

Fat, Black, and Female: Invisible Shadows

By Dara Crawley

This piece was written for Kivan Bay's body positivity webpage and patreon in 2016. There are minor revisions for readability and grammar, along with additional elaborations for clarity. The majority of this essay remains unchanged.

I like to tell my friends that being fat, black, and a woman is like being the Captain Planet of overused stereotypes, but without the neat rings. Laziness! Welfare queen! Anger! Mamie! Domineering! GO BLACKNESS! "With your powers combined I am stereotype!" (Now if only I had a cool goddess to bum around with). Being a FBW is a pretty tough draw, and I realized pretty young that the media made it clear those traits had specific connotations when combined.



Finding well-rounded black female characters has always been hard though it has been getting easier in the last 30 years, but add "fat" and along comes stereotyping; we're loud because all black women are loud; not feminine because if we were we wouldn't be fat...and besides black women have never been allowed to be seen as feminine; unlovable not only because we're fat, but because we're dark; and uneducated because fat people and black people are intellectually inferior; At the same time we're motherly, invulnerable, *strong, independent, black women who don't need no man!* These generalizations don't leave much wiggle room to be people. I graduated cum laude from college and collect Sailor Moon memorabilia. I have FBW friends who speak three languages and run track. Yet our media images are still based around these descriptions, ignoring our individuality. We are silent sisters visible only in misshapen shadows that deny our personhood, our varied humanity, in favor of stereotypes.

One of the first fat black leads in a television series that stood out to me was Monique on *The Parkers*, a spinoff of Brandy's *Moesha*. Monique played Nikki, the single mother of a community college student, who enrolled herself, and obsessively stalked her Professor to comedic effect. He loathed her not because she stalked him, but because she had the audacity to think he'd want her at her size. Frequently, he'd push her down for comedic effect, but she always forgave him. It's like the writers said "Can you blame him, look at her?" episode after episode until he/they changed his/their mind. Despite her confidence the jokes were about her being loud, bossy, and completely juxtaposed to the thin well-read women he dated. They embodied traditional upper-class femininity and disassociated from urban black culture, unlike Nikki who related to that culture and embodied the role of fat "angry black woman" and "mama". It's not black people who're uneducated and loud, the show says, it's fat black women. Our own community dumps the stereotypes on us, so they can escape it.

[Authorial Note: As of 2023, I have revisited the show, and it is important to note that Kim, the daughter, is often framed as being chubby-cute and completely ignorant. The association between intelligence and size remains.]

Years later, Monique co-starred in *Precious*, as an angry uneducated mother, with Gabourey Sidibe as her abused unloved teenage daughter with two children. The critically acclaimed film is about overcoming terrible circumstances. Personally I respect that, but those characters are riddled with stereotypes that remain the most prominent imagery of FBWs. That imagery helps define how people conceptualize our lives and identities, which is all storytelling is at the end of the day. When nothing challenges stereotypes, why should anyone think FBW are, at worst, not more than under-educated women to be condescended to, loathed, and disregarded; and, at best, sassy mother figures? The narrative of blackness that an oppressive society perpetuates is already toxic, but fatness seems to confirm all those stereotypes, deepen them, and traps real and fictional people. This occurs Regardless of whether that media is by or for people of color.

A few months ago a friend and I were discussing the fact that in interviews Sidibe is a smart, and, dare I say, quirky person playing almost exclusively sassy/troubled black



women. My friend said “She’ll never play someone who’s *just quirky*,” and I sadly agreed. I can name chubby quirky white girls from the ultra-feminine titular Fat Princess to Sookie St. James (Melissa McCarthy) of *Gilmore Girls*. Yet society says B Girls aren’t supposed to be different, and if you are then you aren’t “really” black, or so I’ve repeatedly been told.

With Nicki Minaj and Janelle Monae being popular along with the rise of alternative black culture you’d think this would improve drastically. It hasn’t. Minaj’s fabulously curvy body still has a tiny waist and Monae’s afrofunk still comes in a size eight at max. Their bodies, like McCarthy’s race, give them more wiggle room to be seen like full-fledged people. They get to be soft. They get to be colorful. Women who look like them don’t carry the baggage of black fatness.

[Addition from 2023 : They’re allowed to carry possibility even in the face of other marginalizations. Media perpetuates this repeatedly, and the positive stereotyping only serves to underlie other stereotypes. Monique’s Nikki is seen as a fierce mother, and her role often relies on that being her redeeming characteristic. Esther Rolle’s Florida Evans of *Good Times* is deified because she fulfills that matron role. Even in that role they both are “strong” striking respect, but also fear into their families if angered. This is considered acceptable because it keeps their families in line, an idea which itself overlaps with the framing of Black women’s roles in the world. They can dress up beautifully. They can be desired. They’ can be completely different characters, but these two very different characters share the same limitations with decades between them]. Why? Racist fatphobia has been reinforced by constantly showing FBWs as motherly, sexless, and angry.

Over time it seems like portrayals of FBW’s have improved though I cannot think of a recent non-comedic example, which is reflective of broader problems with fat people in media, but Post-*Precious* we seem more nuanced.



My favorite example is Donna Meagle, played by talented comedienne Retta, on *Parks and Recreation*. Retta herself defies stereotypes as she’s versed in hip-hop, opera, and hockey. These facts she’s referenced in her own stand-up. While she wasn’t a series lead, Donna had a subtle complexity exceeding the portrayal of any other FBW I could think of. I related to her in a way I never expected.. She was desired, and admired. Heck, I want to be her when I grow

up. She wasn't perfect by any means, while she had the most active romantic life of any character it wasn't a big plot point. This side-lining functionally de-sexed her like many FBWs on the screen. Still, Donna was business savvy, quiet, adventurous, charitable, cultured, and worked as much as her co-workers. Did I say quiet? You have no clue how much her being quiet means to me as a fat black woman. Usually only thin and light skinned black women get to be quiet, and they are still few and far between.

As a black person there are times you walk into a space and you feel the room inhale because everyone is expecting you to be the "loud black". I have felt it many times, and admit I've done it myself, but there is a particularly potent version of it when you're fat. I've watched my lighter thinner black female peers enter a room to fewer looks than any FBW. I have had people be surprised I know how to carry myself at formal functions with high society. Fatness and blackness in American society is equated with overlapping negative clichés. When those expectations meet, entire auras of rooms, particularly in predominantly white spaces, will change. People's eyes widen, their posture becomes more closed. They're tentative in their approach to you, or assume your role. Why? Because the people in those rooms rely on references to the mythical welfare queens, the Nikki Parkers, and the Mammie's from television, games, and film when they see us. They wonder how/why we're at colleges, conventions, or jobs; and find polite ways to ask ("*Looking for a gift I see?*" "*So what do your parents do?*"). They've been taught that we fit into narrow boxes, and simply don't know, or don't expect, us to exist outside clichés.

I am not me.

I am invisible to them until they can breathe a sigh of relief that I, with my proper English and good manners, am not one of those loud angry uneducated fat black women. Until they can say "You're big, but you aren't fat. You're black but not really black."

Until they're comfortable that my Blackness and fatness is sanitized for their consumption.

That all being said, the world is changing. I'd like to think seeing the Retta's and Donna's on television have helped shift people's expectations. Over time, diverse depictions of all people are becoming more common. *The Help* still exists,

but Octavia Spencer got to take the motherly FBW role beyond invulnerability into badassery in *Snowpiercer*. One of my favorite indie comics is a manga about a fat black/Korean woman with natural hair called [Love, Love, Fighting](#) by Sharean Morishita. *FatBat*, a series of independent comics about goth FBW Dana is fairly plastered over tumblr. Not to mention that Valiant comics released *Faith*, a white geeky plus sized superhero who ultimately founds a resistance against a mad man with good intentions.



Fat women and fat black women are getting better representation. It may be slow, but it can only get better. The biggest solution to speed this up is to demand better depictions of black people and saying “Yes that means fat black people too because we’re more than media molds”. We’re earthy hippies, fiery without being angry, gentle as the rolling winds, strong as tidal waters, but most of all that we have hearts and lives like any other human being.

Basically we’re a lot more like Captain Planet than one might think. The power is ours to create and demand a world where no one is shocked a fat black girl is bubbly, and where we’re all seen as complex human beings.

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