make the first move.

If I don't hear from him by noon, I'm checking out, and I mean just that.

Gloria: Oh [She is speechless as David leaves] (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Again, we see the dysfunction portrayed. Gloria finds out that David had been lying to her for at least seventeen years about his sexuality through his own revelation. Still, Gloria's first thought was that he was making excuses for not being attracted to her because, in reality, her weight (matriarch characteristic) was the true problem. Furthermore, after David drops his shocking news, instead of comforting her or apologizing for misleading her, David leaves, placing their son Tarik in the position of following up and maintaining their already strained father-son relationship.

Until David's admission, the illusory, uncommitted, romantic relationship between Gloria and David was problematic; the fact that Gloria continued to accommodate David reveals a lot about Gloria's self-esteem in *Waiting to Exhale*. This is a common theme seen with the characters in this film: engagement in toxic relationship patterns. In Gloria's case, she was optimistic and hopeful about a man whose actions did not align with that of a person in love with her, and David had been living a complete lie about his sexuality. This is how love in African-American film is portrayed.

Even upon meeting a man who is worthy of her time and effort, Gloria is desperate. In the following scene, Gloria meets her new, attractive neighbor, Marvin King. In this sunny afternoon, Gloria is seen crossing the street towards who she thinks is a mover unloading the moving truck; as she inquires about the possible new family moving in, she soon realizes that the "mover" is, in fact, her new neighbor. Birds are chirping, and Gloria appears out of breath and excited.

Marvin: Nice to meet you, Gloria.

Gloria: Nice to meet you. Well, I'd like to welcome your family to the neighborhood.

Marvin: Thank you. [Marvin is distracted by Gloria.]

Gloria: Unpacking can be hard work. [Camera pans up Marvin's physique, which includes a cut-off sleeveless shirt.]

Marvin: Yeah, it certainly is. I got a lot more to do tomorrow, too.

Gloria: [Visibly distracted] Would you like to have dinner with us, tonight? It's just leftovers: collard greens and cornbread, some candied yams, a little potato salad, fried chicken, peach cobbler, a few slices of ham.

Marvin. Mmm. Yum yum. [Marvin's face did not seem as enthused.] Yeah, I would love to, Gloria, but I just got too much work to do, here. Maybe another time.

Gloria: Yeah. Well, to be honest, I don't have no business eating it myself, big as I am. [Gloria laughs, Marvin does not laugh.]

Marvin: Hmm. Yeah. Well, my wife was a big woman. I like that. [Camera jumps to a shot of solely Marvin's mouth, as his voice begins to echo] I like a woman with a little meat on her bones, you know?

Gloria: [Giggling.] Oh. Well, I could send a plate over by my son Tarik for you.

Marvin: Great. Yeah. I'd appreciate that. How old's your boy?

Gloria: Seventeen.

Marvin: Teenager.

Gloria: He's gonna be leaving in June, I think.

Marvin: College?

Gloria: [Gloria stares off in to the distance for roughly ten seconds. She takes in a deep breath and slowly exhales]. Oh excuse me? What did you ask me?

Marvin: I said, uh, Tarik...Tarik is going to college, huh?

Gloria: Oh. Umm... [Gloria appears dazed.] He wants to travel around the world with this organization called Up with the People. I'm just not sure. I—

Marvin: Yeah, let him go. He's young. Up with the People. Yeah. Where's his daddy?

Gloria: In California, somewhere. [She words this through her teeth, appearing slightly annoyed] Look Marvin, I'll let you get back to your work, and um, I'll send that plate right on over.

Marvin: Thank you. Thanks, Gloria.

Gloria: Yeah.

Marvin: Yeah, nice meeting you. Hope to see you again real soon. [Gloria walks back across the street to her house.]

Gloria (to herself): Oh, God. I hope he's not watching me walk away. [Gloria turns over her shoulder to look back at Marvin and smiles.] He's watching me walk.
(Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Marvin and Gloria presumably begin to date, with Marvin fixing things around Gloria's house. One night, after Marvin and her son Tarik become familiar with one another over months, Gloria visits Marvin at his home to ask if he can convince Tarik to stay in Arizona, rather than tour Spain with Up with the People. Gloria wants Marvin to "talk some sense into him." Marvin praises her mothering skills, and tells her that she should be proud that she raised him to be, so independent. He also discloses that "Tarik is not the one who needs to come to his senses." This infuriates Gloria, and she shuts Marvin out for an undisclosed period of time.

Later on in the film, after Gloria relents and allows Tarik to tour Spain, she knocks on Marvin's door, and enters his home.

Gloria: How you been doing? I haven't seen much of you, lately. I um...I acted silly when all you did was tell me the truth. [Gloria laughs] I guess I didn't want to hear it.

Marvin: I've been real busy.

Gloria: Um. I came over for two reasons. I know I shut you out, and um, I miss you in our life...in my life. Marvin, I have no doubt in my mind everything you said was true, and I apologize. I just came over to say that.

Marvin: Wait a minute. Wait. Come on in. Sit down.

Gloria: [Crying.] He just left. He wouldn't even let me take him to the airport. He's been the man in my life, you know, my companion; more than just my baby. Now he's gone. I gave up, and I...a long time ago, on any hope I had of finding someone for myself, and it's a terrible thing to do to Tarik.

Marvin: Tarik's gonna be fine. Yeah.

Gloria: Yeah, I'm grateful to you, though, for opening my eyes.

Marvin: I miss you too.

Gloria: You wouldn't allow my fear of being alone to get in the way of him growing up and doing what he has to do. I was so unfair to him.

Marvin: No, no.

Gloria: Yes I was.

Marvin: No, you haven't been unfair to Tarik. You've been unfair to you, to us. It's like you don't feel like you're worthy to have someone love you. I love you. I love you.

Gloria: No, don't say it.

Marvin: Yes.

Gloria: You don't love me.

Marvin: Yes, I love you, Gloria (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Marvin and Gloria begin to kiss, as triumphant violins are playing in the background and they slowly move out of focus. The camera pans to the window in the background, and sun is shining through the rain.

This scene explicitly describes how Gloria was so deeply consumed with her own internal pain and loneliness, that she did not have a healthy relationship with her son. She inappropriately depended on Tarik and nearly blocked out the one healthy, romantic relationship she had with Marvin. This individual, low self-esteem is typically present in dysfunctional relationships, and the resistance of appropriate love is another example of dysfunctionality expressed in romantic, African-American film. The matriarch image Gloria embodies is “typically perceived as the resultant of role reversal in the African American community whereby males and females (husbands and wives) change roles for the purpose of maintaining the family. In the absence of the male, however, the female takes on the role of father and mother for the sake of the children” (Harris 192). Luckily, for Gloria's sake, she was able to overcome and accept a suitable, respectful, and mutual romantic love by the end of the film.

While she finds love in the end, Gloria exists under a host of stereotypes and racial framing with regards to communication and race. In *Representing 'Race': Racisms, Ethnicities, and Media*, John Downing and Charles Husband explain that, “...a figurative stereotype becomes a social and psychological definition of an ethnic or other social group, as something produced as a result of enormous, irresistible pressure that in

consequence is completely fixed, ‘carved in stone’ so to speak, totally resistant to change or adaptation” (32). The stereotype of Gloria as a single mother, raising Tarik alone, and without much input from his uncommitted, deadbeat father is an alarming media message to the world about African-American parenting. This narrative of a low-esteemed African-American woman, so downtrodden by disrespectful African-American men who are incapable of love, is another alarming message. As for Gloria, with years of the conditioning of dysfunctional relationships, she is unable to recognize Martin’s respectful love when it is presented right in front of her; in fact, she outright denies it (initially) when Marvin tells her that he loves her in Gloria’s final scene. Unfortunately, Gloria is not the only character in *Waiting to Exhale* who experiences debilitated love. Next, we meet Savannah, who makes Gloria’s love story look like a walk in the park.

SAVANNAH

Savannah is a 33-year-old producer, who has just moved from Denver to Phoenix in search of a new start. She wanted to try her hand at producing, as well as have a fresh start with the men. As Savannah saw it, the men in Denver were “dead” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). Savannah experiences her fair share of dysfunction in *Waiting to Exhale*, first with Lionel, an immature man whom Savannah talks herself into sleeping with; then Kenneth, the very married ex-boyfriend with whom, at the urging of her overly-involved, meddling mother, Savannah carries on an affair. Eventually, Savannah breaks it off with Kenneth, and although she does not gain a functional, romantic partner at the end of the film (like Gloria), Savannah learns to respect herself.

In our first, real introduction to Savannah’s character, she is knowingly ready to impede in on a relationship in which she is aware that the men are taken. She is driven and determined to take someone else’s boyfriend or husband, despite any sense of conscience or moral compass. This scene sets the tone for the nature of Savannah’s dysfunctional romantic relationships in *Waiting to Exhale*. Unlike Gloria, Savannah is not clinging to the wrong men from a place of desperation; Savannah is a high-powered career woman who knowingly pursues and entertains taken men for her own selfish needs. In the following scenes, we see that Savannah wants the functional qualities in a man, but those wants fall behind Savannah’s sexual needs.

As Savannah gets ready to meet her New Year’s Eve date at a party spot named, “The Hermosa,” presumably in Phoenix, she thinks to herself about the type of man that she wants.

Savannah (in her mind): “Here it is New Years, and I’m geeked up for a blind date that’s not even all that. Just some party this guy’s voice invited my answering machine to, when we got worn out playing phone tag. A long time ago, I asked God to send me a decent man. I got Robert, Cedric, Darrell, and Kenneth. God’s got some serious explaining to do. So my prayers got more detailed. Like how about some compassion? Could he have a sense of purpose? A sense of integrity? Could he listen? The truth is, most men are deaf. They prefer to guess what you need, but they don’t guess worth shit. They lie without a conscience. What they’re best at is convincing us we should feel desperate. Thank God I don’t fall for that shit” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

This scene stuck out cinematically because there was an intense focus on Savannah’s eyes, the camera focused on her applying lipstick and pans around her face and head as she sprays her perfume in preparation for the date. All that can be heard is Savannah’s voice, and those small amounts of visual stimulation intensify what is being said. Savannah wants the functional, romantic partner that anyone seeking a monogamous relationship wants; however, the men she spends her time with are the complete opposite.

The theme of Savannah’s dysfunction begins with Savannah meeting Lionel. Before she finds him, in her first scene engaging with other people, Savannah manages to stir up some major controversy. Navigating through the party, as if she’s looking for someone, Savannah finally sees an open chair at a table full of party goers (presumably two sets of couples and an additional woman).

Savannah: “Excuse me. Is anyone sitting here?”

Two men at the table in unison: “No. Please join us.”

Woman whispering to the other women: “She has a nerve...sitting down here.”

Savannah (in her mind): “Hell, yeah. I’m single, and desperate, and have no morals.

And as soon as one of you turns your back, I’m gonna flirt my butt off and then take your man.”

Women are overheard saying: “I can’t stand women like her. Please” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Savannah gets up to leave.

This scene shapes Savannah’s identity toward the controlled image that Patricia Hill Collins describes as the Jezebel, “also referred to as ‘the whore or sexually aggressive woman’ (75)” (Harris 191). Savannah is not a whore in *Waiting to Exhale*; she is a career woman and does not have sex for cash. However, this scene depicting Savannah plotting to flirt and steal someone’s partner sets the tone for Savannah’s mindset in the majority of the film, which is, indeed, sexually aggressive and has few morals when it comes to men who are in a relationship. In *African American Communication and Identities*, Tina M. Harris argues that the stereotype of hyper-sexualized African Americans in film is present in *Waiting to Exhale*, specifically with Savannah and Robin (Robin will be discussed in the next chapter); because of this, “[the] natural aspects of the male-female relationship are distorted and further perpetuate the allegations about African American men and women’s ‘preoccupation’ with pre-marital and adulterous sex” (193). This points back to Eric King Watt’s idea of spectacular consumption and “true” African American life and culture at least partially coming from the images derived from and portrayed in mass media (Watts and Orbe 1). Like the stereotypes in African-American films, Savannah’s scenes continue to stir controversy.

After Savannah leaves the table, she walks around again, searching, a tall, handsome man (Lionel) taps her on her shoulder from behind.

Lionel: "Savannah"

Savannah: "Lionel?" They smile. "Hi. How are you?" They hug.

Savannah (to herself): "God, if this man isn't the one, at least let me dance until I sweat."

Lionel: "Would you like to dance?"

Savannah: "I'd love to."

Lionel: "You look beautiful, tonight."

Savannah: "Thanks."

Lionel: "I'm certainly glad we finally met. You made it here safely in one piece." They walk toward the dance floor.

Savannah: "Well, our answering machines almost moved in with each other, so I'm glad we met, too" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Slow music plays. The camera cuts to a close-up of Lionel and Savannah's hands reaching for each other. Her hand fits delicately inside of his. His hands caress the small of her back; her hands around his neck. They begin to slow dance. They appear to be the only two on the dance floor. A slow song plays, titled, "I'm Gonna Make You My Wife" by the legendary R&B group The Whispers plays. Nothing but the lyrics are heard, and they start with "I'm gonna make you my wife."

Lionel: "You feel so good."

Savannah (to herself): "Thank you, Jesus."

Savannah (narration): And then, I did it: I closed my eyes, and exhaled. And pretended this man was mine, that he was everything I'd ever dreamed of, that he was the one I'd been waiting for all my life."

Woman: "Lionel. Lionel, you haven't danced with me all night."

Lionel, looking uncomfortable: "Uhh. Savannah, this is my friend, Denise."

Savannah walks away.

Lyrics from the Whispers song come back into audio focus: "Cross my heart and hope...to die"

Savannah, to herself, as she leaves The Hermosa: "If I'm lucky, I can still catch Dick Clark" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

It is night one, and already Savannah has nearly gotten herself mixed up (both knowingly and unknowingly) with men with obvious red flags. As she walks away from Lionel and Denise and exits The Hermosa, it is obvious that Savannah is disappointed in her date, Lionel. But that obvious date blunder did not keep Savannah away for long.

Song "My Funny Valentine," sung by Chaka Khan, plays in the background as Savannah sits in her large house/bedroom in her night gown, pondering. It appears that Savannah is alone, until Lionel is seen in the bathroom, brushing his teeth.

Savannah (narration): "I didn't think I'd ever see him again, but he did call to apologize.

Lionel taps the water off of the toothbrush, and smiles at her.

Savannah (to herself): "That's my toothbrush! Is he crazy?!"

Savannah (narration): "Turns out this guy has no real income, chain smokes reefer, brags about being a vegetarian, then inhales three hot dogs like it's the last time someone's gonna buy him a meal. I gave him \$20 for gas, which came to \$7.18, and he didn't even

give me my change. My fantasy was to get me a little piece...you know, get my feet wet in a new town. Well, not exactly my feet. Hell, it's been five months, and he has gotten on my last nerve. But I don't have to be in love with him to do it. Hell, my body needs this." (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

This is where we see Savannah indulging in what her body wants over what she consciously desires in a man or a relationship. Lionel has already brought another woman to their first date, and upon seeing him again, Savannah concludes that he does not have any of the anticipated qualities in a man that Savannah listed in the beginning of the film. Regardless of those blatant facts, Savannah concluded that Lionel is still acceptable, at least for the night. This is the last we see of Lionel, but not the last we see of Savannah's dysfunctional relationships with men.

After a day in the office, Savannah is listening to her answering machine in the production office. The first two messages were work-related calls from coworkers. The third call stopped her from what she was doing. It was a call from her ex-boyfriend, Kenneth. When his message states that he will be in town soon for a medical conference, Savannah contemplates.

Savannah (narration): "God, I used to crave this man. He treated me like a lady. And once you get used to being treated well, you can't go back to bullshit. No mystery how he got my number."

Savannah dials her mother and inquires as to why her mother gave Kenneth her number.

Savannah: "Mama, why did you give Kenneth my number?"

Mama: "'Cause he asked for it. Why, is he coming out there or something?"

Savannah: "You tell me."

Mama: “Ahh! Girl, he’s gonna be out there on the 26th. Ain’t you excited?!”

Savannah: “Mama, the man is married.”

Mama: “Well, how happy can he be if he went out his way to find me to get to you?”

Savannah: “Mama, please.” Up until this point, the scenes showing Savannah’s mother on the phone are shot through a window outside of her home, but when Savannah’s mother makes this next point, the camera is now inside her home and it focusing on her face as she gives a message to Savannah.

Mama: “Please, my behind! Girl, I’ll be so glad when you get up off that high horse and stop trying to act like you don’t need nothing or nobody. Every woman needs a man, and you ain’t no exception.”

Savannah: “Mama, I love you, and I’ll talk to you soon. Goodbye.”

Savannah (narration): “I won’t squeeze him back when he hugs me. I will not look him in the eyes. And I’m definitely not gonna give him any” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

There are a few moments of note in this scene. Savannah mentions that Kenneth treated her in the ways that she wanted to be treated, and because of that, she cannot accept anything less. Yet, Savannah entertains situations (i.e. almost pursuing the men at The Hermosa) and exchanges (i.e. a second chance with Lionel) with men that treat her less than “lady-like”. Savannah’s definition of being treated like “a lady” is relative to what she has experienced in her past, but given Savannah’s list of qualities of what she wants in a man, we initially are led to presume that being treated like “a lady” is a functional standard for Savannah to have.

The other moment of note is the introduction of Savannah’s mother, who has a lot to say with regards to Savannah and Kenneth. Savannah’s mother is very encouraging of

this reunion between the two of them, and the strong opinion and aggression on the part of Savannah's mother begins a similar theme Gloria experienced with Tariq: an inappropriate, dependent relationship from the mother onto the child. Gloria depended on her nearly adult son for companionship, and Savannah's mother appears to be living through Savannah by being overly involved in Savannah's romantic life.

Kenneth arrives at Savannah's house. He knocks twice; she checks herself over and opens the door. After first seeing each other, they decide to take a walk together, and after some surface-level conversation, Savannah becomes blunt.

Savannah: Alright, alright. Let's cut the bull. Are you gonna talk to me for real or what?

Kenneth: You know, I have to apologize for thinking I could just pop back into your life after all these years.

Savannah: Pop back into my life?

Kenneth: Yeah.

Savannah: Oh.

Kenneth: I needed to see you.

Savannah: Alright, so you've seen me. Now I can leave, right? I can go. [They both laugh]

Kenneth: Oh, man. There are so many things I want to say to you.

Savannah: Is that right?

Kenneth: Mmm hmm...things I wanted to say ever since...Well, ever since you dumped me.

Savannah: Dumped you? Can we revisit the real world for a minute, Kenneth? You stopped calling me.

Kenneth: Oh yeah, well, it took me a while to get the hint.

Savannah: The hint?

Kenneth: Yeah

Savannah: Well, what hint was that?

Kenneth: You never called me.

Savannah: I never called you?

Kenneth: To go anywhere, not ever once.

Savannah: Kenneth, you're the man. And that wasn't the nature of our relationship, and you know that.

Kenneth: I know. The nature of our relationship was that I was in love with a woman who was too nice to hurt my feelings.

Savannah: You were in love with who? And what?

Kenneth: Look, I know I'm married. And I love my baby girl with all my heart. You see, her mother was five months pregnant when we got married. Now, that was my choice. I went in with my eyes open, and I've lived with it for seven years now. I don't want this to sound like some sort of come-on, but you are the only woman that I have ever loved. And I still love you, Savannah (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Kenneth was supposed to be the man who treated Savannah like "a lady." In this scene, it is revealed that he stopped calling her when they were together in the past. In this scene, Kenneth also confirmed that he is still married, but wants Savannah to know that she is the only woman he had ever loved. This is not functional, and perhaps it never was, but Savannah participates in the rekindled connection with Kenneth, anyway.

The camera soon cuts to a close-up of Kenneth and Savannah's hands reaching for each other, similar to Savannah's first encounter with Lionel. Like before, her hand fit delicately inside of his. His hands caress the small of her back; her hands around his neck. They slow dance in her home, and soon after, they become intimate. Kenneth's visits to Phoenix continue, developing into an affair, and despite some of Savannah's trust reservations with Kenneth, her mother continues to push her forward.

With regards to stereotypes in film, Tina M. Harris adds, "if a comparison were made, it is plausible that mainstream movies are the primary perpetrators of the very image that is typically ascribed to African Americans" (Harris 193). This statement highlights the impact of representation in film. Therefore, *Waiting to Exhale* serves as a heavy and contribution to representation America Americans with regards to its images and relationships in and surrounding romance, and Savannah's problematic actions and behaviors in *Waiting to Exhale*, may not be the most positive contribution to African American films.

Savannah's perpetuated Jezebel characteristics are nothing new in film roles given to African American actors, and the impacts of repeated exposure to these suggested messages about race in film are discussed in the final chapter. In a 2007 comprehensive journal article, titled "Emotional Segregation: A Content Analysis of Institutionalized Racism in US Films, 1980-2001," Sociologist Angie K. Beeman conducted a quantitative study and content analysis, comparing media portrayals of romantic relationships in forty American films by race. What she found was that there was a difference in the media portrayals of African American couples, compared to European American couples (Beeman 707). In film, African American couples were intimate quicker than both

European American and interracial couples, and African Americans tended to have sexual intimacy rather than emotional intimacy (699). Furthermore, Beeman found that sex scenes between African Americans were much more graphic and obscene than between European American couples, suggesting the films' messaging implies that sex for African Americans "is more an issue of pleasure rather than an expression of intimacy and love" (703). In media messages about African Americans with regards to romance and sexuality, Savannah is a match.

In Kenneth and Savannah's final scene, Savannah comes to some realizations about Kenneth, as well as herself. Kenneth meets Savannah for an outdoor lunch. He is late, and explains that his daughter was sick with the chicken pox.

Kenneth: I mean, [my wife's] been beeping me on the hour, every hour, all damned day. I told her, all she had to do was give the girl an ice bath, or rub her down with some alcohol.

Savannah: Right.

Kenneth: Jesus. You'd think she had malaria.

Savannah: So why'd you even come [out here to visit me]?

Kenneth: Because you are the most important thing in my life. One of these days, she's not gonna have me around to bug about this shit.

Savannah: Mmm.

Kenneth: You know, every trip I make out here, I dread going home. And the longer I think about it, the more I'm convinced that this is what I wanna do...when the time is right. I mean, it's more financial than anything, and there's still a lot of things that need

to be worked out. I know if I left now, it would be the wrong time for my daughter. She thinks she's having a baby sister.

Savannah: A baby?

Kenneth: So, we're going to have to wait a little longer than expected.

Savannah: Yeah.

Kenneth: But I know the kind of person you are, you want to do the right thing as much as I do.

Savannah: I do, Kenneth. I really do. You see, the more I think about it, the more I look at you, you look like...the scum of the Earth. You see, the good news is that I was never, ever in danger of you getting a divorce. Oh, no. I'm the lucky one, the most important thing in your life. Meaning you'll abandon your wife and your child to get laid every chance I give you. And you think the brass ring is some bogus promise to put me into Paula's shoes, so you can do the same thing to me, next year? It's pretty close to irresistible, loverman.

Kenneth: What the hell is wrong with you? I mean, are you and my wife working for the same fucking firm or something? You weren't this self-righteous when you were fucking my brains out. You weren't worried about my poor little wife then, now were you?

Savannah: You're right. You're absolutely right. I couldn't see past what I wanted, so that made me an asshole. But the difference between you and me is, I'm not anymore.

Kenneth: Wait a minute! Whoa.

Savannah: What is it?

Kenneth: Now, look. I'm sorry. But we need to talk about this some more. I mean, without all the anger. Look, I'm not mad, really.

Savannah: Neither am I, baby. I'm not mad. And to prove it, the drinks are on you
(Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Savannah knocks her drink over onto Kenneth's lap.

Savannah finally recognized the role she had been playing in the decimation of someone else's relationship, and she finally understood her worth. Lionel and Kenneth were not functional partners to Savannah. They were not the men Savannah expressed that she wanted, and after some time, Savannah gained (or regains) her moral compass and ended the dysfunctionality. Kenneth relayed their final exchange back to Savannah's mother, who confronted Savannah about it by calling Savannah at work.

Savannah: Hello?

Mama: Have you lost your mind?

Savannah: Ma?

Mama: Kenneth just called me and told me how simple you acted. He was actually crying. And men don't be crying over no woman, unless they love them. How can you be so insensitive?

Savannah: First of all, Ma, I am sick of you telling me how I should live my life, who you think I should love, marry...ma: I'm sick of it!

Mama: Don't you raise your voice at me.

Savannah: Mama, I'm 33 years old, and I live alone.

Mama: Mmm. Yeah, tell me about it.

Savannah: And I may have to accept the fact that I may live alone for the rest of my life.

Mama: It ain't too late Savannah. He's begging on his damn knees, and you letting him get away.

Savannah: Mama, do you hear me?! I have a job, I have friends. Ma, I have interests you don't even ask about. Because only one thing counts with you, Mama.

Mama: With any damn woman unless they lying to themself.

Savannah: Well, I'm being honest with myself, ma. I'm smart, I work hard, and I'm a good person. Ma, if I allow myself to think like you, I guess I'd be a dead woman. Ma, you should be proud of the fact that I'd rather be alone, than crawling up behind some two-timing loser, like Kenneth.

Mama: He's a good man, Savannah. A good man. He's just in a bad situation, right now, and he's trying to get out of it.

Savannah: Mama, I'll tell you what: why don't you fucking marry him, then.

Savannah hangs up the phone, and after a few moments, she calls her mother back.

Savannah: Ma, I was wrong to yell. I'm sorry. But I meant what I said about my life, but I didn't mean to disrespect you. I'll never do that again.

Mama: It's alright, baby. It's alright. I just don't want to see you to end up like me: alone.

Savannah: I know, Ma, and I love you (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

The inappropriate mother-daughter relationship reached its meddlesome peak at this particular scene. After Savannah's mother was shown repeatedly encouraging this dysfunctional relationship and ranting about how "good" of a man Kenneth was, Savannah's mother revealed the truth: she did not want Savannah to end up alone. Savannah's mother's overly dependent relationship, much like Gloria and her son's relationship, was based on the surface-level premise of a mother loving her child. In reality, she was so aggressive and opinionated, not because she truly thought Kenneth was the right guy for Savannah, but because she did not want Savannah to be alone (like

her). Gloria was similar in that she used the guise of motherly love when expressing her interest in keeping Tarik closer to her, but in reality, she was depending on his companionship. Unfortunately, Savannah is not the only character in *Waiting to Exhale* who has familiarity with maternal conflict, nor is she the only character who has embodied the Jezebel image in relation to her dysfunctional romantic rendezvous; like Savannah, Robin also experiences an unhealthy lack of accordance with men and motherhood.

ROBIN

“I don’t know why I always pick the wrong men to fall in love with. My weakness is pretty boys with big sticks” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). This one line perfectly summarizes the romantic trials and tribulations of Robin Stokes, the third character in *Waiting to Exhale*. Robin is a marketing executive, appearing to be between her late twenties and early thirties. She is the youngest of the four characters, and while she is portrayed as superficial and the most-sexual character (she has more bedroom scenes and wears the least amount of clothing, in comparison to the other characters), she has a real innocent and naïve quality about her when it comes to relationships. In *Waiting to Exhale*, we see Robin’s encounter with three men: a colleague by the name of Michael, a newcomer by the name of Troy, and a slick, smooth, on-and-off lover by the name of Russell. The themes of superficiality, naiveté, the “Jezebel” stereotype, race, and motherhood all play a part in Robin’s love life. All of these relationships are dysfunctional, and through the following scenes, we see exactly how these themes intersect, as Robin navigates these rocky relationships.

We first meet Robin on New Year’s Eve, as she talks to herself (in the mirror) and to her dog, Achey.

Robin (out loud to herself): “I don’t believe I’m spending New Year’s Eve by myself.”

[She looks at and talks to herself in the mirror] “Now *this* is definitely a first. I finally gave up on Russell – a lying, sneaky, whorish Pisces” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)!

Robin walks around her apartment, talking to her dog, Achey. She opens her refrigerator to get a snack. Upon opening the freezer to grab ice cream, nothing but pictures of extremely muscular, attractive men are pinned to the freezer.

Robin: “Russell was so fine. Probably every woman in America wanted him. But you know what, Achey? Oh I *knew* he was mine, till...till I found that half slip in his gym bag” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Robin’s introductory scene starts with her speaking about past dysfunction, a cheating lover; however, not to be alone for long, the beautiful Robin moves on to other prospects.

Robin’s first prospect is Michael, and in this scene, Robin is dressed in lingerie with smokey eye shadow. She turns on her CD player to play sensual music.

Robin (narration): Michael and I work for the same insurance company. Mmm. He’s just been promoted onto my marketing team (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Robin is waiting in her bedroom for Michael to come out of the bathroom. Michael comes out in a tight t-shirt and boxers. He is overweight and wears glasses –nothing like the men on her refrigerator. As she undresses herself further, viewers learn more about Michael.

Robin (narration): Michael is no Russell. I mean, he’s not pretty, but he is available.

Michael: Ohh. [He chuckles and looks over Robin’s body] A Kodak moment.

Robin (narration): Michael had to be about a 38 D. My brain was saying, ‘Put your hands anywhere else but on my body, then go home. And don’t come back you human submarine sandwich!’ But you can’t say that kind of thing without hurting someone’s feelings. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

Despite her repulsion to Michael's lack of attractiveness, Robin decides to go through with the sexual experience, anyway.

Michael kisses Robin, picks her up, and carries her to the bed. Instead of placing her gently onto the bed, Michael clumsily drops Robin, face-down, onto the bed. He appears to be unclear with what to do next.

Robin (narration): At dinner he told me he drag races, scuba dives, deep sea fishes, and

keeps his own boats in the white mountains. I told him I grew up an Army brat; that I went to ASU and majored in Anthropology. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

As they begin their sexual experience, Robin narrates her frustrations about not witnessing "what he had to offer" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). Throughout the experience, Robin is not intimately connected with Michael at all. Bogle notes, "...[Robin's] desperate to please even at the expense of her self-respect" (Bogle 375). When they finish, she appears disappointed and disgusted, but does not communicate what Michael could have done to please her, sexually.

Robin (narration): Does he think he did something here? Shit. I could've had a V-8.

Michael: Oh, I knew you were going to be somebody special. [Michael laughs, appearing satisfied and confident] How do you feel?

Robin: About what?

Michael: Me. This. You know...everything. Tell me what you want. What do you need?

Because whatever it is, I'm going to see to it that you have it. [Michael leans up toward her] What's your fantasy? I mean, what do you want from a man?

Robin: Everything.

Michael: Can you be more specific.

Robin: I want a house in Scottsdale.

Michael: I own a house in Scottsdale. What else?

Robin: I wanna get married, and I wanna have kids...two, maybe three.

Michael: And?

Robin: I wanna eat out two, maybe three, times a week. I wanna have babies. I wanna go away for long weekends. I wanna have a family. I wanna be happy.

Michael: You don't want much. I can give you that and a whole lot more. [Robin's face slowly drops, as if reality has hit her.]

Robin: What about you, Michael? What do you want?

Michael: Robin, I think I've found it.

Robin: You don't even know me.

Michael: It's about knowing *me*. I could give you anything you want, everything you need...if you let me.

Robin: You can start by kissing me. [They kiss.]

Robin (narration): And he did it right, and I felt like silk. And when I looked at him, I didn't care anymore that he wasn't Mr. Universe. I just felt young and sexy and beautiful. And when I closed my eyes, and squeezed my pelvis real tight, and my body exploded from the inside-out, Michael felt just like the real thing, and everything was perfect...for once. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

It is in this scene that Robin's superficiality is brought to the surface. She is sleeping with a man she not only does not have feelings for, but a man she is physically not attracted to; however, once he tells her about the property he owns and once she is

able to see how much he can provide for her, she finds an attraction for him. This is not functional by any means.

Robin's relationship with Michael breaks down quickly in their next shared scene; the scene is set with Robin and Michael in the workplace. Robin is presenting data in front of a staff of coworkers, and Michael points out a discrepancy in one of her reports. Before she could respond to the discrepancy that Michael found, the meeting is interrupted by a phone call that she has to take. She glares at him, and as she walks over to the phone, she says to herself, "So you wanna do your job? Well, you'll never get another whiff of this!" as the scene ends, insinuating that their relationship is over.

The final exchange between Michael and Robin consisted of a brief glance at a happy hour lounge, but to Robin, it was much more. While Robin was at the lounge with Gloria, Savannah, and newly-separated Bernadine, Michael is seen with a new woman.

Robin: Oh, I don't even believe this shit.

Gloria: Uh oh.

Savannah: What's the deal? What's going on?

Robin: It's only been a week since I fired him, and he was talking marriage.

Gloria: Well, don't forget: you dropped him. And please don't embarrass yourself, and please don't embarrass us.

Savannah: Please.

Robin: Oh, I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Little fat fuck. [Robin sips her drink.]

Bernadine approaches the ladies from the dance floor, unaware of the preceding conversation.

Bernadine (smiling): Robin, did you see Michael?

Savannah: Oh, she saw him.

Robin: Michael who? (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Robin's true feelings regarding Michael emerged in the workplace scene, but they especially emerged once she witnessed him with another woman in the smoke-filled lounge. Michael's physical flaw of being overweight, which she previously attempted to ignore about Michael, resurfaced. Robin's experiences with Michael in *Waiting to Exhale* is yet another example that matches Beeman's film study; the findings of which suggest that heterosexual African-American partners in film are depicted as having sex more for pleasure (superficial) than for intimacy and connection.

Robin quickly moves to her next prospect, named Troy. We are introduced to Robin's new boyfriend, Troy, as they are driving in an old-fashioned pickup truck. They are all dressed up and en route to a party he invited her to. He is smoking; the smoke makes Robin cough.

Robin Narration: I've only known Troy for three days, but already I feel close to him. I wish he didn't smoke, but I can live with one bad habit. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

When they arrive at the house party, everyone is dressed in white and/or beige (including Robin); Troy who, along with the party host, "Wild Bill," are the only two dressed in black. Upon meeting Robin, "Wild Bill" blows smoke in her face. Robin appeared to be instantly annoyed, and shortly after getting a feel for the party, she notices a drug exchange between Troy and "Wild Bill." She immediately demands that they leave, and upon arriving back at her place, she tells Troy that things between them are not working out.

Troy: Well, you know this comes at sort of a bad time.

Robin: And why is that? Because you want some, tonight?

Troy: I'm not talking about tonight. I'm talking about Sunday. My mother wanted me to invite you over for a barbeque.

Robin sucks her teeth

Troy: Oh, you think I'm making this up 'cause you mad? You mad? Huh? Well, here, why don't you call her? 555-1467

Robin: Troy, why do you want me to meet your mother? I have only known you for three days.

Troy: Maybe it's because I feel a little different about you than you seem to feel about me. But I can't help that. Robin (kisses her)

Robin Narration: No man has ever asked me to meet his mother before. Maybe he's not into this stuff all that much, and maybe if we got to know each other better, I might be a good influence on him. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

Robin believing that Troy can be influenced is an example of Robin's naivety. In a phone conversation with Savannah, Robin's naivety was further exposed, as she urged to consider what she has done in such a short amount of time that would cause Troy to want to introduce her to his mother. Robin wants to cancel on Troy, but she cannot seem to find her wallet. Savannah insinuates that Troy stole it (as a result of the drugs).

Before they can figure it out, Russell, Robin's ex-boyfriend, calls Robin on the other line, and she immediately grants him permission to come over. Robin ends the conversation with Savannah, and despite Savannah asking if Russell was the reason she had to leave, Robin chose not to tell the truth.

Since Troy was not a stable partner to have, Robin runs back to the dysfunctional love she has known the longest (of the three men): her ex-lover, Russell. In Robin's first on-screen scene with Russell, they are in the bedroom. Robin is drinking out of a champagne glass, wearing lingerie, and Russell is shirtless.

Robin (narration): Troy is such a waste of my time.

Russell: Come over here. Come on, now. Come over here.

Robin Narration: Russell is the only man I really loved. Look at him.

Russell: Why you acting like you don't wanna come over here?

Robin Narration: Damn. Last time we were together, he wanted to stay the whole night.

And he would have, except he had to take his mother to church early the next morning.

[Robin and Russell are embracing, hugging and kissing]

Robin Narration: And you can't hold a few mistakes against someone for the rest of their life.

Just like that, Robin lets Russell back into her life, despite her initial claims of him being "a lying, sneaky, whorish Pisces" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)! Her innocence, or perhaps, her denial, is evident in that she believes Russell truly could not spend the night because he had to take his mother to church early the next morning. She takes comfort in her decision to take Russell back because of the idea that no one is perfect; that mindset does not allow for the growth in knowing that she deserves better. Instead, it gives her temporary security. Superficiality, naivety, and low self-esteem equal dysfunction, in correlation with these men.

In Troy's final scene with Robin in *Waiting to Exhale*, he does not exit unnoticed. As Robin reads outdoors on her second-floor balcony, an inebriated Troy calls for her attention, below her balcony. Orchestra music plays in the background.

Troy: Woo, shit. It's hot. Damn. Hey! Hey! Yoo-hoo! Robin! Hey! You ready baby?

Robin: I'm not going.

Troy: Why not? [Troy throws his arms up]

Robin: Because, Troy. I don't like this. [Troy laughs and starts to walk away]

Troy: You don't like what? Okay. Alright. So what am I supposed to tell my mother and my son and the rest of my family?

Robin: Your son? How old is this son?

Troy: He's almost thirteen. What's your point?

Robin: My point is, I don't think we're ready for family reunions, yet.

Troy: What am I supposed to tell 'em, Robin?

Robin: Tell them whatever you want to.

Troy: Oh, so I'm just supposed to accept this?

Robin: You don't have a choice. You should've asked me before committing me.

Troy (shouting): I did ask you! [Troy starts to walk up Robin's stairs leading to her apartment]

Robin (shouting): No, you told me! You come here two hours late and I'm supposed to go with you? Oh, I don't think so.

Troy: Robin! Robin! [He tries to enter her apartment]

Robin: It's locked, Troy. [She is still on the outside balcony]

Troy: Baby it's too hot for this shit. [Goes down the stairs] Can you come get the door?

Robin: No.

Troy: Can I use your bathroom?

Robin: Hell, no.

Troy: Do you have any idea how many women would love for me to take them to my house, so they can meet my mother?

Robin: Oh, I can just about guess.

Troy: Oh, man. You black bitches is all the same.

Robin: Bitch?

Troy: You complain all the time about don't nobody want your asses, don't know how to treat ya. As soon as a man, a brother, show you genuine interest, you bitches act simple. Then you wonder why we go out with white women. [Troy walks away]

Robin: A white woman can have your sorry ass. [Troy picks up an orange off of the ground, next to an orange tree, and attempts to throw it at her.] Don't you throw that up here!

Troy: You raggedy bitch! You better be more careful about who you pick up in grocery stores, next time.

Robin: Troy, take your drunk ass, leather-wearing-in-the-summertime-need-a-shave-stinky-ass home. I'm not going.

Troy: Have a fruit bowl, tramp! [Troy throws the orange at her. He misses her, but orange hits the sliding doors of the balcony that lead to her apartment.]

Robin: Punk!

Troy: Forget you!

Robin: Forget you! [She picks up the orange and throws it back at him, nailing him.]

Troy: Ow! Alright. It's like that then.

Robin: Bye! (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Troy's final scene with Robin is an important one for several different reasons. The first reason is that this is the first time Robin truly takes a stand. She has a voice. She is not passively going along with someone she does not find attractive (Michael), she is no longer trying to change or influence her lover (Troy), and she is no longer convincing herself to consent to unacceptable behavior under the guise that no one is perfect (Russell).

Cinematically, this is brought to life by the gradual ascension of the background orchestra music that accompanies the dialogue, growing louder as their words turn to shouts. The music climaxes at the peak of Robin and Michael's dysfunction, when the shouts of profanity turn to violence, as they throw fruit at one another. Again, we see yet another incompatible African-American couple on screen, this time verbally and physically assaulting one another.

Perhaps the most notable moment in this scene is Troy's ideology about African-American women and why African-American men prefer white women over them. In African-American films, such as *Jungle Fever* and *Save the Last Dance*, there is a pervasive idea portrayed that African-American males prefer white women over African-American women. This, too, can be seen throughout *Waiting to Exhale*. When Bernadine's husband left her, it was perceived as a stab in the back; however, when the detail was revealed that the woman Bernadine was left for was a "white girl," the reaction of the three women (Gloria, Savannah, and Robin) was a sense of shock and disapproval; the knife used in the metaphorical "stab" had been twisted, and inebriated Troy had all

the answers: African-American women were ungrateful, and therefore, deserved to be alone. This message is relationship dysfunction at its finest, this time defined by race and spread among the masses. We will investigate this concept further in Bernadine's chapter.

Despite Robin's confrontation with Troy, she is back with Russell. She is seen, again, in lingerie, waiting in her bed.

Robin (narration): Russell called and said he's leaving his wife for sure, this time. Okay.

So, what's taking him so long?

Robin has her arms crossed and is tapping her fingers with anticipation. Russell arrives.

He opens the door, and he looks at her. He heads toward the closet and begins to undress.

Robin: Russell? Russell, what took you so long?

Russell: I wasn't gone that long.

Robin: Well, what happened?

Russell: We talked.

Robin: Well, I assumed that much. [Robin, in revealing lingerie, puts her arms around him begins to kiss him.] Is she going to sign the divorce papers or what?

Russell: You just don't decide to divorce somebody and sign on the dotted line, baby.

Doesn't work that way. I wish it did, but it doesn't. [He kisses her, smacks her rear-end] Why don't you get my pajamas?

Robin: Pajamas? Now that's the first time you ever asked for those. [Robin takes his pajamas out of the drawer and throws them at Russell] Russell, did you sleep with her?!

Russell: I can't take coming here and being pressured about what I'm doing with my own wife.

Robin: Well, you know we're not going to have much time together. [Robin's voice is quivering through tears. Russell walks away and heads toward the bed. Robin's phone rings.]

Robin: Hello?

Troy: Hey, what's happening, baby? It's Troy.

Robin: I can't talk right now. [Both Robin and Russell are lying in bed with their backs to one another.]

Troy: What, you can't talk now? Look, why don't you say something sexy to me so I can sleep?

Robin hangs up.

Russell: Who was that?

Robin: Savannah.

Russell: I suggest you tell your boyfriends not to call here after eleven.

Robin (narration): He's jealous. [She smiles] What a joke. What the hell am I doing anyway? (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Here, we see Robin back in the pattern of engaging in a relationship that is not beneficial to her well-being. Looking back at Angie Beeman's study on relationships in film by race, which was discussed in the Savannah chapter, another one of her findings was that "...African-American men [being] depicted as less emotionally supportive than 'white' men reaffirms the patterns in the quantitative data" (Beeman 700). Russell matches the description, and although Russell does not end his current relationship with

his wife to be with Robin, Robin is still in love with Russell; his jealousy comforts her, despite the messiness of their reality.

Robin ultimately fits the Jezebel image by sleeping with a married man and continuing to “perpetuate the image of the sex-crazed African American woman” (Harris 193). For Robin, scantily clad with lingerie in many of her scenes, not much is left to the imagination. “Within intersecting oppressions, Black women’s allegedly deviant sexuality becomes constructed around jezebel’s sexual desires...Because jezebel or the hoochie is constructed as a woman whose sexual appetites are at best inappropriate and, at worst, insatiable, it becomes a short step to imagine her as a ‘freak’ (Collins 83). Although Robin shares this Jezebel commonality with Savannah, the circumstances surrounding Robin sleeping with a married man are much different (i.e. selfishly pursuing the relationship to fulfill a need, versus not knowing the man was married and being too in love to end it).

Another similar-but-different commonality between Robin and Savannah (and Gloria) would be the issue of motherhood and how that ties into their romantic relationships. The next character-defining scene features Robin and Savannah sitting in what appears to be a community playground for kids, complete with a swimming pool.

Savannah: I mean, so what do you think, Robin? I’ve loved this man forever, and now that we’ve got another chance, I don’t want to blow it by making him think that I don’t have faith in him, you know what I mean?

Robin: I mean, don’t we hear this on *Salle* and *Oprah* every day? [Savannah laughs.]

That’s what you sound like.

Savannah: Yeah, I know. Is that where you get your advice from? TV?

Robin: Well, you know, there was this one woman in your same situation. This man kept saying he was gonna leave, too. She got her hopes all up and everything. Quit her job, even moved to the city he lived in. Right after she got there, she found out she was three months pregnant. He ended up dumping the woman. He said his kids would be too hurt if he left now.

Savannah: So, what about the baby?

Robin: So, she had an abortion. She never, ever told a soul; not even her mama.

Savannah: Mmm.

Robin: She never looked at men quite the same, again.

Savannah: What show did you hear this on?

Robin: Sorry, I've never been on Oprah. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

As Robin looks into the kids playing in the pool, a child in the background could be heard saying, "Where's my mom? I think my mommy left me. Have you seen my mom" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)?

In this scene, Robin reveals that she was previously in yet *another* romantic relationship with a married man, resulting in an aborted pregnancy. This revelation connects Robin to Savannah and Gloria in that the theme of motherhood has somehow tied into their romantic relationships (or lack of). Gloria's lack of romantic relationships can be tied back, in part, to her codependency on her son, Tarik; Savannah's relationship with Kenneth was heavily complicated by the pressures and approval of her meddling mother; Robin's pregnancy (and later abortion) ultimately ended the affair she was having with a married man; however, when she is presented with the same circumstance, this time with Russell, Robin decides to take a different route, this time around.

Robin's last scene with Russell begins with Robin reading a book on her couch, Achey by her side. She is wearing an oversized, button-down shirt and baggy socks. Russell knocks on the door, and as soon as Robin answers the door and recognizes him, her face drops.

Russell: Hey, baby. Surprised to see me? Finally got that bitch off my back like I told you I would.

Robin: If that's what you want, I'm happy for you.

Russell: Then why we standing here in the hallway talking about it? [Russell steps forward to enter the apartment]

Robin: Because I haven't invited you in. [She pushes Russell back]

Russell: Come on, baby. It's me. It's Russell. Why you wanna do this, after all we been through? Huh? Come on, now. [He steps forward again]

Robin: I said stop. [Russell steps back. He notices a book in her hand.]

Russell: What you reading? "Childbirth Choices?" [Russell takes three more steps back.]
What's that about?

Robin: Yeah, it's yours, and I'm keeping it.

Russell: So what you expect me to do?

Robin: What you do best: disappear! Go home to your wife. Or better yet, go get some help. I don't want anything from you. I want you to read my lips: *we don't need you in our lives.* (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Robin closes the door in Russell's face, locks it, and sits down with Achey. Russell attempts to knock, but instead, he gently places his hand on the door, before turning to leave. Robin looks at Achey on the couch triumphantly and whispers, "Yes!" She

continues to read books as the violins play in the background. Robin has come full circle with what she deserves, and while the audience is left with a sense of future hope for the character, Robin will soon become like Gloria, an African-American single mother with a dead beat fathering her child (another stereotype in African-American film). Through the trials and tribulations of Gloria, Savannah, and now, Robin, none of these characters truly endure the brunt of dysfunctional romantic relationships in film the way our next character, Bernadine, has experienced in *Waiting to Exhale*.

BERNADINE

We first meet Bernadine, dolled up and applying makeup at the mirror of her vanity table. She is a married mother of two, and lives in a well-to-do, Phoenix community. John, her husband, is a successful owner of a firm, and they are getting ready to attend one of John's work functions. However, what Bernadine does not know, is that her entire world would change in one evening. Bernadine serves as the peak of dysfunctional love in *Waiting to Exhale*.

Bernadine (narration): I do not feel like going to another one of these boring affairs.

[John enters their bathroom.]

John: Bernie?

Bernadine: Yes.

John: Would be terribly disappointed if we didn't go to the party, tonight?

Bernadine: [smiling] Crushed. [John does not smile] What?

John: I guess there's no appropriate time to tell you this, but I'm going to the party, just not with you. [Bernadine stops combing her hair]

John: She –

Bernadine: She?

John: Yes. She...doesn't want to be alone, tonight, and I was thinking, 'why should she be?'

Bernadine: It's that bitch that keeps your books, isn't it? And you picked tonight to flaunt your whore in front of all your business partners and your friends. What the hell are they supposed to think, John?

John: The truth. Finally, the truth. I'm leaving you for her.

Radio: This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. This is only a test.

John: Don't worry. You can have the house, and you know I'll take care of my kids.

Bernadine whips her head around to face him, as they had been talking through the reflection in her mirror. The Emergency Broadcast System test continues.

Bernadine: Now, you wait a minute I give you eleven fucking years of my life, and you're telling me you're leaving me for a white woman?

John: Would it be better if she were Black?

Bernadine: No, it's be better if *you* were Black!

[Emergency Broadcast System test continues]

John: Thank you, Bernadine, for making this easier on me.

[Bernadine stares at him, incredulously.]

John: I'll be back next week for my things.

Radio: This concludes this test of the Emergency Broadcast System

[Bernadine stares back into the mirror.] (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

Cinematically, this scene stands out because it is the first we really see of Bernadine and her husband, John. The conversation between the two seems quite ordinary until he tells Bernadine that he is leaving her for someone else. The location of the scene is in their bathroom, which can be considered a very vulnerable spot in one's home. The moment he drops the news, the emergency broadcast system on the radio performs (and concludes) a test for the remainder of the scene.

In terms of stereotypes and representation, we have already witnessed dysfunction within five minutes of Bernadine being on the screen. Culturally, it is particularly important to note Bernadine's concern with the other woman being white. This

preoccupation with white women was noted in Robin's chapter, but Bernadine bringing up race as a major factor throughout the film with regards to her failing relationship with John is not brief; in fact, it presents itself multiple times throughout the film. Eric King Watts states that, "blackness and whiteness are productive of aesthetic values coordinated by attributions of beauty and ugliness" (Watts 5). Bernadine's attention to the other woman's race under the umbrella of the racialization of beauty can be traced, in part, back to slavery and legalized discrimination, which benefitted whites. In the article "The Blacker the Berry: Gender, Skin Tone, Self-Esteem, and Self-Efficacy", researchers Maxine S. Thompson and Verna M. Keith conducted a study in 1980 examining "the relative importance of skin color to feelings about the self for men and women in the African American community" (Thompson and Keith 338). The methods of data collection were through interviews done within the National Survey of Black Americans by randomly picking self-identified Black American citizen participants (totaling 2,107), aged 18+ nation-wide to answer personal questions (i.e. age, sex, income, skin tone, etc.) (342). According to this study, women were more affected by white standards of beauty than are men (338). For men, on the other hand, "a lighter complexion is associated with higher feelings of perceived mastery...The skin tone on self-efficacy is much stronger for men" (347). As we see in *Waiting to Exhale*, this concept is still perpetuated in film, and now Bernadine is losing her husband to a white woman.

The day after, still in night clothes from the night before, appears exhausted and drained. Melancholy piano music plays in the background. Bernadine plays her answering machine messages, feeds her fish and makes coffee. After sending the kids off to school, Bernadine is seen slamming open the door of John's walk-in closet. The

camera zooms in, quickly, on all of John's belongings, each set of belongings zoomed in on was accompanied with a loud booming noise: shirts, suits, ties, jewelry.

Bernadine: This motherfucker is psychotic! I bet you there's serial killers less anal!

[She looks around the closet, starts to violently snatch the clothes off the hangers.] A

white woman probably be the only one who would tolerate your smug ass! Yeah, I was your white woman for eleven years! Couldn't have started that damn company without me! Hell, I worked my ass off! I got a master's degree in business, and here I was his secretary, his office manager, and his computer.

[She drags his stuff in their car outside, via a children's wagon]

Bernadine (quoting John): 'No, Bernadine, you can't start the catering business, this year.

Why don't you wait a few years, huh? Yeah, don't start it, now. Wait one, two, three years. I need you to be the fucking background to my foreground.'

Bernadine (sobbing): Seven-thirty-two, seven-thirty-two: the number of times we made love! I remember when that bastard told me he was counting, right after fifty-one! I'll show you! Fuck me for not leaving your ass then!

[Bernadine goes back into John's closet to collect more of his belongings.]

Bernadine: But the fucking worst was making my kids go to a school with only two other black children because you don't want them to be improperly influenced. Well, guess what John?! You're the motherfucking improper influence! Get your shit, get your shit, and get out! (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

As she scurries back and forth, transporting all of John's items into their BMW, the car is packed, and she is adding items through their sunroof. She opens the garage door, races the BMW in reverse, and proceeds to douse the vehicle in gasoline. She

lights a cigarette and uses the same match to light the car on fire. Using the same match can be seen as her gaining pleasure (the cigarette) from John's pain (his burning belongings). Taking a long drag from her cigarette, she watches the car and John's belongings burn, almost symbolizing the end of their marriage. The scene ends with a shot of John's empty closet; the metal hangers are still swaying, indicating the quickness of Bernadine's rage.

This scene encompasses another stereotype with regards to portrayals of Black women in media, which is commonly known as the "angry Black woman." The depicted characteristics of the angry black woman can be described as overly aggressive, loud, violent, and irrationally angry with an attitude. Bogle notes that "it was no doubt the film's most memorable scene – and perhaps its most inauthentic. The sequence is sheer theater" (Bogle 373). Little of that was taken into consideration by the media machine representing African-Americans. Philip Kretsedemas, author of, "But She's Not Black: Viewer Interpretations of 'Angry Black Women' on Prime Time TV" notes that this [stereotype] can be traced to the Sapphire character which debuted on the *Amos n' Andy* show in the late 1920s (Kretsedemas 150)." Historically and currently in the media, Black women "are associated with aggressive, flamboyant behavior that emphasizes their racial Otherness" (155). As with a lot of stereotypes, portrayals of angry Black women existed in film and television long before *Waiting to Exhale's* Bernadine came into existence. Kretsedemas went on to say that "media stereotypes of black women are often embedded in narratives themes that have been used to send messages about the 'dangers' of racial integration and black social mobility" (151). In a lot of her scenes, Bernadine's fury was often not measured, and she fits the angry Black woman stereotype.

Bernadine's reactions continue as she storms into one of John's board meetings.

John: Bernadine, I'm in a meeting. If you need something, I suggest—

Bernadine (approaches the other woman): Would you mind terribly if I had a few words with my husband? [Bernadine smacks the woman]

John: What are you doing?!

Bernadine: I've been to the bank. Thank you! Thank you for thinking of your children!

John (to everyone): Everyone out!

Bernadine: Yes, out! Out!

John: You don't get to come into *my* office and start throwing some tantrum because you can't finish what you started.

Bernadine: What am I supposed to do for money?!

John: I gave you the house, now sell it!

Bernadine: I hate you!

John: I'm really sorry to hear that, Bernadine, but I am not playing games with you, anymore.

Bernadine: Who do you think started this damn company, huh?

John: Let's not start that again, alright?

Bernadine: And now you think you can just...take the money and run!

John: Business hasn't been good for years, but don't worry: you'll get what's coming to you.

Bernadine: Hell, I'm *not* worried; you, on the other hand, *should* be.

John: Okay, look. Let's not let this...thing...get any uglier than it already has.

Security: Is everything alright, Mr. Harris

John (to security): Fine.

Bernadine (to security): You gonna put me out, Joe? You here to put me out?

John (to Bernadine): Now, I'm willing. I'm more than willing to give you \$300,000 cash, today!

Bernadine (to John): Your children aren't for sale. [Bernadine starts to walk away.]

John: One more thing before you go: I'm coming for my kids on Saturday.

Bernadine: Yeah? If I hear you had them anywhere near that TRAMP BITCH, you're gonna regret it for the rest of your damn life! (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

Violence, aggression, and shouts. Bernadine epitomizes the angry Black woman role.

However, that is not the only stereotype that Bernadine takes on with regards to her relationship with men. In the next scene, we see Bernadine slip into the Jezebel label, as she starts to sleep with a married man. Gloria, Robin, Savannah, and Bernadine decide to have a ladies' night at a local club. Three of the four women are smoking; all of them are drinking. As the other women sit and talk, a newly coiffed Bernadine gets up to dance.

Gloria: Ooh, that's Herbert Webster; used to be a pro-football player. Now he's a newscaster or sports agent.

Robin: And fine as hell. And if [Bernadine] don't want him—Mmm! I'll slam-dunk him tonight.

Gloria: He's also very married.

Robin: And?

Savannah: She's only dancing with him, y'all. Damn.

Gloria: Are you blind? Look at her. Uh-uh. She flirting with that man.

Robin: Mmm.

Gloria: Shoot, I could be at home watching 'Good Times.'

Bernadine (approaching the three women): Why aren't you dead beats dancing? Now you can drink and talk at home.

Savannah: Ooh, you're too hot for me.

Gloria: You better watch out for that man.

Bernadine: Who? Herbert? Oh, he's harmless. Besides, if his wife's at home, he better watch out for *me*!

Robin: Ooh! Give me some! [Robin high fives Bernadine.]

Savannah: Y'all bad.

Gloria: Well, I guess that means that he's available.

Gloria and Bernadine spend time together and go to a day fair. They are riding a Ferris wheel Ferris wheel. Bernadine expresses herself, while Gloria brings Bernadine's attention to her actions with Herbert.

Bernadine: He thinks he's gonna get away with it? Well, I'm not gonna let him get away with it.

Gloria: That's right.

Bernadine: You know he has a whole apartment building, 200 acres of farmland in California, and a vineyard right here in Arizona? And did you know they made wine in Arizona?

Gloria: Yeah.

Bernadine: Well, I didn't.

Gloria: Girl, this mess will get you a week on Sally Jesse.

Bernadine: I'm telling you, Glo; this is how women get screwed: too lazy to look out for yourself, so you put all your trust in your husbands. But I finally got the answer: just never get fucking married.

Gloria: Lots of us got that answer. I thought you had the answer to something. [If] you had the answer to that one, honey, you'd be on the cover of *Cosmo*, *Newsweek*, *Psychology Today*, *Jet*, *Essence*...*Ebony*! [They both laugh.]

Bernadine: Don't make me mad. [Bernadine frowns.] I'm mad.

Gloria: *Mad Magazine*! [They laugh again]

They continue their day at the fair, watching the ostrich race, when Gloria has a question.

Gloria: Bernie, if I ask you something, promise you won't get mad?

Bernadine: What is it?

Gloria: You been messing around with Herbert?

Bernadine looks down and around, then she finally looks at Gloria with a face of guilt and admission.

Gloria: Bernie!

Bernadine: I spent one evening with him. Look, I don't wanna marry him; I just --I-- I wanted to, you know. I needed to get laid, so I did.

Gloria: Now how you gonna say something like that?

Bernadine: Easy. Men been doing this shit for years.

Gloria: Mmm.

Bernadine: I'm telling you: It's like watching paint dry. [They both laugh.] Girl, now he calling and paging me all hours of the day and night. Showed up to my house, unannounced. My child answers the door; now you know that freaked me out.

Gloria: Uh huh.

Bernadine: I don't know what he's thinking. I tapped danced for a man for eleven years; I'm not about to go out and get me a new owner.

Gloria: Yeah Bernie, but you know you're wrong.

Bernadine: No, see? That's why I didn't want to tell you. I'm not...like you, Gloria. I need somebody to hold me.

Gloria: Hmm!

Bernadine: Even if it is a damn lie.

Gloria: Hmm. [Gloria sarcastically sounds like she is agreeing with Bernie, but her face reads the opposite.]

Bernadine looks really embarrassed and ashamed. Her husband is leaving her for another woman, and here she is, being the other woman. Although, Bernadine's Jezebel label has much different roots than that of Savannah (selfish) and Robin (naivety and superficial); Bernadine is acting out of loss. She does this throughout the film, not just sexually. Still, it is stereotypical. Patricia Hill Collins insists that "the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of several interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining Black women's subordination" (Collins 72). None of the four women of *Waiting to Exhale* were able to escape the controlled images: three Jezebels and a matriarch.

As a result of these controlling images, Bernadine discussing Herbert's lack of sexual prowess is not uncharacteristic of African-American romantic films. Beeman's study about the portrayal of couples in romantic movies by race found that "much of the conversational content between African American characters focused on sex. In fact, 38

percent of films involving African American couples were based on sexual themes” (Beeman 700). I would argue that those sex-related conversations depicted in African-American films are a direct byproduct of the Jezebel image.

In her preliminary divorce settlement ruling, Bernadine receives \$3,000 per month until they review the newly submitted documents. Bernadine’s angry black woman characteristics return, laced with racial overtones.

Bernadine’s Lawyer: This is only round one. Stay strong, Bernadine. Stay strong.

Bernadine looks down in defeat, then marches over to John in court. John is overheard speaking to his lawyer.

John (to his lawyer): Look, I want this to be over and done with.

John’s Lawyer: Let’s just take this step by step.

Bernadine: You’re a sorry son of a bitch, John. [She leans over John and his lawyer, both of whom are sitting.] You know the mortgage is \$5,000 a month. How are your children supposed to live, huh?!

John: I’ve told you to take the \$300,000, but you want to play hardball.

Bernadine: All dogs don’t go to heaven, John. [Bernadine looks back and forth, between John and his lawyer] You think you can get away with this, huh? You low-life-ass-kissing-Uncle-Tom!

John: You know...[John stands up] this whole ‘Uncle Tom’ stuff, it’s really becoming a bit redundant, don’t you think, Bernadine? Excuse me.

Bernadine is left speechless. Instead of calling John a “liar” or a “cheater” in their previous exchange, Bernadine calls him an “Uncle Tom”; based on Bogle’s definition of a “Tom,” being called one is quite a sizeable insult surrounding race. After the court

proceedings, Bernadine enters what appears to be a hotel lobby. A couple is getting married, and a small band plays as the newly wedded pose for pictures. It's bitter-sweet, as Bernadine has just arrived from divorce court, evidenced by the same brown suit she wore in the previous court scene with John. She walks up to the bar and orders a scotch and soda. As she sits alone, she lights up a cigarette.

In walks James Wheeler, who sits beside her at the hotel bar. Bernadine takes a long drag from her cigarette and holds her breath a moment before taking a long exhale. After failed attempt to get to know her, James finally get to know her name.

James: Bernadine. My, this is a pretty place. But I have to admit: I haven't seen anything as splendid as you since I've been here.

Bernadine assumes James is coming on to her, and she darts him an icy glare with her eyes. James laughs.

James: Okay. Hold on, now. Hold on. [He laughs again.] You don't have to give me that look. Look, I haven't seen the sun for four days, now. I mean, it's been one meeting after the other, after the other. And now, I am finished. So, I decided to come downstairs, have myself a drink, and in the morning I look forward to meeting my lovely wife. Salud. [James raises his glass of cognac].

Bernadine loosens up. Her back isn't as stiff in her chair, and her body language leans toward him, losing tension. She takes a deep breath and exhales.

James: So, why are you sitting here all alone?

Bernadine instantly stiffens up, again, and she looks as if she is about to respond combatively. Before she could verbally respond, James cuts in.

James: Okay, wait. Hold on, now. You don't have to answer that. You don't know me. You know, I mean, you don't know me from a can of paint; here I am, all in your Kool-Aid and don't know the flavor.

Bernadine: I'm getting divorce, James.

James: Ah, I'm sorry to hear that.

Bernadine: Yeah, well...It happens, huh? [Bernadine swirls her drink as her cigarette burns in the ash tray] And you know, it just occurred to me that um, I've lost something that once meant everything, and it hurts, and right...I'm just--I'm really pissed about it. [James and Bernadine are leaning into each other and look into each other's eyes.]

Bernadine: But you know what really gets me? I didn't have plan B. My marriage was supposed to last. [She takes a drink with one hand and has her cigarette in the other.]

James: Mmm.

Bernadine: So, I guess that's why I'm here. [She puts her drink down.]

James: Well, you are one, brave woman. You bad. [Bernadine looks shocked and laughs.]

Bernadine: No.

James: Oh yes. I hope you recognize that.

Bernadine: No, I don't really feel like that, James.

James: Well, I mean, you're sitting here, all alone. Ain't a Black person in sight, and you sitting here like everything is alright. [Bernadine scoffs]. You --Your makeup is flawless.

Bernadine: Come on, now. [She is smiling.]

James: I mean, you've taken his best shot, and you're still here.

Bernadine: Mmm.

James: Splendid.

Bernadine: You just know me so well. [Her tone is sarcastic]

James: No, no, no, no. I don't know you...

Bernadine: Mmm.

James: But I do know a fighter when I see one. And I can tell that with one look in your eyes. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

As they talk and laugh, Bernadine learns that James is a civil rights attorney, and that his wife is dying of breast cancer. As her marriage is dying, his wife is dying. Although they are in different circumstances, both are watching their significant other slip away, hers voluntarily. This scene is important because this is where Bernadine's vulnerability comes into play. She's opening up emotionally, not opening up out of rage, and some character depth is finally added to her. The connection between Bernadine and James was so strong, and after a time, they decided to go to...*Bernadine's* hotel room. Again we see her employing the mindset of Patricia Hill Collin's Jezebel by being in a hotel room with a married man.

Initially, Bernadine has trouble getting into her room, but the key finally works.

Bernadine: I always get so confused.

James: You okay?

Bernadine: Yeah, I'm just...I'm okay.

James: You're nervous.

Bernadine: Well, I'm a little nervous [Bernadine glances over her shoulder as they enter the hotel room.]

James: Well, I mean, if you're having second thoughts about me being up here...

Bernadine: No, I'm...having all kinds of thoughts.

James: Well, if it's any consolation, Bernie, I've never done this before.

[Bernadine is sitting on the ottoman at the foot of the bed, nervous and breathing heavily.]

Bernadine: You sure?

James: I haven't made love to a woman in over a year. Lauren stopped wanting to, so...

[They stare at each other. Bernadine is sitting upright. She laughs, nervously. James sits down on the ottoman with Bernadine.]

James: Look, I got two things I wanna say to you.

Bernadine: No, you don't have to say anything.

James: No, no. I do because you might kick me out afterwards. [Bernadine laughs.]

Remember how you were saying that the woman your husband was marrying –I mean, ex-husband – that she was white?

Bernadine: Yes.

James: Well, so is my wife.

Bernadine's face drops as if being disappointed or let down. She also appears to be embarrassed when she looks back up into his eyes.

James: Look, Bernie, I mean, I could sit here and say that the reason I'm staying with her is because she's dying or that it's my obligation, or a whole bunch of...stuff. But the truth of the matter is, I love her. She's the only woman I have *ever* loved.

Bernadine stares into his eyes, her eyes welling up with tears.

James: And I would never leave her, under any circumstances. [Bernadine closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.]

Bernadine: It hurts like hell.

James: Yeah.

[Bernadine grabs his hand and lays her head on his shoulder. James rests his head on top of hers.]

Bernadine: Someone felt that way about me, once. But he stopped. [She takes a long pause.] What do you what to do, tonight?

James: Make tonight beautiful.

Bernadine: Beautiful.

The next shot of them features Bernadine and James sleeping next to each other, cuddling in the morning daylight. As the shot pans out, it is revealed that they still have on all of their clothes, including their shoes. This indicates that they slept together, but presumably did not have sex. Bernadine's level of vulnerability was higher than we had seen at this point in the film, but her decisions to be intimate with a married man is still tinged with and suggests a stereotypical Jezebel "nature." Hall adds that this "stereotyping, in other words, is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order" (Hall 258). Bernadine could never truly absolve herself of a stereotype, as her anger returns. In her next scene at Gloria's birthday, Bernadine acts out again, perhaps because James served as a reminder of the love she no longer had.

At the birthday party, all four main characters are pretty intoxicated, and while the other three women are listening to music and relaxing on the couch, Bernadine is off to the side of the living room, appearing distraught. The ashes on her cigarette are long.

Savannah: You know what? You know what we all have in common?

Robin: What?

Savannah: None of us, not none of us, have a man.

Bernadine appears to be even more hurt after hearing Savannah's observation.

Savannah: That's some sad shit.

[Bernadine's eyes are welling up, and the tears flow down.]

Bernadine (out loud, to herself): That lying asshole...f-messed up my life. I should call him, right now. Yeah, I wanna talk to that bitch.

[Bernadine puts her cigarette out and takes on sip out of her champagne glass, before she hurries over to Gloria's house phone. She dials the number, despite Gloria's numerous verbal attempts to stop her.]

Gloria: Girl, you crazy? Bernie!

Robin (drunk): Hand me the phone. *I'll* talk to that ho!

Savannah: Robin! Oh wait! Wait a minute! Hold on! Robin! What are y'all doing?

Robin: No!

[Kathleen, John's new love interest, answers the phone.]

Kathleen: Johnny? Hello?

Robin: No, it's not John, Bitch. [Robin hangs up the phone.]

Bernadine: What happened?

Gloria: Bernie, don't do this. Bernie! Bernie, don't do this. [Bernadine is holding the phone.]

Bernadine: Gloria, I gave him two babies, and she thinks she can just take my fucking husband? [Bernadine picks up the phone to dial John, again.]

Gloria: Bernie! Bernie! [She disconnects the phone receiver cord from the base.] Cut! It's stupid. It's stupid and it's childish.

Bernadine walks away. She stands in the middle of the room, sobbing.

Bernadine: Gloria, I have some shit that I wanna get off my chest! I'm hurt. Why you unplugged the phone? What...what happened to the music? I thought this was supposed to be a party. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*)

In the next scene, she is back in court awaiting her final court settlement. The judge rules that Bernadine is to receive: "\$1.5 million in the phoenix municipal savings and loan association, ownership of their home in Pinnacle Peak, AZ, a second home in Acapulco, Mexico, \$500,000 stocks and bonds, and an E320-S Mercedes station wagon" (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). Bernadine is beaming and smiling with disbelief, grabbing her lawyer.

Bernadine: Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Lawyer: You're welcome. (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

Bernadine walks over to John, this time she is more amicable. He offers his hand to her as if in a business deal. She shakes his hand and her serious expression is marked with a hint of sadness. John opens the court gate to let Bernadine out. As soon as she goes through the gate, she shrieks loudly with joy as she runs to hugs a supportive Savannah in the court gallery.

In Bernadine's final scene, Bernadine is sick with a cold. Her young daughter presents the mail to Bernadine, in an effort to care for her mother. Bernadine opens the letter and realizes that it is from James Wheeler from the hotel bar. As she reads the letter she cried. In it, James expresses that he fell in love with Bernadine in that one night at the hotel. He also expresses that he also still loves his wife, and he cries when she sleeps because his wife is so amazing and because he is so lucky to have her (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). He calls Bernadine an inspiration. "You know what inspiration is? It's someone who lets

you know life will go on and something beautiful can be waiting somewhere. Somewhere, when you least expect it” (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*). When Bernadine finishes the

letter, crying, her daughter comes back into the room and points to their ceiling window.

Onika: Look, mama! God stopped crying. [She is referring to the rain stopping. The sky is now full with beautiful pastel colors.]

Bernadine: I don’t think those are God’s tears, at all; just his way of making sure everything keeps growing (Whitaker, *Waiting to Exhale*).

This scene was a nice way to wrap up Bernadine’s character, depicting that she had come full-circle toward a better, more peaceful life. However, the damage had already been done; her incessant, relentless rage (angry Black woman) and her poor sexual decisions (Jezebel) with Herbert and James, both of whom are married, dominated her role. As Bogle remarked with her intentional car fire scene, it was *that* part of her character that was deemed unforgettable (Bogle 373).

CONCLUSION

Waiting to Exhale, whether or not this movie had been recognized by the Hollywood elite, *matters*. Yes, the late superstar, Whitney Houston, played a lead role; yes, Angela Bassett contributed her enormous range, subtlety and depth to the project; yes, Forest Whitaker directed the film; but what matters most about *Waiting to Exhale* is that it serves as a representation of romantic love in African-American film, a very controlled and limited sector of Hollywood.

Waiting to Exhale has an overarching message, and that message is that romantic love for African-Americans is extremely dysfunctional and problematic (in film). In film, love for African-Americans is angry and irrational, as portrayed through Bernadine. It is sex-based, superficial, and it is unemotional, as shown through Robin, Michael, and Russell. It is desperate and deceitful as depicted through Gloria and David. Lastly, love is selfish, pathetic, and untrustworthy, as revealed through Savannah, Lionel, and Kenneth. Examining these adjectives that describe how love is portrayed in *Waiting to Exhale* (and African-American film), in conjunction with the history of African-Americans on screen, not much has changed in terms of the African-American image to the masses, unfortunately.

In addition to African-American representations, *Waiting to Exhale* deals with representations of class, gender, and sexuality, all equally important markers that make up identity. With class and sexuality, though, the four main characters are of the dominant group(s); they are not struggling financially, nor do they have to deal with any of the societal pressures and discrimination that homosexuals sometimes encounter; due to this privilege, those sectors of identity are implicitly neutral and in the background.

The *difference* (or Otherness) that is spectacularly consumed directly points back to the identity markers of race and gender (African-American women), both of which are marginalized groups. This highlights that the explicit negative representations of love in *Waiting to Exhale* are specific to African-American women (and to some degree, African-American men).

In a modern-tech world, these images are being brought forth at a rapid pace, and the consequences of these negative images are more dangerous and critical *now* for African-Americans (yes, even with an African-American president), than ever before. This is mainly because we are not solely looking at television, movies, and magazines anymore, in terms of media consumption. Television shows go off, movies end, magazines are finished; the *Internet* has now given us an endless supply of these same images. Based on the ideas of spectacular consumption, increased negative representation and repetition leads to greater consumption, resulting in the amplification and enforcement of ideas about “authentic blackness.”

We have not yet, at length, examined the spectacular consumption of self and how representations of romantic love may affect the ways in which African-Americans view themselves; however, when we study media and race, we look at how the dominant group views the minority, based on the image in the media of the projected minority group(s) (spectacular consumption). We have also looked how the media images of the dominant group affect the minority group(s) (for example, white standards of beauty and the surge in growth of eyelid surgeries among Asians). Lastly, we have focused on the privilege of the dominant group and its effects on both the dominant and minority group(s) (for example, white privilege and the gap in American wealth by race). This serves as proof

that we *all* ingest these representations and messages (knowingly or unknowingly), African-Americans included.

The purpose of this thesis was to assist, along with other academics, in pushing the scholarship forward in African-American media studies. Through *Waiting to Exhale*, I wanted to highlight the historical and current representations in African-American film (specifically with love), the messages that are being communicated about love, as well as how those messages are consumed. The next step is to continue *action*. We need to increase the diversity in African-American representations to more-closely represent the range and the beauty of the African-American experience. Until that trajectory is improved, we too, are waiting to exhale.

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Selected Presenter and Session Chair, The Popular Culture Association Conference |

Chicago, IL | April 2014

- Selected to present music video research and serve as chair for a panel session on popular music.

Presenter, The 99th Annual National Communication Association Conference |

Washington, D.C. | November 2013

- Presented historical and cultural research in communication.