

The Phenomenal Woman: How *Beauty Shop* Redefines Postfeminism to Makes Space for Black Bodies

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Preface

Introduction to Postfeminism and Race

Before plunging into the text of *Beauty Shop*, I would like to clarify the concepts of postfeminism, as they will be addressed in this essay. Postfeminism is a term that encompasses many definitions, including anti-feminism, the idea that feminism failed, and that feminism ended because it succeeded. Rosalind Gill defines postfeminist as an “entanglement” of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. This definition contains a contradiction that is inherent in postfeminism, where autonomy, choice and can-do girl power sits side-by-side with surveillance, discipline, and women as sexual subjects.

In particular, *Beauty Shop* (Bille Woodruff, 2005) looks at the space for black women in postfeminism, which has traditionally only examined the experiences of the white, heterosexual female. Some academic argue that there is no place for women of color in postfeminism. bell hooks, for example, proclaims that racialized postfeminism is a “commodification of otherness” in which ethnicity functions to spice up dull, mainstream white culture (qtd. in Butler 16). Butler adds a slightly different perspective, stating that racial differences among women are ignored in postfeminism. While this may in some ways benefit women of color, who *are* accepted in postfeminism, there are serious cons, Butler explains. Since women of color are repressed from

expressing their otherness in postfeminism, their silence feeds the power of white hegemony. Additionally, “postfeminism requires its nonwhite participants to reject political activism in favor of capitalist consumption and cultural visibility” (Butler 16). In summary, hooks and Butler argue that to this point, the space for women of color in postfeminism is limited if not harmful to nonwhite women as a whole.

A Glance Backwards: The *Barber Shop* Films

The concept of *Beauty Shop* (Bille Woodruff, 2005) stems from its predecessors, *Barbershop* (Tim Story, 2002) and *Barbershop 2: Back in Business* (Kevin Rodney Sullivan, 2004). The sequence of films posits *Beauty Shop* to be the “female” version of the *Barbershop* films. Framing films in terms of male and female versions reinforces postfeminist philosophy that men and women are inherently unlike and that they do not understand each other (Gill). In a sense, *Beauty Shop* interprets the male-dominated *Barber Shop* films into a female-friendly text.

Despite the fact that men and women are fundamentally different, there are many commonalities in the themes of *Beauty Shop* and *Barbershop*. Both plotlines, however thin, feature the hair salon as the epicenter of black middle class entrepreneurship. Such an enterprise is inherently competing against the money-hungry, white, bourgeois economy – a system that excludes black values. In such, there is the constant discussion of white versus black commodities. Additionally, all films emphasize the influence of black historical figures, be it Martin Luther King, Madam CJ Walker, or Maya Angelou. Finally, both the male and female films overlap in some values: community spaces, family, entrepreneurship, aging, and food as nourishment.

The male and female films differ most distinctly in their representation of the female body. *Beauty Shop*, the female-friendly interpretation, is the film most critical of female bodies. *Beauty Shop* focuses more on physical appearance and beauty consumption than does *Barbershop*, which instead spotlights the themes of overcoming economic setback and black history. In fact there is not one scene in *Barbershop 2*, a film also starring Queen Latifah, where a woman's body is openly criticized. However, that is a reoccurring scene in *Beauty Shop*. Much of the time, it is the woman herself who invites criticism of her body. However, the theme of female objectification makes sense because in *Beauty Shop*, as in postfeminist theory, the women's body is constantly evaluated. Women are invited to assess and re-assess their own looks and the looks of other women.

All differences aside, the commodification of the "barbershop" storyline, now spanning 3 blockbuster films with all-star casts and PG-13 ratings, represents the "bowdlerization" and "cooptation" of the ghetto fabulous aesthetic, explains Roopali Mukherjee, author of, "The Ghetto Fabulous Aesthetic in Contemporary Black Culture: Class and Consumption in the Barbershop Films." Mukherjee notes that the rebelliousness aspects of ghetto fabulousness have been groomed and recuperated by dominant culture, codified and transformed into commodity form (601). Thus, one must study such cultural productions such as the *Barber Shop* films for coded messages on class and race in contemporary black culture in relationship with the hegemonic tensions of capitalism.

Introduction

Beauty Shop separates itself from its predecessors by examining how the cooptation of black culture under the pressure of capitalism affects the representation of black women. Race, gender, and socioeconomic status influence bodies and contemporary beauty standards for women. However, *Beauty Shop* makes a point that many films fail to acknowledge: there are many distinctions between white and black femininity. The some-what didactic text unsettles assumptions about race, gender, and sexuality in postfeminist culture. Looking at the themes of patriarchy, economic independence, space, bodies, consumption, sexual pleasure, and the gaze, I will argue how *Beauty Shop* reconstructs postfeminism to include black femininity.

Analysis

Re-establishing Black Patriarchy

Beauty Shop establishes an overarching tone of patriarchy while defining black postfeminist values. Black feminist theorist Janie Gaines explains that maternal power is a way for black women to return to the original “Afro-American community”. Unlike white feminism, which sees patriarchy as universal and color blind, black feminism perceives black patriarchy as a white establishment - a position assumed by black men to combat white male oppression (Gaines 300). There are many representations of the mother figure throughout the film including Gina (Queen Latifah), the salon, and historical female figures.

Gina, mother to Vanessa (Paige Hurd) redefines the postfeminist mother, showing that she is a cool mom, a disciplinarian, an entrepreneur, and a sexual person all at once. Gina

establishes herself as a matriarch in *Barbershop 2: Back to Business* (Sullivan 2004) when she has a lengthy verbal showdown with the grandfatherly Eddie (Cedric the Entertainer) after he attempts to punish Vanessa for mouthing off. She claims her identity as a modern mother, telling Eddie that she is not “Gina Cleaver.” In *Beauty Shop*, Gina sacrifices herself for her daughter’s future, moving from Chicago to Atlanta in order to send Vanessa to a performing arts school. Initially bearing the burden of racist diva-boss Jorge Christophe (Kevin Bacon) of Jorge Christophe Salon in order to afford Vanessa’s expensive tuition, Gina ultimately decides she can pursue her own career goal of opening a salon while also supporting the dreams of her daughter. Gina openly discusses the difficulties of balancing her roles of business owner and mother. For example, after her shop is broken into, Gina worries about hiding her grief over the vandalized business in order to support her daughter during her recital the next day.

As a mother, Gina presents a different type of sexuality than the two options offered in postfeminism: the hypersexual woman and the prude (Gill). Instead, Gina is a confident woman who refuses to be objectified by the male gaze; she is the matriarch to her daughter and staff, yet she also has sex appeal and sexuality. She talks honestly about sex in front of her daughter, and asks Vanessa to verify that her pants make her butt look big. However, Gina establishes her maternal power by refusing to let Vanessa have “an attitude” or wear “hip hop” accessories.

Gina’s Salon also functions as a sort of mother to its staff and customers. When Gina first moves into the vacant beauty shop, she and her team revamp the old space. The makeover and reveal of the new salon has little dialogue while the song “Give Up the Funk (Tear the Roof Off The Sucker)” by Parliament narrates the scene with the lyrics, “we’re gonna turn this mother out.” The soundtrack tells the story of transforming an old store into a new “mother.” Gina’s Salon also honors many mothers of black feminism, including a prized portrait of Madame CJ

Walker, the mother of black hair products. Ms. Josephine (Alfre Woodard), an older black stylist, often disrupts the salon buzz with dramatic recitals of Maya Angelou's poetry. Not to mention, the salon-mother facilitates problem solving amongst her "children," as she serves as a comfortable space for racial integration, where women openly discuss cultural differences and similarities (read on for more about the use of space in the salon).

Entrepreneurship As Independence

Throughout the film, female entrepreneurship is lauded as the ultimate symbol of feminine independence. Strong, economically independent female voices dominate the narrative, including talk radio host Hollerin' Helen (Adele Givens). Hollerin' Helen voices black female values throughout the film. Gina listens to Helen on the radio when she is not allowed her own voice in Jorge's salon. When Gina has her own salon, Helen's voice fills the air as all women listen attentively, responding to Helen's prompts to shout words like "Amen!" and "Ghetto!" While Helen's voice is a uniting factor, it also functions to expose racism. Many of the salon attendees glare dismissively at Lynn (Alicia Silverstone), the only white stylist, when she also engages in Helen's chants. Ultimately, Helen's economic power saves Gina's salon when Helen recommends the beauty shop to all of her listeners after Gina unknowingly salvages Helen from a bad hair day.

Gina attributes her economic success against the white male economy (represented by Jorge Christophe Salon) to her femininity and her blackness. Although the ever-scheming Jorge tries to ruin Gina's Salon through bribing the health inspector and vandalizing the space, Gina ultimately thrives. In a final confrontation with Jorge, Gina explains, "You didn't break me! You will never intimidate me because I am a phe-nom-in-al woman." The emphasis on the word

“phenomenal” references the poem “Phenomenal Woman” by Maya Angelou (1978). The poem reads:

Men themselves have wondered / What they see in me. / They try so much / But they can't touch / My inner mystery. / When I try to show them, / They say they still can't see. / I say, / It's in the arch of my back, / The sun of my smile, / The ride of my breasts, / The grace of my style. / I'm a woman / Phenomenally.

In this stanza, Maya Angelou discusses that men (like Jorge) will never understand the greatness of a phenomenal woman (like Gina). Angelou, a voice for empowered black women, attributes her greatness to her black, female body shape (“arch of my back” and “ride of my breasts”) and her confidence as a woman (“sun of my smile”).

The ultimate lesson in female economic independence takes place in the relationship between Gina and Darnelle (Keshia Knight Pullman). Gina teaches Darnelle, an at-risk girl, that the postfeminist values of work ethic and economic self-sufficiency will save her from going down the wrong path. Keshia Knight Pullman, infamous for her role as Rudy Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, invokes an image of an all-American sweetheart child, the irony of which accentuates her at-risk behaviors. Dressing in belly chains and shorts that “barely reach the top of her burning bush,” and accepting stolen gifts of motorcycles and jewelry from men, Darnelle exemplifies how the hip-hop lifestyle transforms can-do black girls such as Rudy Huxtable into at-risk adults through the consumption of the wrong goods.

Beauty Shop calls to black female leaders, such as Queen Latifah and Alfre Woodard, to correct the image of young black women, who have become a symbol for the problematic youth of society (Harris 15). Gina teaches Darnelle work ethic by making her serve cappuccinos and water in the salon. When Darnelle slips back to her old ways and accepts cash from a boyfriend,

Gina yells at her for being lazy and wasting her life. In the final scene, Darnelle dons her new jacket for cosmetology school, showing that she successfully transformed into the postfeminist can-do girl, someone who shows commitment to a career, belief in her own capacity to succeed and acceptance of the “right” consumer lifestyle (Harris, 14). Darnelle also shows the postfeminist value of cherishing yourself and the opinion of other women above the opinions of men.

Constructing A Postfeminist Space

The effects of space on black female expression are an important part of the *Beauty Shop* text. The film begins with Gina working at Jorge Christophe Salon, a space that exemplifies the white standards of beauty: sleek, clean, wealthy, colorless, and narcissism (conveyed through individual styling stations). Scenes in Jorge’s salon are bookended by high fashion shots of cityscapes, white models walking down empty sidewalks, and close-ups of women’s faces in the salon mirrors as they are being pampered, all to the repetitive and predictable rhythm of late 90’s electronic club music.

Racial differences are not openly acknowledged at Jorge’s as is true in postfeminism (Butler). At Jorge’s, Gina’s race and body are silenced, and her role as the only black stylist to an all-white clientele is to “enhance and maintain white womanhood as object of the phallogentric gaze” (“The Oppositional Gaze” 310). Jorge passively aggressively uses Gina’s race to stifle her self-expression, for example suggesting that she avoids shopping at Kmart and to not use “street colloquialisms”. In Gina’s dramatic quitting scene, she makes a spectacle of her blackness and black beauty for the first time. Yelling at Jorge and the entire salon, “Is it because I’m black?!” and asking Jorge to “kiss it” as she proudly slaps her large butt before stomping out of the door.

This public display of unruliness suggests that black women should not try to contain themselves to fit into unrealistic white beauty culture, but instead must create their own beauty culture.

The genesis of Gina's Salon shows the construction of a black postfeminist space from scratch. Gina transforms a dilapidated, abandoned salon into her own space. Customers of the old salon compliment her ability to convert the space "from backwoods to Hollywood." Gina intentionally creates a racially integrated space, where racial differences are acknowledged and celebrated. Those who are not comfortable with a mixed race setting are symbolically thrown out (this includes two black employees who refuse to work with white stylist Lynn, and a white client who makes racial slurs against Lynn for "trying to be black" and a black stylist for being too "hip-hop"). The New York Times review for the film titled "Haircuts That Come With Fried Catfish and Sisterhood" explains that wealthy white customers who follow Gina from Jorge's salon "soon discover that the warmth and high spirits make up for lack of valet parking" (Scott 1).

Gina's salon is a tribute to black culture. The salon is adorned with images of powerful black women of the past and filled with the voice of black women of the future (DJ Hollerin' Helen). Scenes in the salon are prefaced with shots of "ghetto" Atlanta street life: crowded sidewalks filled with old men sitting in groups, and street vendors selling purses and sunglasses. A score from female hip-hop artists such as Pussy Cat Dolls and Salt-n-Peppa often introduces the salon scenes.

The circular layout within the salon highlights black postfeminist values of sisterhood. The stylists, of all ages and skin tones, are arranged in a circle facing the center of the room. This format keeps the conversation flowing. Unlike the constrained individualism emphasized at Jorge Christophe, Gina's Salon promotes social exchange and conversation, often leading to

verbal unruliness (yelling, singing out loud, and arguing). Camera work emphasizes the symbol of the circle, as women repeatedly crowd around to form a circle that surrounds the camera. For example, the women circle around Gina when she finds out Covergirl might be interested in her homemade conditioner, and in the end the women of the salon circle around the radio to listen to speak to Hollerin' Helen.

The Body: Racialized Beauty

“Does this make my butt look big? Perfect!” The audience is introduced to Gina through her body. In postfeminist discourse, the body defines femininity. The body is both a woman's source of power and requires constant scrutiny (Gill). In her first appearance on screen, she asks her daughter if her pants make her bottom appear larger than it is, a clichéd question for white female vanity. However, Gina quickly establishes that she is not seeking the white beauty ideal by expressing that she desires her butt to look big. A large bottom is a sign of beauty and power to Gina, a black woman. The white body ideal defines a “sexy body” as thin and toned. Large bodies are considered unruly (Rowe Karlyn 31) In this scene, Gina, indoctrinates her daughter in black postfeminist dogma: to own her female power by subjecting her body to self-scrutiny not only of her body, but the part of her body that defines her blackness – her large butt.

The black female body is the main subject of *Beauty Shop*. Within the space of Gina's Salon, black beauty appropriates its “unruliness” – large butt, extra fat, full lips, and textured hair, all components rejected by the white ideal – to establish its superiority to white beauty. In traditional discourse surrounding the black body, the women in the film embrace the connection of the body as food (Parasecoli 110). The story of Terri (Andie MacDowell) emphasizes the racialized value of food and bodies. Terri, a wealthy white client who follows Gina to her new

salon, initially refuses food in order to appeal to her husband who has asked her to lose weight despite the fact that he hardly pays attention to her. However, Terri gives in to her cravings and accepts a platter of Catfish Rita's (Sheryl Underwood) collard greens. Catfish Rita reassures Terri in her choice to do so, stating that eating the greens will help her grow a "piddy-pablo-ying-yang-twins-and-the-east-side-boys booty," something that her husband will like. In a subsequent scene, Terri asks Rita how much fat is in her food, promoting the white female tradition of fat-free diets and fat body shaming. Rita assures Terri that her food is "full of fat" and leads the ladies of the salon, including Terri, in chanting "fat is good!" Again, this establishes black beauty values as superior in the space of Gina's salon, celebrating loud voices and fat bodies.

The Sexually Liberated Woman

Beauty Shop redefines postfeminist attitudes towards sexual liberty to include black female bodies. One of the first voices of the film, Hollerin' Helen, discusses her "sexcapade" of the previous night with "one of [her] many menses." This sets the tone for postfeminist sexual liberation, which allows women to confidently have many male partners and "hookups." However, *Beauty Shop* brings black bodies to this postfeminist value, showing that not just sexy white women are hooking up. Sexual liberty in *Beauty Shop* extends to all black bodies: young women, pregnant women, fat women, older women, and even mothers.

Even within the unruly, sexually liberated women of *Beauty Shop*, there is a range of opinions on how men prefer women to look. A conversation on bikini waxing prompts input of varied opinions. Hollerin' Helen, who claims to be broadcasting standing up because of her bikini wax, says that it is "not natural" even though she partakes in the grooming ritual. Ms.

Josephine disagrees with the act, stating that “a real man likes it natural and wild” as she bucks her breasts. Stylist Chanel (Golden Brooks) shares that both her and her boyfriend wax their genitalia, saying that she likes it “trimmed and perfect.” This collection of voices represents traditional feminist and modern day postfeminist values. All parties acknowledge that women are free to have sex for pleasure; the difference is in the scrutiny of the female body. Chanel, the most self-scrutinizing, desires a “perfect” vulva, which in her mind is hairless, while others claim natural is best.

While the sexually liberated women of *Beauty Shop* are encouraged to analyze themselves and each other, there is one group who is strictly forbidden from engaging in such criticism: men. Again, this lesson surfaces during the story of Terri. After discovery her husband’s infidelity, Terri leaves him and grows a plump J. Lo booty from eating collard greens. Her body transformation is publicly applauded by all of the women in the salon. This fulfills the postfeminist concept of women achieving heteronormative desirability as something explicitly done for *yourself* and not in order to please a man (Gill). In other words, Terri transfers from grooming a white ideal body in order to please her husband to the black ideal body in order to please herself and other women.

The Objectifying Gaze

In *Beauty Shop*, no one is free from the scrutiny of the female gaze: not men, not women, and definitely not the gazer herself. Women are constantly analyzing each other’s bodies. For example, a client enters the salon, and the camera only shows her behind, not her face. The women in the salon crowd around to admire this women’s backside. The camera switches from the group of women in the salon standing together to a solo shot of the woman’s behind. (The

same camera work happens when women are admiring men. A crowd of women stand in the back of the salon as the camera switches between them and the face and arm muscles of a new hunky stylist.) This camera work of group of women versus body part emphasizes the postfeminist value that not only are women encouraged to single out other women's bodies, they should bond over it (Gill). The camera shot of the women's backside is disrupted when a group of men enter the door to also look at the woman's booty. At this interruption, the women in the salon become angry, yelling at the men for being disrespectful. This scene references postfeminist double standards that women should subject themselves to scrutiny, but are against open male objectification. However, many postfeminist theorists such as Gill argue that the female-to-female gaze is really the internalization of male objectification. Nevertheless, *Beauty Shop* teaches that female objectification of women is okay, while male objectification of women is promptly dismissed.

In *Beauty Shop*, there is another sort of female-to-female gaze, the race-based gaze. The audience sees this when Gina's stylists respond to Lynn, the only white stylist. Lynn, although tolerated, is a disruption in the black salon. Even when she enters the salon for the first time, she announces herself boisterously as she clambers in the door with a large, heavy box filled with potted plants and a loud "heyyyy am I late?" in her high-pitched "backwoods" accent. Again, in this scene the camera shows scrutiny of Lynn, focusing on the group of stylists already at the salon and then back to Lynn. Lynn is "rescued" by Gina, the race-mediator, who leaves the frame of the group of stylists to embrace Lynn. Despite her positive attitude, Lynn has a hard time getting clients to trust her ability to do black hair. When she tries to participate in-group conversations, the other women often glare her back to her chair. She confesses to Gina that she "feels really white" in Gina's Salon.

After some advice from Darnelle, Lynn lets the black stylists give her a “black hair style” so that she can “look the part”. After her “black makeover” which consists of swirling braids and spiky hair, the other stylists accept Lynn. She is even allowed to participate in call and response with Hollerin’ Helen. In the end, Ms. Josephine says to Lynn, “you know you’re really black.” In this narrative, race-based beauty standards are reversed. In Jorge’s salon, Gina was forced to comply with the white standards of beauty and her blackness was not acknowledged. Now in Gina’s salon, Lynn must have a black makeover before she is fully accepted and eventually considered black.

The character Willie (Little JJ) represents traditional male to female gaze in *Beauty Shop*. Willie, a neighborhood boy who sells candy to fund his hip-hop career, represents black male misogyny from the unfiltered mouth of a preteen boy. Willie follows women’s backsides around the neighborhood with his camera in hand, as he collects footage for his hip-hop videos. The use of the camera with its zooming capability, accentuates the gaze, equating photography with humiliation and desecration of women’s bodies by men (Gaines 296). Willie, a preteen boy, openly discusses the commodification of female bodies, saying things like “that’s a money shot right there” to a woman’s behind. He explains “the booty is the cornerstone of all hip hop videos today. If it ain’t shaking it ain’t selling.” Although Willie is persistent, his objectification is never tolerated. He is frequently ignored, greeted by women rolling their eyes, and even thrown out of Gina’s Salon. The female responses to Willie signifies that women will not tolerate male objectification, and men who treat women that way come across as foolish and juvenile.

The character of Willie (Little JJ) can be read as a tribute to black filmmaking, which, according to cinematographer and director Arthur Jafa, started in hip-hop video making (qtd in “Reel to Reel” 190). In an interview with bell hooks, Jafa (most notable for the cinematography

in *Crooklyn*, a Spike Lee film from 1994) credits the accessibility of hip-hop music video making as being the educational force behind a generation of black film technicians (“Reel to Real” 191). Willie represents the origins of black filmmaking – hip-hop. Not to mention, Queen Latifah also has her roots in the music industry. However, Willie’s childishness when talking to women is a didactic call for hip-hop filmmaking to grow up and to “learn how to speak to a woman,” a lesson Willie is repeatedly told that he needs to learn.

Conclusion

When looking at the themes of matriarchy, economic independence, space, the body, consumption, and the gaze, *Beauty Shop* argues for a broader definition of postfeminism to include black bodies and black tradition. Unlike its male-oriented predecessors, *Beauty Shop* dissects the role women play in relationship to each other – be it as mothers, coworkers, or competitors. Emphasizing a strong community that includes black and white women of all sizes and life positions, *Beauty Shop* creates an inclusive (yet still heteronormative) space in postfeminism where even unruly women are “phenomenal.”

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