



Subverting Beauty Aesthetics in African-American Young Adult Literature

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Multiculturalism resists the notion that people of color must assimilate in order to become accepted in society. Cultural difference is “recognized, acknowledged, and respected, without its individual members being coerced into a single homogenized amalgamation” (Ibieta & Orvell, 1996; 4). This concept is especially important when considering the ways in which cultural groups express themselves in terms of physical appearance and artistic modes of expression. In this article, I discuss African-American expressive culture as found in novels for young adults by three contemporary African-American female writers: Angela Johnson, Rita Williams-Garcia, and Jacqueline Woodson. The novels I focus on are Angela Johnson’s *Toning the Sweep* (1993) and *Heaven* (1998), Rita Williams-Garcia’s *Blue Tights* (1988) and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995), and Jacqueline Woodson’s *The Dear One* (1991) and *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* (1994). These novels contain female protagonists for whom physical appearance is a significant concern.

I include passages from literature for adults by black women writers to illustrate a continuous dialogue among black women writers about how beauty is defined, expressed, and often used as a form of oppression. I also describe how the six young adult novels contribute to the ongoing conversation about beauty in discrete, yet significant ways. By delineating the intertextual relationship between African-American young adult (AAYA) literature and African-American literature written for an adult audience, I show that AAYA literature has depth and can endure critical literary analysis.

Though the focus is on physical appearance, I think it is important to state that the AAYA novels I discuss here contain numerous references to African-American expressive culture unrelated to physical appearance. Music particular to black culture, such as jazz, hip-hop, gospel, and reggae, is alluded to in *Heaven*, *Toning the Sweep*, *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, and *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*. References are also made to writers, specifically black women writers

(such as Zora Neale Hurston in *Heaven* and Audre Lorde in *I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This*), to social and/or historical events important to the black community—church burnings in the South (*Heaven*), the civil rights movement (*I Hadn’t Meant to Tell You This* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*), and the L.A. riots (*Toning the Sweep*)—and to African folk traditions or to Africa in general. Conjure, hoodoo, and root-work and African royalty appear in both *Toning the Sweep* and *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, flying Africans in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, and toning in *Toning the Sweep*.

Black women writers often write fiction about beauty standards and the destructive nature of hair and skin politics on women’s lives (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Ebong, 2001; Rooks, 1996, 2001). Characters often convey contempt for a beauty standard that excludes people of the Diaspora, as it is suggested that white or light skin and long, straight hair connote beauty (Leeds, 1994;

Rooks, 2001). *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds: Stories by and about Black Women* (1990) reveals what editor Mary Helen Washington refers to as a consistent obsession among black women writers with physical beauty. This obsession is an indication of how black women writers are “deeply affected by the discrimination against their skin and the texture of their hair” (Washington, 1990; xiv–xv).

A number of the works in *Black-Eyed Susans/Midnight Birds* include protagonists who dislike their physical appearances or blackness. As a result, they find themselves longing for white physical features or hating white women because they have been used as the model by which women of color are measured. Another disturbing example of this is Pecola from *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison, 1970). Longing for white physical characteristics, Pecola’s end is a tragic one that leaves her insane.

Gwendolyn Brooks’s only novel, *Maud Martha*, offers another example of a black woman who is deeply affected by others’ perception of her skin color and cultural identity.

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When Maud Martha watches her husband pull a “white as white” girl onto the dance floor, she realizes that he does not approve of her color. Maud says, “He keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping” (Brooks, 1990; 119).

This notion is echoed by the title character in “Reena” by Paule Marshall, who explains that two of her past lovers did not approve of her skin color. One of Reena’s lovers terminates his relationship with her after his parents voice their disapproval of her skin tone. In another relationship, this time with a white man, Reena learns that he is using her skin color to anger his father. As a result of her struggle with her lover’s perception of her blackness, an older, wiser Reena confesses, “I had my share of dreams of waking up to find myself with long, blond curls, blue eyes and skin like milk” (Marshall, 1990; 92). However, the mature Reena no longer wishes to be white or have blond hair. In fact, she has discovered that:

We live surrounded by white images, and white in this world is synonymous with the good, light, beauty, success, so that, despite ourselves sometimes, we run after the whiteness and deny our darkness, which has been made into the symbol of all that is evil and inferior. (Marshall, 1990; 92)

Each of the literary works mentioned above reveal how many within the African-American community have been socialized to devalue blackness. This hatred for black skin is also transferred to hair texture.

Thick, curly hair, like dark skin, can be problematic for black women. Hair can be a controlling force in black women’s lives, as it helps to decide if one will be viewed as beautiful by society in general as well as by members of the black community. Straight and long hair has traditionally been considered feminine, while short and natural hairstyles have been viewed as masculine and/or militant (Rooks, 1996). Brownmiller (1984) maintains, “Hair indeed may be trivial, but it is central to the feminine definition” (76). Terms such as “good hair” and “bad hair” simultaneously plague and perplex. “Good hair” looks like white people’s hair, straight and silky. “Bad hair,” unique to black people, is often a source of anger and shame, as Marguerite describes in Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:

Wouldn’t they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blonde, would take the place

of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn’t let me straighten? . . . Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Angelou, 1969; 3)

Like Marguerite, Hagar, a character in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, thinks beauty and long, straight hair are synonymous. In the following dialogue with Pilate, Hagar surmises that Milkman’s lack of interest in her is a result of his contempt for her hair:

“He don’t like hair like mine. . . .”
“It’s his hair too. He got to love it.”
“He don’t love it at all. He hates it. . . .”
“How can he love himself and hate your hair?”
“He loves silky hair.”
“Hush, Hagar.”
“Penny-colored hair.”
“Please, honey.”
“And lemon-colored skin.”
“Shhh.”
“And gray-blue eyes.” (Morrison, 1977; 319)

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The YA novels studied here explore the beauty aesthetic in more positive ways. For example, a scene in *Like Sisters on the Homefront* makes for an interesting comparison to the above passages from Angelou and Morrison. As Gayle sits in an abortion clinic, she looks around at the other girls in the room. She spots an “East Indian-looking girl with perfect brown skin and a ponytail long enough to sit on” (Williams-Garcia, 1995; 5). Similar to Marguerite, “Gayle imagined herself with that long ponytail, then snapped out of it. The thought of being dragged around the schoolyard by the hair was not pleasant, as Gayle was always starting something with the biggest gal she could find” (Williams-Garcia, 1995; 5). Unlike Marguerite, Gayle does not express self-loathing or an unnatural longing for long hair. In fact, she resists the idea of having such a hairstyle, as it interferes with her personality and way of being. This seems to suggest that, in spite of other problems, Gayle is firm within her sense of self and does not believe she needs long, straight hair to be beautiful.

Body Image

In much of black women’s writing, notions of standardized physical beauty are destructive and illustrate that beauty is political, as beauty standards are put in place by the dominant culture and transmitted into society. Not only is this

true of ideal skin color and hair texture, but it is also true of suggested ideal body images. Cauce et al. (1996) assert that “The ‘American’ ideal feminine figure—petite proportions, slim hips, and small facial features—is not often seen among African American women” (103). Similarly, McDowell (2001) maintains, “Thinness is prototypically embodied by the white woman” (298). Traditionally, black women have been described as big, fat, “black black” (Walker, 1983) and boisterous, similar to the Sapphire stereotype in film, literature, and other media.

Christian-Smith (1990) employs the image of the mirror to reveal teenage girls’ obsession with physical beauty and the social acceptance it affords them. According to Christian-Smith, girls peer into several mirrors aside from the one that actually hangs on the wall; for example, boyfriends, peers, and society all operate as mirrors. Duke (2000) argues that during adolescence, girls, more so than boys, “experience. . . stress, declining confidence, and self-image disturbance” (2). Duke explains that girls fear that they will not be embraced by peers if they do not have a socially acceptable physical appearance. In Duke’s study of girls’ opinions about a “media-endorsed standard of beauty” (377), an African-American participant “argued that the experience of being a racial minority made Black girls less apt to buy into a value system that placed a premium on a standardized way of looking” (385). While this statement is certainly debatable, a number of the girls in the AAYA novels discussed here seem to convey a similar sentiment. However, Christian-Smith found something quite different when she analyzed girls’ notions of beauty in YA romance novels published between 1960 and 1980.

As expected, Christian-Smith noted that black and white girls differed in their levels of self-consciousness concerning skin color. For black girls, self-acceptance, as well as the acceptance of others, concerning their skin color was problematic. For example, often the girls expressed frustration brought on by an inability to conform to white standards of beauty. According to Christian-Smith, black girls in the novels revealed “the pain involved in accommodating someone else’s definition [read whites] of self” (53).

The six AAYA novels I discuss here were published during the 1990s, and they express a different sentiment concerning white standards of beauty. The novels do not adhere to stereotypical body images when describing black women. Instead, they describe black women’s bodies in a variety of ways. In some cases, images of black women seem to purposefully reverse stereotypes. For instance, Johnson (1993) depicts Ola as the exact opposite of the big, black woman stereotype: “short and delicate like she’d break if you held her arm too tight. She wouldn’t break, though” (20). Similarly, while Gayle’s mother, Aunt Virginia, and Cookie are all described as big and tall or “big-boned” (Williams-Garcia, 1995; 31), Gayle “inherit[ed] Great’s petiteness, her features, her ways” (88). Other characters in each of the novels also reveal the diversity of body types that exists among African-American women.

Blue Tights takes this one step further, making body image a principal theme of the story. The novel illustrates the damaging affects of standardized beauty ideals concerning body type on the lives of young black girls.

Through “the oppressive gaze of the dominant culture,” which Ms. Sobol symbolizes, Joyce learns of the oppressive nature of standardized notions of beauty. Ms. Sobol views Joyce’s body as “an eccentric black body” (Peterson, 2001; xv) adorned in a loud blue and orange dance outfit:

[Joyce’s] waist [is] a narrow stem for her heart-shaped buttocks. Her breasts. . . ample but not her main feature. Standing in profile at the barre, Joyce *ruined* the line of twenty would-be Makarovas, all slight in stature, with her blue tights and her *big butt*. (Williams-Garcia, 1988, 27; italics are mine.)

Joyce’s body and taste in fashion differ from Ms. Sobol’s and the other girls in the class, including the middle-class black girls. Ms. Sobol presents herself as ideal: white, thin, appropriately dressed, complete with flawless makeup. Thus, this juxtaposition of Ms. Sobol’s white body and Joyce’s black one is indicative of how black and white women’s bodies have been positioned against one another in texts (Harris, 2001; Smith, 1998; Wiegman, 1991). For instance, Ms. Sobol and Joyce reflect “traditional dichotomies governing black women and white in dominant U.S. film” (Wiegman, 1991). However, Joyce does not see Ms. Sobol as ideal. To Joyce, Ms. Sobol is “a perfect stick figure” (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 27) who has “absolutely nothing on her body to make a man look twice” (28), while Joyce puts her hands on her shapely hips and boasts “God made me a real woman” (4). Individuals conceptualize beauty differently based on race and class. In a recent study of how girls decipher idealized notions of beauty presented in teen magazines, Duke (2000) found that “white girls were striving for a narrowly defined body size and shape, [while] Black girls saw unattractiveness only at the far reaches of either side of the weight continuum. . . they were far more likely to describe a girl as too thin than too heavy” (385).

Ms. Sobol puts Joyce on display like the Hottentot Venus and objectifies her. Constantly calling attention to Joyce’s butt, Ms. Sobol even tries to push Joyce’s butt down as she yells, “Tuck that butt under!” (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 29). Ms. Sobol, and others, focus on Joyce’s body so much that Joyce begins to feel uncomfortable. She refuses to undress in the locker room in front of the other girls after dance class because “she knew they all wanted to stare at her round tail” (31). Several characters in the novel suggest that Joyce is less than human because of her shapely buttocks. This damages Joyce psychologically, but it also leads her to question the sanity of the dominant culture’s notion of beauty: “*What’s*

wrong with white people, anyway? Don't they know that this is just how black folks are made? How come she don't see nothing wrong with any of these no-tail, no-hips, no-nothing nons? Just me (29; italics in original). While Joyce wants to be accepted as a dancer, she resists the temptation to accept a Eurocentric standardized definition of beauty (Leeds, 1994).

Unlike heroines described by Christian-Smith (1990), Joyce does not try to transform her image or conform to society's idea of what is acceptable. Instead, she seeks comfort in her own culture, where she finds acceptance. Joyce is invited to participate in an African dance troupe, where she auditions and gets the lead role in *Kwanzaa Suite*. This helps to build her self-confidence, especially when she sees the other female dancers "dancing with vigor and grace, uninhibited breasts and buttocks jiggling to the demands of the movements. Their shapes and sizes had such variety that she lost her uniqueness in the studio. She was just another dancer" (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 60).

Initially, Joyce avoids looking at herself in the mirror on the wall because the metaphoric mirrors she comes in contact with lead her to question her beauty. Yet as she gains confidence, she begins to look at her image and to like what she sees. The last line of the novel reads, "[Joyce's] focus remained in the mirror, at something wonderful opening up before her eyes" (138). Joyce's refusal to allow society's conception of beauty to control her self-image exemplifies an important tenet of black feminist theory: Black women must define beauty for themselves while simultaneously committing to loving themselves despite physical appearances.

Other novels analyzed here seek to redefine and disregard dominant standards of physical beauty. Johnson's (1998) *Heaven* offers a good example of this when Shoogy, who is described as so beautiful she competed in beauty contests, challenges the notion that beauty is defined in a distinct way, in a way that makes it possible for only a few exceptional people to be "beautiful." When Marley asks, "Do you think Jack would have kept me if I was beautiful?" Shoogy replies, "We're all beautiful" (Johnson, 1998; 74). The premise here is that beauty must be defined by the individual, not by outside forces such as the media or the movie industry, which both promote the standardized notion of white beauty.

Skin Color

Walker (1983) credits Zora Neale Hurston with being the first black woman writer to create black female characters "naturally in all the colors in which they exist" (301). Prior to Hurston, writers like Nella Larsen, Jessie Fauset, Harriet E. Wilson, and Frances Watkins Harper created mulatto or biracial heroines. While it is true that African Americans vary in skin color, literature written before the middle of the twentieth century did not attest to that. Collins (1994) maintains that "[t]he range of skin colors and hair texture in contemporary African-American communities bears mute testament to the powerlessness of African-American women

in controlling [the rape of black women by white men]" (53). Njeri (1996) agrees but also points out that "[f]or centuries, Africans mixed with myriad ethnic groups before any were enslaved and shipped to the New World" (526).

Following in Hurston's footsteps, the six AAYA novels discussed here depict African-American characters in an array of shades of brown and black. A color hierarchy does not appear to exist. In *The Dear One* Afeni's mother's skin is "dark brown and smooth everywhere" (Woodson, 1991; 7), baby Afeni has "chocolate-brown fingers. . . and wide gray eyes" (139), and Grandma has dark brown skin. Family friend Bernadette's parents are from Kenya, and her lover, Marion, "could be white but says she isn't. Her skin is the color of sand and her gray eyes have flecks of gold in them" (Woodson, 1991; 23). The characters in *Blue Tights* are described in various shades of brown too. When the women in the African dance ensemble come on stage, Williams-Garcia writes: "Tamu led the magnificent spectrum of multicolored maidens, from the flawless ebonies and earthy cafes to the clay reds and creamy yellows" (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 120). Joyce's skin is "a smooth, cinnamon-brown," and she has "dark eyes, a blunt Bantu nose, and perfectly defined lips" (94).

A few of the books include only subtle references to African-American characters' skin color. For example, Shoogy and Bobby, characters in *Heaven*, are described as having brown legs, while Feather has "caramel skin" (Johnson, 1998; 24). In *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This*, Marie and her father are simply described as dark, while skin color is scarcely mentioned at all in *Toning the Sweep*. In *Like Sisters on the Homefront* Gayle believes she is "a fine yella honey" (Williams-Garcia, 1995; 50), and her son Emanuel has "buttermilk-colored legs" (2). It is not clear whether Gayle believes she is attractive simply because she has light skin. On one hand the inclusion of a variety of skin colors for African-American characters suggests that the authors celebrate the diversity in skin color that exists among African Americans while also suggesting that black skin is "natural and undemonic" (Walker, 1983, 299; italics in original). On the other hand, books like *The Dear One* and *Blue Tights* appear to be subversive in their use of skin color.

In these novels, light skin and eye color, traditionally deemed pretty or beautiful because it reveals a connection to whiteness, is depicted negatively and in some cases demonically. For example, Afeni in *The Dear One* recalls her grandmother telling her that people with gray eyes were evil. As a result, several times throughout the novel Afeni thinks of Rebecca's gray eyes this way.

hooks (1997) writes that blacks and whites are socialized to believe "that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and nonthreatening" (169); yet this image of what is characteristically viewed as white often does not hold true for blacks who associate whiteness with terror. When one considers images of whites in the black imagination, hooks says, "whiteness [often] makes its presence felt as terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, [and] tortures" (169). This idea is prevalent in literature by black women

writers. Take, for example, the following passage from Morrison's 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*:

anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (251)

Morrison makes vivid that the "white equals heavenly" image is a mere construction brought about to uplift whiteness and "demonize" blackness in the black and white imagination (Morrison, 1992; xi). Sethe's acknowledgment and understanding of the white/good contradiction or untruth suggests that through her experiences and ways of knowing she is able to uncover her own "truth" about whiteness.

Sherley Anne Williams's 1986 novel for adults *Dessa Rose* reveals a similar sentiment concerning whiteness. Because of Dessa Rose's experiences with whites, she also vilifies whiteness and equates it with evil and terror. Dessa maintains: "White folks had taken everything in the world from me except my baby and my life and they had tried to take them" (173). When Dessa looks at the light-skinned Rufel, she does not admire her beauty, her whiteness; she does not envy Rufel's hair or long to possess it. Instead, she looks at Rufel's hair and sees fire and blood; Rufel's mouth "was like a bloody gash across [her face]" (86).

In *Blue Tights*, likable characters are described as being "raisin-colored" (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 58) or as having "face[s]. . .carved in fine detail from a smooth black stone" (60). The boy who offers Joyce encouragement at an audition has skin that "could have been a night shadow with no end to its blackness" (49). Conversely, antagonists like Cindi and Jay-Jay are described as having Caucasian-like features. In fact, Cindi's West Indian heritage is obscure: "Only the thick West Indian clues in her voice and the waves at the root of her brown-near-blond tresses saved her from being Caucasian" (24). Jay-Jay is described as having "shoulder-length hair and. . .fine features" (25). The boys who try to take advantage of Joyce are described similarly. The Davis twins who spread rumors about Joyce look like "yellow Siamese piglets" (2), and Andre Miller, another boy who humiliates her, has "green eyes, golden skin, and curly hair" (129).

Skin color is significant outside and within the black community (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). This obsession with skin color within the black community has been called intraracism and/or colorism. Colorism, according to Walker (1983), is prejudice or preference for people within the same race based on skin color. The mistreatment Joyce suffers at the hands of light-skinned, middle-class schoolmates in *Blue Tights* suggests that colorism exists for her. Perhaps middle-class black characters are depicted with Caucasian-like features in both AAYA and adult novels to note the disparity that exists between light and dark-skinned blacks socioeco-

nomically. According to Njeri (1996), in the early nineties two white social scientists reported a significant "social and economic gap" between light and dark-skinned black people (515). The researchers claimed light-skinned blacks earned 30 cents more per dollar than dark-skinned blacks.

Hair

According to Jones (1994), "hair is the key racial signifier after skin [color]" (296). Historically, black women's hair has been degraded, as noted in advertisements that date back to the early nineteenth century (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Rooks, 1996). These advertisements, along with personal dissatisfaction with their own hair, led black women to use grease and chemical straighteners to alter the texture of their hair. While there has been an ongoing debate concerning the degree to which a conscious or subconscious desire to appear white or possess white-like characteristics influenced black women's decisions to change their hair texture, few fail to acknowledge that a large number of black women view hair as an accessory or type of adornment that has more to do with creative expression than a desire to assimilate (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Jones, 1994; Rooks, 1996). Yet hooks (1999) explicitly states, "The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful" (225).

In terms of choice of hairstyle, the girls in the six AAYA novels I discuss do not adhere to a European ideal. None of the girls or women in these novels appears to have chemically straightened hair. Instead, the hairstyles the girls wear suggest political awareness and pride in African ancestry (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Rooks, 1996). A number of the female characters wear natural hairstyles or braids.

The characters in *Blue Tights* wear an array of hairstyles typically worn by African Americans. For instance, Joyce's hair is described as "a mop of natural hair" that either she or her aunt straightens with a hot comb and braids (Williams-Garcia, 1988; 5). Marley, the protagonist in *Heaven*, has "big hair" reminiscent of an Afro. Other female characters wear braids with and without beads. Bernadette in *The Dear One* has "cornrows gliding down her back" (Woodson, 1991; 113), and Marie in *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* wears her hair in short braids. Gayle takes pride in the fact that "[t]he homegirls would hook up Lynda's braids with red and yellow beads" (Williams-Garcia, 1995; 12), while the protagonist of *The Dear One*, Afeni, has natural hair that her mother French braids even though it immediately begins to frizz before Afeni can look into a mirror. In the same way that the "'Afro' or 'natural' became the definitive mark of a woman who embraced black identity" in the 1960s and 1970s, braids serve a similar function today (Leeds, 1994; 148).

For women, short hairstyles are rarely considered beautiful or feminine, yet a number of the girls in these novels wear their hair this way. For instance, Rebecca in *The Dear*

One has “curly hair cut short like a boy’s” (Woodson, 1991; 45) while Emily, the protagonist of *Toning the Sweep* and a budding hairstylist who likes to cut people’s hair, opts to shave most of her hair off rather than style it repeatedly. A few of the older women in the AAYA novels, particularly those described as “free spirits,” have liberated hair that literally stands on top of their heads. For instance, Martha in *Toning the Sweep* “cuts her hair short, and sometimes it sticks straight up, but she doesn’t care” (Johnson, 1993; 18).

Toning the Sweep certainly challenges standardized definitions of beautiful hair. While focusing on her grandmother through a camera lens, Emily thinks: “For the first time in my life I really look at my grandmother. She’s beautiful. Her dreads fall over her face when she moves and her skin glows from sweat” (32). Similarly, when speaking of her dreadlocks, Ola tells Emily:

I love the way my hair feels. . . I do wonderful things with it. I ignore it. . . Hair should be kept at home—not loaned out to people who want to put strange objects and creams in it, then twirl you around in a chair. (44)

Ola considers her hair to be her only vanity; consequently, she refuses chemotherapy in an effort to preserve it. Ola’s attention to her hair allows Emily to think differently about her own hair: “I can’t get all of it between my fingers, but I love the way the kinky waves feel” (45).

Within the novels studied here, there seems to be a conscious effort to depict black hair in ways that affirm African-American culture while simultaneously suggesting that these hairstyles are acceptable marks of beauty. These AAYA novels of the late 1980s and the 1990s reflect a change in attitude not unlike the change occurring in adult literature by African-American authors a decade earlier. The following poem by Gwendolyn Brooks (1980) illustrates that change:

TO THOSE OF MY SISTERS
WHO KEPT THEIR NATURALS

*Never to look
A hot comb in the teeth.*

Sisters!

I love you.

Because you love you. . . .

You reach, in season.

You subside, in season.

And All

Below the richrough righttime of your hair.

You have not bought Blondine.

You have not hailed the hot-comb recently.

You never worshipped Marilyn Monroe.

You say: Farrah’s hair is hers

You have not wanted to be white.

Nor have you testified to adoration of
that state

with the advertisement of imitation,

(*never* successful because the hot comb is
laughing too.)

But oh the rough dark Other music!
the Real.
the Right.

The natural Respect for Self and Seal!
Sisters!

Your hair is Celebration in the world!
(12–13; italics in original)

Conclusion

The AAYA novels discussed here offer opportunities for us to explore identity construction in our literacy classrooms by encouraging students to use a critical lens when reading this literature. The girls in the novels attempt to counter hegemonic social structures by choosing to embrace their own ideas about physical appearance. This provides the reader with an opportunity to begin thinking about how biased beauty aesthetics stifle her or his own identity formation. Literary images that depict African-American girls who negotiate and construct their own identities in subversive ways might generate discussion about how students themselves can challenge socially constructed notions of beauty aesthetics.

Making connections between the female characters’ perceptions of beauty and choice of expression via hairstyle and hair texture helps to create an opportunity to think critically about how people of color, in this case blacks, have often resisted the dominant cultural group’s definition of beauty in order to attain self-esteem and self-affirmation. This has not been an easy task, for as Wallace (1990) explains, “The black woman [has] not failed to be aware of America’s standard of beauty nor the fact that she [is] not included in it. . . [unless] her hair [is] straight, her skin light, and her features European; in other words, if she [is] as nearly indistinguishable from a white woman as possible” (157-158).

The YA and adult novels discussed here are similar in that they depict cultural expression as an individual choice. The overarching premise of each of the novels—YA and adult—concerning beauty is that beauty is individualized, and everyone is beautiful in a unique way. These books offer positive portrayals of black expression and cultural identity. Further, the novels present a different way of viewing different body types, dark skin, naturally thick and curly hair, and culturally specific hairstyles unique to African Americans. This view of African-American expressive culture helps readers understand that often African Americans resist European-American beauty standards as they choose to embrace and connect with their

own culture.

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