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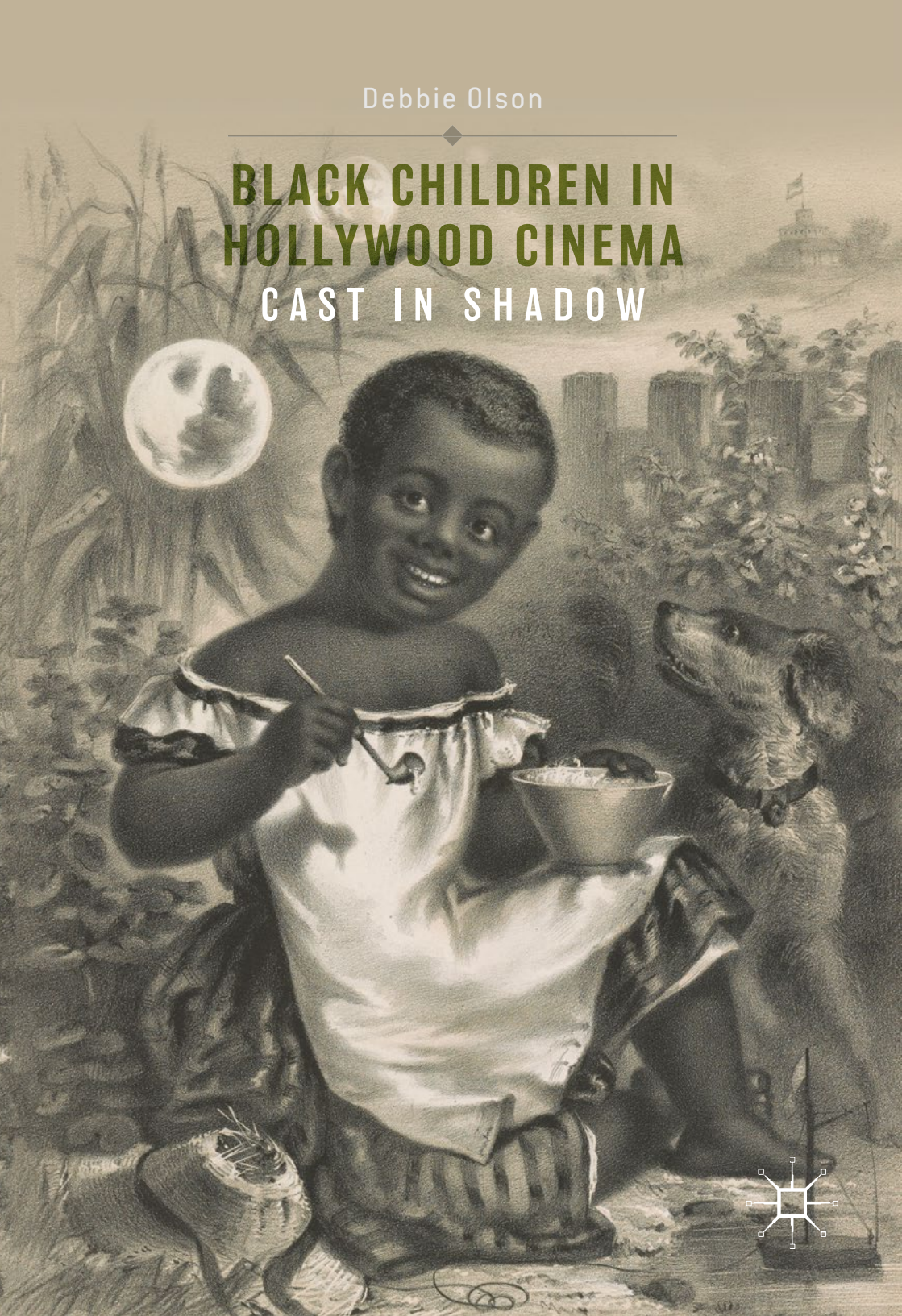
BLACK CHILDREN IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

CAST IN SHADOW



CHAPTER 3

African American Girls in Hollywood Cinema

In 1810, ship surgeon Alexander Dunlop returned to England from South Africa bearing numerous curiosities from the Dark Continent. One of these specimens was a *San* woman named Saartjie Baartman, who would later be known throughout Europe as the "Hottentot Venus." Dunlop sold Baartman to Hendrick Cezar, a showman in London, who promptly set Baartman up as a cultural "oddity" because of her unusually large buttocks (steatopygia) and, as was advertised, her "primitive" genitalia—an elongated labia.[1] The practice of putting people from different cultures on display for white visual consumption has a long history in Europe. According to Lindfors, "Live Eskimos [were] being exhibited in Bristol as early as 1501 … Brazilian Indians building their own village in Rouen in the 1550s … 'Virginians' on the Thames in 1603, and … numerous other native human specimens from the New World, Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands were conveyed to European cities and towns as biological curiosities." During the years of heightened colonialism (seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries), such ethnographic displays were common throughout Europe and America. Saartjie Baartman's humiliating display of her large buttocks and extended labia, however, functioned to establish and reinforce cultural notions of the superior beauty (milk-white skin; straight, flowing hair; small nose and lips; "delicate" facial features) and femininity (weakness, modesty, self-control, compassion, sensitivity, tolerance, fragility, submissiveness, and graceful movements) of white women, and helped establish perceptions of black women as the "monstrous" opposite to the white female model (Fig. 3.1).

D. Olson, *Black Children in Hollywood Cinema*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-48273-6_3

Fig. 3.1 Popular representation of Saartjie Baartman, Dec 31, 1809, Library of Congress, accessed July 15, 2015, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2007680266/

Saartjie Baartman's experience, and particularly her *visual* depictions, her "on-display-ness," underscores the way the black body has been systematically linked to notions of abnormality in relation to the white body (Fig. 3.1). George Yancy, in his compelling book *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, describes the way the black body is ritually defined in relation to whiteness: "From the perspective of whiteness, the black body *is* criminality itself. It *is* the monstrous; it is that which is to be feared and yet desired,

sought out in forbidden white sexual adventures and fantasies; it is constructed as a source of white despair and anguish, an anomaly of nature, the essence of vulgarity and immorality."[2]

As Yancy points out, "Black *existence* constitutes a threat," and the demonization of the black body by whites has persisted throughout history. Yancy argues the black body is a discursive entity, bound to the interstices of "social semiotics" where the black body is "less of a thing or being, than a shifting or changing historical meaning that is subject to cultural configuration and reconfiguration." And although cultural configurations are constantly in flux, the way the black body is discursively juxtaposed against the white body—"Momma, See the Negro! I'm frightened!"—continues the Western myth of white superiority.[3]

Mammy and Jezebel

The stereotype of black females as oversexed, asexual, or animalistic not only applies to adult females but also to black female children. And while the most historically common stereotype of the black child is the pickaninny character—an unkempt, ragamuffin black child normally with bulging eyes and a cacophony of ponytails that stick up all around the child's head—many of the general stereotypes about black adults are also recreated in portrayals of black children.

In *Imagining the Black Female Body: Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture*, Carol E. Henderson argues that black women are placed "outside the 'acceptable' conceptualizations of womanhood that have historically made black women the monstrous Other, and white women the emblems of virtue and beauty." Black women have been historically portrayed as either the oversexed Jezebel character—in such films as *Birth of a Nation* (1916), Pam Greer's (in)famous *Foxy Brown* (1974) and Halle Berry's role in *Monster's Ball* (2001), (Angela Bassett was first offered the role, but refused specifically because it was a stereotypical Jezebel role) or the passive and non-sexual mammy character—such as in *Birth of a Nation, Gone with the Wind* (1934), *Pinky* (1949), Whoopie Goldberg's role in *Corina, Corina* (1999), and more recently, perhaps arguably, Tyler Perry's Medea character. This duality is a variation of the "Madonna/Whore" construct in which many women, of all races, are depicted in popular culture as either angelic with limited sexual needs, subservient, and in need of protection, or independent, sexually deviant, and deserving of punishment. Carol E. Henderson states that when the black female was

depicted visually it was either as a "sexualized mythology or a neutered anomaly, defined by her sexuality, or her lack of it."[4] A woman who enjoys sex, who is active in pursuing sex, is (still) viewed culturally as less feminine than a woman who is subservient to men and sexually non-aggressive. As victims of white oppression and slavery, black women have historically had to fight the racism battle on two fronts: their humanity and their femininity.

Similar to the historical white strategy of emasculating black men, and thereby subjugating the black male, white slave-masters had to de-feminize the black female in order to rationalize their systematic rape of her. Black slave women were also defeminized as a strategy to raise the status of white womanhood. If black women were not "real" women, then they cannot be raped. In her compelling study *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, Estelle B. Freedman describes the southern beliefs about rape that "strongly shaped definitions of rape throughout the nation: first, that black women could not be raped, and second, that black men threatened white women's virtue." During slavery, because black women were possessions with no rights of citizenship, their sexual violation did not constitute rape. And the persistent depiction of black woman as "sexually lascivious provided an excuse for imagining that they always consented."[5] These notions about black women's sexuality have persisted within cultural discourse since colonial times and still form part of the way modern black women are presented. As Henderson suggests there is an "inextricable link between idea and subject formation and the historic conditions that shape our perspectives of flesh and bone."[6] Such discursive notions about black lasciviousness during colonialism and slavery gave life to beliefs (that still persist today) that black women were somehow not feminine, not "real" women, particularly when contrasted with the "virtuous" white woman image.

In his discussion of the mammy character, David Pilgrim writes: "The mammy caricature was deliberately constructed to suggest ugliness. Mammy was portrayed as dark-skinned, often pitch black, in a society that regarded black skin as ugly, tainted. She was obese, sometimes morbidly overweight. Moreover, she was often portrayed as old, or at least middle-aged. The attempt was to desexualize mammy."[7] The mammy caricature functioned as a discursive counter to the sexually permissive black woman. As Norma Manatu argues, from the first encounter with white people, black African women were not viewed as women, but as lesser than white women because of their "perceived absence of femininity,"[8] a myth that

has been, and still is, perpetuated through visual images of the black mammy figure in American popular culture. In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins describes the mammy stereotype as:

> the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service, the mammy image represents the normative yard-stick used to evaluate all Black women's behavior. By loving, nurturing, and caring for her white children and "family" better than her own, the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power. Even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her white "family," the mammy still knows her "place" as obedient servant. She has accepted her subordination.[9]

The polar opposite of the mammy figure, however, is the Jezebel character, who, as a stereotype rooted in old European notions of the "lusty Moor,"[10] depicts strong black women or autonomous black women (deemed "aggressive") as oversexed. Manatu suggests that "no matter how virtuous the black woman, no matter how feminine, she is more likely than not to be viewed as hypersexed because black women's virtue has had no place in the 'feminine' mythos of US culture."[11] Whites have historically put forth the notion that blacks were "intellectually inferior, culturally stunted, morally underdeveloped, and [express] animal-like sexually."[12] Black women are regularly portrayed in cinema as animalistic, overly sexual, and aggressive. As Sander Gilman argues, the "Hottentot remained representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female."[13] David Pilgrim describes the Jezebel stereotype:

> The Jezebel images which defame African women may be viewed in two broad categories: *pathetic others* and *exotic others*. Pathetic others include those depictions of African women as physically unattractive, unintelligent, and uncivilized. These images suggest that African women in particular and black women in general possess aberrant physical, social, and cultural traits. The African woman's features are distorted—her lips are exaggerated, her breasts sag, she is often inebriated. The pathetic other, like the Mammy caricature before her, is drawn to refute the claim that white men find black women sexually appealing. Yet, this depiction of the African woman has an obvious sexual component: she is often placed in a sexual setting, naked or near naked, inebriated or holding a drink, her eyes suggesting a sexual longing. She is a sexual being, but not one that white men would consider.[14]

Today the Jezebel stereotype is regularly splashed across television—particularly music videos, cinema, and the Internet. The image of the Jezebel provides a "framing of the black female experience" for the audience, who are gratified at "witnessing" what they have long believed about the hypersexed black woman.[15]

Both of these stereotypes are classic iconography for black women. But both stereotypes are also part of the way young black girls are also presented in contemporary cinema. Today, it is common for black teen girls to be portrayed as Jezebels across all media platforms: "Jezebel images also [reveal] that black female children are sexually objectified. Black girls, with the faces of pre-teenagers, are [portrayed] with adult sized buttocks, which are exposed. They are naked, scantily clad, or hiding seductively behind towels, blankets, trees, or other objects … [which] suggests that black females are sexually active and sexually irresponsible even as small children."[16] The sexualized images of black girls often lack an element of romance—they are fully object, desired for momentary physical satisfaction and hence are portrayed as raw, pure sexual energy. White girls, in contrast, are sexualized as inherently innocent (the "little girl" appeal), exploring their sexuality (as opposed to owning it) and needing the "help" of the white male to achieve knowledge of her sexuality. Historically, white girls in popular imagery are the desirable romantic partner, while black girls are rarely the desirable romantic partner. Instead, black girls are often positioned as the *le fruit interdit*, or the exotic dark temptress, the Jezebel. Jezebel characters are found in such popular films as *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *Bring it On* (2000), *Coyote Ugly* (2000), and *Monster's Ball* (2001) for which Halle Berry won an Oscar for Best Actress. Numerous rap/hip-hop artists feature Jezebel characters in their music videos: "Respect" by Notorious B.I.G., "Pause for Porno" by Dr. Dre, Cali Swag District, and most Drake, Rick Ross, and Lil Wayne videos, as well as numerous others. The below image, from "Twerkit" by Busta Rhymes (2013) is one example of the ways in which young black women are portrayed as the overtly sexual Jezebel figure, their worth equated with their bottom size. The video features rapper Nicki Minaj, (who was judge on season 12 of mainstream hit TV show *American Idol* [Fox 2013]) whose derrière is the sole focus of the men with her. And while dancing itself can be a positive expression of sexuality, the sole purpose of the majority of women in these types of music videos is to expose their bottoms for male visual pleasure (Fig. 3.2).

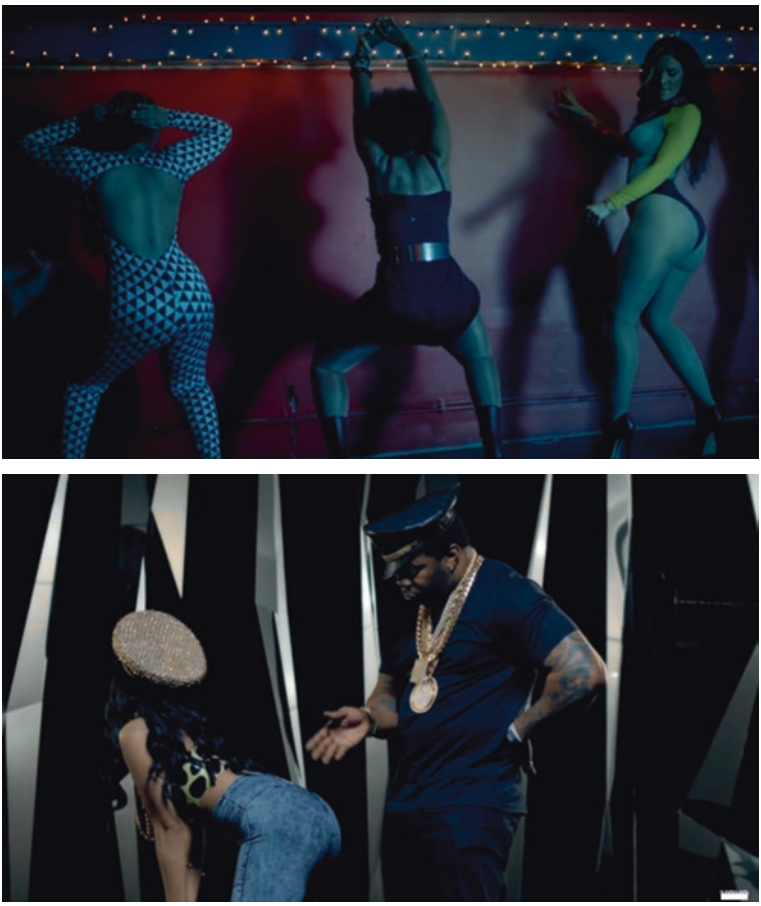


Fig. 3.2 Busta Rhymes "Twerkit," frame grab, accessed 15 July 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j47MYli8pj4

And there is a growing body of scholarship on the overtly sexualized images of black girls in music videos. According to a study by Shani H. Peterson, et al., "Closer examinations of rap music videos have shown that African American women are often portrayed as hypersexual, materialistic, and amoral. Further, their depiction often overemphasizes their sexualized, physical appearance and places them as decorative objects rather than active agents."[17] Even with the growing social awareness of

the sexualization of young black women, images such as the above persist in rap and hip hop, as well as Hollywood cinema. Though slavery is well in the past, these are not new stereotypes or characterizations; rather, they are very old beliefs repackaged and represented within new frameworks. Today, teen black girls are routinely depicted in reality television shows and music videos as hypersexual and aggressive. Such images, in contrast to white teen girl images, which most often emphasize innocence and purity, instead suggest "the overt sexuality of the black child," and especially poor black girls, drawing attention to the power of white discourse to frame cultural notions of childhood.[18]

The consistent Hollywood portrayal, both discursively and visually, of black children as both savage and sexual in relation to white children and Western notions of childhood, constitute a juxtaposition that helps reinforce the "larger cultural politics of innocence" from which the black child is ritually excluded.[19] Early depictions of black children were of a harmless, though ignorant savagery (uncivilized, uncultured, animalistic), such as the portrayal of Sunshine Sammy, Farina, Stymie, and Buckwheat of the *Little Rascals/Our Gang* series discussed in Chap. 2.[20] For instance, Sunshine Sammy as the uncivilized pickaninny was often juxtaposed against a "civilized" white child like in the silent episode "Donkey Delivery Company" (1922) where a mother faints at the shock of finding Sunshine Sammy in her white son's clothing. In the *Little Rascal*'s episode "Little Daddy" (1931) Stymie and Farina discuss why "daddy's in jail" and in "A Lad an' a Lamp" (1932) Stymie asks the lamp for some "chicken" and to "get his daddy outta jail": his requests both historically rooted and are persistent stereotypes about blacks. This type of savagery was presented within the context of culturally dominant beliefs about inherent black stupidity, and amid prevalent fears of black (mostly male) aggression, particularly sexual aggression. Hill Collins states that poor and working-class black children are often portrayed in the media as "aggressive, undisciplined, unruly, and unsuitable playmates for white children of any social class."[21] Such widespread portrayal of black children as renegade and undisciplined has evolved to more positive portrayals in a very few Hollywood films, for instance the recent *After Earth* (M. Night Shayamalan, 2013) co-starring Jaden Smith, son of Will Smith (also co-starring) and Jada Pinkett-Smith. Jaden's character is much improved from the clownish youth portrayal of Sunshine Sammy or Buckwheat, and he is intelligent and not portrayed in any way as a pickaninny. But, as I will discuss in Chap. 6, Jaden's character is still not equal to a white child hero. And Jaden Smith is quite the

exception to the rule: *After Earth* was not the anticipated box-office hit, coming in third at its opening, almost unheard of for a Will Smith action film. And both Jaden's parents are producers of the film and so have influence in Jaden's casting.[22] While *After Earth* breaks new ground as the first Hollywood science fiction film to star a young black male child, its depiction of the child hero is much less groundbreaking.

As I will show in the following discussion, black female children are often portrayed in cinema today within the framework of historically informed stereotypes. Finding popular films that star a black child is rare indeed. The films I will discuss all feature a black child protagonist, with *Precious* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* garnering multiple Academy Award nominations.[23] Both of these films were widely viewed by domestic and international audiences; though both were not Hollywood produced, they became a part of the Hollywood production machine as their popularity grew. Being honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences lends weight to the argument that popular films that present stereotypical images of blacks tend to reinforce beliefs in the validity of the stereotype. The last film choice, *Butter*, was not a hit by any means, grossing only $176,706 world wide, but is an example of the ways even small-budget, contemporary Hollywood films tend to position black children as outsiders to American childhood. And in the case of *Butter*, the extra-diegetic race discourse surrounding the film's promotion provides another critical aspect to the ways in which black children are either stereotyped or absented from mainstream cinema.

Monstrous Mammies in Lee Daniels' *Precious*

Precious, based on the novel *Push* by Sapphire, directed by Lee Daniels, and produced by Oprah Winfrey and Tyler Perry, was released in 2009 to wide critical acclaim. It is the story of a morbidly obese black teenage girl named Clarice Precious Jones who suffers horrendous abuse at the hands of both her mother and her father. She is raped multiple times by her father (and has two children by him), beaten by her mother (who hates Precious for "stealing my man") and is bullied at school by the other teens. The film was praised by some reviewers as a "must see," a rare cinematic experience that "exhibit[s] the courage and perseverance that gives us all hope."[24] Teresa Wiltz, of *The Root*, claims *Precious* is a film that will make the viewer "feel with her, *through* her,"[25] while David Hennessee argues that *Precious* is "singular, moving, and disturbing," with a narrative

that suggests we "feel good about a character's struggles because they are ultimately overcome."[26] Yet not all the critical response to *Precious* has been so uplifting. Ed Gonzales, of *Slant* magazine (slantmagazine.com), describes the film as an "impeccably acted piece of trash—an exploitation film that shamelessly strokes its audience's sense of righteous indignation" and a film "For The Stuff White People Like" genre. Gonzalez opines that the film "simplifies" Precious' longing for escape and for a loving, secure family.[27] Armond White, writing for *NYPress*, characterizes the film as "ghetto tragedy," a "post hip-hop freak show" in which the film's star, Gabourey Sidibe, is "so obese her face seems bloated into a permanent pout." White states that "not since *Birth of a Nation* has a mainstream movie demeaned the idea of black American life as much as *Precious*."[28] Body shaming aside, the range of responses to the film either romanticizes Precious' childhood and struggle, or critiques the depiction as a stereotype.

Black children and black childhood are often ostracized from the landscape of the culturally normative ideal of childhood. Even issues such as child abuse are often visually linked to blackness. Black children (mostly boys) are often portrayed as unsupervised waifs, hungry, abused by their irresponsible or addict parent, and never innocent but always street smart. What *Precious* does do is provide a context for Precious' childhood struggle, but within the framework of black stereotypes like Welfare queen, lazy, uneducated, unambitious. But *Precious*, I will argue, forces to the surface the notion of the "monstrous feminine,"[29] which Barbara Creed describes as "constructed within/by a patriarchal phallocentric ideology [and] is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration." For Creed, who draws on Freudian-based psychoanalytic theories, the monstrousness of the female is in what she represents to the male, that is, difference and the (fear of) loss of power.[30] In *Precious*, this difference is realized in the "monstrous black child" through what David Hevey terms "enfreakment," a cultural process by which bodily differences are skillfully embellished and foregrounded while at the same time they are degraded and marginalized—that is, freaked. Though this process elicits only a conditional sympathy for Precious—a sympathy that oscillates between compassion and revulsion—it essentially reinforces comforting white racist beliefs about the Otherness of African Americans and the monstrousness—not innocence—of black children.

Adam Phillips, in *The Beast in the Nursery*, observes that "in the old, modern fable of civilization and its discontents, either the child or the culture is demonized." Such is the case in *Precious*, which showcases

many of society's ills—welfare, poverty, isolation, drugs, and abuse. On the film's surface, Precious, beautifully played by Gaborey Sidibe, is constructed as an object of pity and sympathy; we cringe when she is verbally abused by her mother, yet the film's subtext sends a very different message. It presents the dark cultural spaces where Precious resides, along with her children born of incest, framed by all that civilization abhors (poverty, filth, disorder, welfare, blackness, etc.). Though centuries away from the distasteful ethnographic zoos and the carnival displays of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century freak shows of Saartjie Baartman's time, *Precious* nevertheless does replicate what Rosemarie Garland Thompson calls the "discourse of the anomalous body" through the film's exaggerated visual presentation of difference.[31] What is most disturbing about the aesthetic geography of *Precious* is its validation—indeed, its naturalization—of the monstrousness of black female mothers and their children: Precious' abusive mother, Precious and her daughter (by her own father) whom she calls "Mongo," slang for Mongoloid. (The child has Down Syndrome.) This trilogy of black females suggests a generational aberration. The film, while not a traditional horror film in the sense of the supernatural or of slasher elements, presents instead the "horror" of race, of the black underclass that threatens to spill out into white middle-class America (which Precious longs to be a part of); a horror that is reinforced throughout the film by the portrayal of the monstrous feminine, or, in the case of Precious Jones, the monstrous mammy.

The film opens with Precious dressed in a beautiful ballroom-style blue gown, happy and smiling. She is morbidly obese, yet this opening scene does not foreground her bodily difference; rather, it is her happy demeanor that captures the scene. She is approached by a tall, slim, regal-looking older black woman, wearing an orange princess gown, with an African style headress. The smiling woman anoints Precious with a red-orange, flame-colored, or blood-colored, scarf by laying it on Precious' shoulder, a symbolic passing of a "torch." They look into each other's eyes with a sense of understanding. This opening scene visually connects Precious to a fairy godmother character who alludes to traditional African philosophical beliefs in the deep spiritual connectedness between the living and the ancestors. This important filmic nod to African women, African spirituality, and connection to the ancestors will ultimately be reinforced as the film progresses. That the film opens with this scene is significant, as I will show, because so many of the scenes in *Precious* suggest notions of a generational monstrousness.

The first few scenes in *Precious* present a young teen girl in school who daydreams about being on the cover of a magazine, about her white teacher being in love with her, about finding a light-skinned boyfriend, and hoping she will someday live in the suburbs—all things that any typical American teenage girl dreams about. The classroom, however, is exactly what white America imagines an inner-city classroom to look like (and what Hollywood typically portrays): white male teacher in front of a wild and out-of-control room full of disrespectful children of color. The landscape of this classroom is oft repeated in such films as *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995) and *Freedom Writers* (Richard LaGravenese, 2007) that reinforce viewer familiarity with "those" kinds of classrooms and "those" kinds of kids; for the white viewer, this stereotypical classroom lends an air of authenticity, of truthfulness to an inner-city "condition" that belies the film's actual scriptedness, which emphasizes the "otherness" of black children who "cannot act right" in a classroom, despite the falseness of that notion. The black boys are particularly unruly and their behavior is foregrounded significantly—the way they tease Precious is by making animal noises (barking), a long-held stereotype of the "animalistic" nature of black children, especially males. The barking noises also begin a trope that lasts throughout the film: equating Precious with a dog.

Throughout the film, Precious is cast as unfeminine: she is morbidly obese and is displayed as vulgar, both of which are considered types of cultural deviancy and decidedly not feminine. At home, Precious is a servant to her mother—a mammy in all senses of the word. In the classroom, she forcefully hits a boy upside his head because he would not be quiet while the teacher was speaking. Black women are often portrayed as violent, dominating, and castrating, and this scene naturalizes such stereotypes. Her voice-over discusses how she has "Mr. Wicher's back," also a part of the mammy character—protection of the white master (in this case, the teacher). Precious' aggressive act is also repeated in the Each One, Teach One classroom, where one of the girls calls her fat, and she quietly walks by, then quickly turns around and strikes the girl. Yet, oddly, when a group of boys verbally assault Precious as she walks home, she does not lash out at them physically as she did to the students in both classrooms, but is pounced on from behind and knocked face-first to the ground, a violent act that sends her into one of her out-of-body escape fantasies.

The notion of physical violence committed by the monstrous child is complicated where Precious is concerned. On the one hand, in the class-

room she demonstrates aggression and even violence, but outside the classroom, and most particularly at home, she is passive and vulnerable and is physically and emotionally abused. This oscillation between aggression and vulnerability is a part of the film's practice of enfreaking Precious. Her large frame and her occasional acts of lashing out physically seem to suggest an adult power and an underlying ruthlessness, an uncontrollability, perceptions rooted in a culture that equates power with size (short men are seen as less powerful than tall men, for instance) and blackness with aggression. In the mythos of female obesity, the belief that a large woman is physically strong is common and as a result the viewer is not really surprised when Precious strikes her adversaries; yet the film interrogates this notion of an obese woman's mannish strength when we witness Precious' large body as vulnerable when her mother, Mary, beats her. Precious' position as mammy is also interrogated in the scene when her father rapes her. At that point, she also becomes, symbolically, the Jezebel, as her mother blames Precious—"you fuckin 'ho, stole my man!"—throughout the film for stealing her man away. This duality of identity is replicated in the many dualities within Precious' character—pretty/ugly, love/hate, skinny/fat, ignorance/knowledge, and abuser/abused.

Precious' vulnerability in this scene works in tandem with the ensuing fantasy, in which she is dancing provocatively with a light-skinned man, to assert that in the "real" world, obese black girls do not get light-skinned boys. As she imagines the young light-skinned man nibbling lovingly on her ear, she reluctantly fades back to reality to discover, as she lays face down in the street, it is a dog licking her ear, a gesture in which resides Precious' desire *for* loving kisses, and her marginalization as *undeserving* of them from a man, particularly a light-skinned man. She is literally at ground level with the dog, and the film suggests, deserves dog kisses.

In *Suffering Childhood in Early America*, Anna Mae Duanne examines the "complex relationship between vulnerability and violence that [Little Eva from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)] helped articulate in early America." The little white child Eva, in contrast to the wild, uncivilized black girl-slave Topsy, became a defining icon for American childhood itself—the site of "vulnerability, suffering, and victimhood" that is still in use today. Conversely from Stowe's novel, the slave child Topsy became the blueprint for the pickaninny character. Though Precious is no pickaninny character, she does represent a "traumatized slave child"[32] in the sense that, as Riché Richardson argues, she is "essentially her mother's servant," a child-mammy who has been "dehumanized and devalued …

treated like an animal"[33] by her peers and in her own home by the one person who should be protecting her. Precious' vulnerability in some cases, such as when her mother abuses her and when her father rapes her, elicits sympathy. And yet, her aggressiveness cancels out that same sympathy, reminding the viewer that *black* children are abject, a term Julia Kristeva in part defines as the human reaction to a threatened breakdown of meaning between the subject and object, or between self and other. Kristeva argues that the abject is "radically excluded" from the norm. Here Kristeva uses the term abject to suggest the primitive effort in memory to separate human from animal: "By way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder."[34] Here, too, we see Precious resist being labeled as animal while, at the same time, the film sexualizes her through the animal aggression of her father, and connects her numerous times to the dog. As Régine Michelle Jean-Charles argues, "While the film draws the audience by soliciting a particular type of affective response, it simultaneously performs a critique of the structures of looking that inform the spectacle of sexual violence."[35] Extending Jean-Charles' argument, I believe the film forces the traditionally non-sexualized mammy into a sexualized position, contesting long-held beliefs about the sexuality of black women and children, obese females, and the mammy character.

In some ways, Precious' size itself becomes the catalyst for the continual oscillation between sympathy for her and the belief in her own complicity. In the field of Attribution Studies, Robert T. Muller, et al., explains that for people who believe the world in general is ordered, just and fair, the "victim-blame" phenomenon results when people try to justify good things happening to people who they feel do not deserve it, and conversely, when bad things happen to good people (like themselves). Muller argues that "individuals respond to such inequities by altering their perception of the victim, [particularly] the victim's behavior, so that the victim is devalued and blamed for [their own] misfortune."[36] The intersection of sympathy and blame contribute to Precious' monstrousness—her abject sexuality as a child-victim of rape, which garners sympathy, and of her obesity, which does not. For instance, the monstrousness of her obese body is reinforced in the scene where she steals and eats an entire bucket of chicken. The film implies that Precious was in some way complicit in both of these conditions—her rape and her obesity. As Michelle Jarman notes, "Sidibe's non-normative body is often situated as the primary problem of the film …

critical fixation on her weight trumps the abuse, literacy, and economic issues faced by the protagonist."[37] Yet Precious' size perhaps functions as a visual framework that also underscores her lost childhood. Her most poignant scenes occur when she is viewing her body, which reveals both a black girl and a fat girl who, much like Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove, believes she is ugly and desires to be thin, white, and loved.

It would be hard to deny the resemblance of Clarice Precious Jones to Toni Morrison's Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike."[38] There are quite a few parallels to the two girls: Both were raped by their fathers and became pregnant, both were abused by their mothers (though Pecola was not sexually abused by her mother like Precious was), both girls escaped abuse through dissociative means, both girls see themselves as ugly, and both hate and blame their blackness as the cause of their condition. Pecola's meditations on her physical appearance mirror Precious' self-contemplation in the bedroom scene, one of the few scenes in the film that remind us that Precious is still a child.

The scene opens with Precious in the shower, getting ready for her day at Each One, Teach One, then cuts to her mother masturbating in bed. The juxtaposition of both scenes suggests Precious' desire to wash the stain of incest away (a common trope in rape narratives), and a "point of transfer of power"[39] in which Precious' bathing signifies renewal of both her desire to learn (taking pains with her appearance for the alternative school) and rejection of her mother's (and father's) sexual abuse. The camera next does a slow pan of Precious' bedroom: posters of skinny, beautiful pop singers and light-skinned male hunks line her wall. Precious then appears in frame and steps to the mirror. Instead of her own reflection she sees a thin, blonde girl looking back at her, a "visualization and reinvention" of herself while simultaneously rejecting her own identity and body.[40] Precious here "imagines conforming to the hegemonic discourse of beauty she's absorbed from white society" as the way to love and security. As Mask describes her, "Precious's learned self-devaluation [is] the convergence of abuse, internalized racism (or more specifically, colorism), and weight discrimination."[41] Much like Pecola Breedlove imagined that having blue eyes would help her escape abuse and despair, Precious believes that being socially acceptable and deserving of a better life requires being thin and having lighter skin. Unlike Pecola, however, Precious' journey is not into insanity, but rather, away from it. She is not

the silent victim that Pecola was and takes tentative, but stubborn, steps towards her own salvation, such as attending Each One, Teach One. As those few steps garner significant progress (like reading and having friends for the first time), Precious finds the strength to reject abuse, to leave her mother's home, and to strike out on her own with little Abdul and Mongo. But in the final scene, when Mary has confessed to years of abusing Precious, Precious turns to Ms. Weiss and says, "I like you too, but you can't handle me. You can't handle none of this," confirming the great division between white "establishment" and her life. As Precious leaves with her children, the film cuts to a low angle shot of the building, its name clearly visible—Citizens Advice Bureau, inferring the "white advice for black assimilation" Bureau. Though Precious and her children move to a half-way house and do make progress, in this last scene, the film implies that her rejection of Ms. Weiss' assistance, rejection of her "citizen's advice," will ultimately doom Precious to perpetuate in some way the "dysfunctional black family."

Confirmation of the belief in the dysfunction of the black family is presented in the film as intergenerational, beginning with the very first scene where the older woman passes the orange scarf to Precious. In the scene of the welfare worker's visit, *Precious* visually suggests deep familial corruption by showcasing four generations of black female monstrous others: the ineffective grandmother (perhaps a victim of abuse herself), Mary (Precious' mother), Precious, and her daughter Mongo. In this scene, the *façade* of a functioning family unit is presented to the welfare worker (and us) by Mary, who puts on a wig, lipstick, and holds a squirming Mongo in a falsely loving embrace. Mary's voice is soft and humble as she works to convince the welfare worker that she has been looking for work and caring for Precious and Mongo. But as soon as the welfare worker leaves, Mary pushes Mongo off her lap, calls her a "goddamn animal" and proceeds to berate Precious' "stupidity" for somehow being the "cause" of the welfare worker's scrutiny. Precious here is positioned squarely as a child, yet only as a means to her mother's welfare check, and only in front of the worker. The moment the welfare worker leaves, Mary begins to treat Precious as a servant, a mammy, while the silent grandmother looks on. The intergenerational nature of both physical and sexual abuse is suggested by the grandmother's extreme passivity, and her obvious fear of her own daughter, Mary. In Mary's aggression toward, and verbal abuse of, little Mongo, one may infer (particularly in light of a later scene where Mary intentionally drops newborn baby Abdul to the floor) that until the child was placed with the grandmother, she may have also been the victim of Mary's wrath.

All the people in the film who are positive influences, who are kind and help Precious, are light-skinned: Ms. Weiss (a welfare worker), Ms. Rain (her teacher) and her lesbian partner, and Nurse John. The only meaningful support that is offered Precious comes from these light-skinned people, reifying whiteness as the savior, as the answer to Precious' (and by inference "The Hood's") problems. Such a message elides the very real socio-economic and political processes and matrices that often converge in urban poor areas that create real obstacles for those who wish to improve their lives. The film's rhetorical strategy renders "happiness, safety, and security [as] particularly synonymous with a white suburban configuration of the American Dream," leaving no other avenue open for success.[42] Even Precious' own grandmother, Toosie, who is dark-skinned like Precious, does not, will not, or cannot help. Toosie's lack of involvement in preventing her own daughter Mary from abusing Precious (and perhaps Mongo) seems to reiterate the intergenerational impotence and dysfunction of the black family.

The welfare worker's visit echoes the most disturbing and racist opinions of the notoriously paternalistic 1965 Moynihan Report, which concluded that the "negro family" is disintegrating because of the predominance of single mothers (i.e., Jezebel behavior), their dependence (generationally) on public assistance, residing in urban ghettos, and a lack of "strong father figure[s]" who have the freedom to "strut" like all "male animals."[43] The stereotypes about crumbling African American families inherent in the Moynihan Report unfortunately remain today and have influenced both public policy shifts (i.e., welfare reform under the Clinton administration—a media-inspired, moral panic response to the demonized, and mythical, black "Welfare Queen") and persistent processes of institutional racism in such areas as medical care and schools. While, narratively, the film appears to transcend the notion of the dysfunctional black family, it visually affirms these persistent notions about the flawed black family by positioning Precious' escape as a move towards the white suburbia she has desired all along, but can never achieve—not as a redemption of the black family.

One of the recurring allusions in *Precious* is to the notion of the animalistic black female. Throughout the film, at key moments, dogs appear as visual metaphors that suggest the animalistic nature of Precious and her family. The little brown and white Jack Russell terrier first appears when the boys knock Precious to the ground. As I stated earlier, in her fantasy she is being kissed by her light-skinned prince, but she wakes to find the dog licking her face. She is face down on the street, on the same

level as the dog. A short time later, we see Precious steal, then, like a starving animal, devour an entire bucket of chicken, a scene in which the character performs the most racist of stereotypes about black people and fried chicken, complete with chicken pieces and grease around her mouth. When Precious is in the hospital, her grandmother berates Precious that "not even a dog would drop a baby then leave, not even a dog." Most significant, however, is the scene when a bloody and disheveled Precious, cradling the newborn Abdul, escaping from her mother's vicious assault, hears music and stops in front of a church. As she listens to the church choir, she slides into one of her dissociative excursions and imagines herself singing with them. Next to her fantasy self is her light-skinned boyfriend holding the little Jack Russell terrier. That the dog becomes an ambient character in her dreams is indicative of her struggle to redefine her identity, to escape the framework of "ghetto tragedy," to escape the echo of the barking and grunting noises the boys in her public school class made towards her, and to resist the label of animal that has defined her life until Ms. Rain and the Each One, Teach One school.[44] But in this choir scene, the dog is contained by the fantasy boyfriend rather than sharing the street space with Precious, a suggestion of her reclamation of identity that resonates with her new liminality (Fig. 3.3).

Fig. 3.3 *Precious.* Directed by Lee Daniels. Los Angeles: Lionsgate, 2009, frame grab

And while the fantasy choir scene shows a smiling and singing Precious, under the loving gaze of the light-skinned boyfriend (and the dog), the street scene instead positions a giant billboard above Precious that reminds the viewer of her and her children's (and her family's) monstrousness. The billboard sign recommends people "spay and neuter" their pets (for a "Healthy, Happy Animal") and is juxtaposed with an abused Precious, protectively cradling her child (of incest) outside the church which has the slogan "Thy will be done" over the door. The billboard message, which hovers over Precious, is the literal discursive framing of Precious as abject: the moment when her body, her sexuality, and her progeny are fully monstrous, and that monstrosity threatens to spill over into the suburbs she dreams of inhabiting—that dream is the film's "horror"—so blackness must therefore be "neutered" as the sign recommends. The triangulation of the billboard, Precious and Abdul, and the church presents the viewer with a "trinity of judgment;" an intersection in which the church (moral authority) and the sign (representing the dominant culture) also play to historical theories of eugenics.

Eugenics is the science of selective breeding in order to improve the human race. Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, coined the term in the early 1900s. In the 1930s, eugenics took hold of the popular imagination and was "widely embraced on both scientific and popular levels" in both America and Europe, and by Germany's Adolf Hitler, with devastating and horrific results. Eugenicists believed that human selective breeding would end all "social ills by encouraging the birth of children with good, healthy, beautiful traits." According to Harriet A. Washington, the science of eugenics added to the prevalent racial discourse that devalued black lives and was used to reinforce "physiological evidence of black inferiority … [and label] black women as sexually indiscriminate and as bad mothers who were constrained by biology to give birth to defective children."[45] Eugenicist discourse discouraged the poor (of all races) from breeding and in some cases sterilized those with mental or physical handicaps to prevent procreation.

Eugenics was a dominant discourse throughout the 1930s and 1940s as it was considered the apex of scientific thought. Eugenics discourse was prominent in discussions about fixing social ills, including poverty and crime. In 1929, Margaret Sanger instituted *The Negro Project*, in which she recruited NAACP founder W.E.B. Du Bois to support her push for widespread birth control for poor African American women so they would stop "breeding." Du Bois, an unlikely supporter, had stated at the time

that "the mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly," a sentiment Sanger repeated often in her quest to "[reduce] the black population."[46] As Gail Bederman states: "Scientific theories [like eugenics] corroborated [the] belief that racial difference [and] civilization … all advanced together." Millennialist discourse at the time embraced the notion of achieving a "perfect society" where "superior races outsurvive[d] inferior races." The science of eugenics fit perfectly with the cultural momentum at the time to "bring about the perfect civilization" through selective breeding.[47] Sanger pushed for government-sponsored clinics that gave out free birth control to poor black women.[48] Du Bois' statement "least intelligent and [least] fit" reaches out from history to marginalize Precious Jones, who is portrayed as both. The billboard message to "spay and neuter" positioned above Precious and her child of incest, coupled with the many references to her as an animal, underscore the historic connection to the eugenics ideology of limiting poor black women and girls from "breeding" in order to keep the horrors of aberrant black sexuality and its monstrous femininity out of middle-class, white America, a sentiment that is fully realized in this image.

Despite the film's explicit message of uplift through education and self-love, the subtext of *Precious* resides with old notions of whiteness, slimness, and middle-class suburbs as the paths to happiness. Though Precious finds freedom from her mother's tyranny and discovers what it is like to be loved and have friends, she holds on to the model of whiteness, and white childhood, as her ideal goal (the bedroom scene in front of her mirror, her desire to be thin and blonde, her fantasy about her white teacher and living in the suburbs, her desire for a "light"-skinned boyfriend). The film does a respectable job of leaving Precious in the interstitial space between child and adult, but it is the juxtaposition of adult knowledge (particularly sexual) with the childlike fantasies (being a star, a princess, being desired by a "white" light-skinned young man) that highlight Precious' exclusion from notions of childhood itself. For Precious, who wants to *be* a child in the idealized sense, her fantasies of a loving mother, adoration by fans, and the love of a light-skinned man frame her forced position of adulthood, her desire for knowledge, and her determination to be the loving mother to Abdul that she never had. The film disavows innocence for Precious. In fact, all the black children in the film are portrayed as knowing and adult-

like, reaffirming the notion of black childhood as abject and other. In *Precious*, black girls, indeed, poor black females of any age—"i.e. just some black girl"—are continually othered by the cultural apparatus in place that partitions black childhood from notions of innocence and purity.

Pickaninnies of the Southern Wild

One of the most common, and stubbornly enduring, portrayals of a black child is as the "pickaninny," a coon character that is often devoid of human characteristics, is animalistic, untamed, genderless, with wide eyes, hair sticking up all around the child's head, and often "stuffing their wide mouths with watermelon or chicken."[49] The most (in)famous pickaninny character is, of course, Topsy, from Harriet Beecher Stowe's anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's depiction of Topsy (blackest of her race, shrewd, cunning, wooly-headed, filthy, solemn, ragged) became the basis for the popular pickaninny caricature.[50] Robin Bernstein, in *Racial Innocence*, explains the pickaninny is often depicted:

> Outdoors, merrily accepting or even inviting, violence … Characteristics of the pickaninny include dark or sometimes jet-black skin, exaggerated eyes and mouth, the action of gorging (especially on watermelon), and the state of being threatened or attacked by animals (especially alligators, geese, dogs, pigs, or tigers). Pickaninnies often wear ragged clothes (which suggest parental neglect) and are sometimes partially or fully naked. Genitals or buttocks are often exposed, and not infrequently targeted by animals. In some of the most degrading constructions, pickaninnies shit or piss in public … Some pickaninnies are constructed as clean, well-dressed, and engaged in domestic chores … Some pickaninny figures are nonindividuated and doltish as cows, but others are clever as monkeys. When threatened, pickaninny characters might ignore danger or quake in exaggerated fear; when attacked, they might laugh or yelp, but in either case, they never experience or express pain or sustain wounds in a remotely realistic way … the pickaninny may be animalistic or adorable, ragged or neat, frightened or happy, American or British, but the figure is always juvenile, always of color, and always resistant if not immune to pain.[51]

Bernstein succinctly captures the varied nature of the pickaninny stereotype. Not all pickaninnies have every characteristic, but the most common image of a pickaninny had woolly hair in little ponytails sticking up around the head, bulging or large eyes, exaggerated lips, usually ragged or no

clothes, and they were often portrayed in rural areas or in nature, or in fear of being eaten by an animal. Many pickaninny characters were also genderless in that they were portrayed as either male or female depending on the clothing they wore. Most tellingly, Bernstein argues that "whereas the white child manifested innocence, the pickaninny deflected it: the pickaninny made not itself, but its violent context appear innocent."[52]

The pickaninny character was a workhorse image—it was everywhere in American society: on products, posters, postcards, greeting cards, advertisements for a multitude of products (particularly soaps), in early film and television, and even as a consumable food (Licorice Babies—sometimes called "nigger babies"—a popular candy of the 1950s and still sold today). Kyla Wazana Tompkins explains that the image of the black child as food was quite common until the 1960s and was rooted in the "violent intimacies of the slave economy." As she notes, such imagery of blacks and food is still found today on such products as Aunt Jemima pancake mixes and syrups, Uncle Ben's rice, and the Little Black Sambo books that are still in print (in which little Sambo is continually in fear of being eaten by a tiger).[53]

Being dirty is a prevailing stereotype about Africans and black or brown people. Early American advertising used black children to advertise soaps as a way of reinforcing notions that blackness itself is somehow "dirty" while reinforcing whiteness as "clean." Pieterse explains that "socio-cognitive" notions of "'clean, white, fair, light, good' go together as the foundation of aesthetics and civilization." Soap and hygiene became a "symbol and yardstick of civilization."[54] The idea of blackness as "dirt" became a common American motif that sparked products like whitening cream or skin bleaches. So the equation of blacks with dirt and poverty, often represented by the pickaninny, has a long history in US racial politics.

Pickaninny characters have all but disappeared across the board since their early twentieth-century heyday; however, they have occasionally made an appearance in popular media, particularly television, most notably Jaleel White's character Steve Urkel in the long-running *ABC/CBS* sitcom *Family Matters* (1989–1998). While he was always well-dressed, kind, and showed glimpses of intellect, Urkel was the reconfiguration of the pickaninny caricature: high-steppin' (in Urkel's case, it was high pants), singin', dancin', and with overly exaggerated mannerisms—particularly facial expressions—Urkel merely continued the images of black children as different and marginal. Other modern pickaninny characters include Arnold (Gary Coleman) in *Diff'rent Strokes*—large eyes, exagger-

ated emotional states—(NBC/ABC 1978–1986), and Emmanuel Lewis as the "endearing black child"[55] on *Webster* (ABC 1983–1989),[56] both of whom are, according to Jared Sexton, "deemed cute by the dominant vantage."[57] In cinema, however, the pickaninny character has been for the most part absent in recent years, until the 2012 release of director Behn Zeitlin's *Beasts of the Southern Wild*.

Beasts of the Southern Wild is a heart-wrenching story about an abused and neglected black girl named Hushpuppy. She lives with her alcoholic father, Wink, near a collection of misfits who live in a Louisiana swamp area called The Bathtub, an ironic name as the characters live and rejoice in filth. The film is a tour de force of the darker side of childhood. One could go so far as to imagine young Hushpuppy's experience as very similar to that of Clarice Precious Jones (*Precious*) but for the setting—abject poverty in a rural, rather than urban, jungle. *Beasts* is an independent film, with a budget of just over a million dollars. Although it was not produced under the Hollywood machine, it quickly became a part of the Hollywood distribution matrix as the film became popular. Many of the actors in the film are local people hired from Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, where the film was shot (incidentally, the same parish in which A&E's hit reality show *Cajun Justice* was filmed in 2012). *Beasts* was an instant hit when it made its debut at the Sundance film festival. It received Academy Award nominations for best film of the year, best director, best actress (the youngest nominee ever for Quvenzhané Wallis' memorable performance as Hushpuppy), and best-adapted screenplay. It won the AFI award for Film of the Year, the Grand Jury prize at Sundance, the FIPRESCI prize at Cannes, an Image Award for outstanding independent film, and, surprisingly, the Black Reel award for best film of the year. The film was based on white writer Lucy Alibar's play, *Juicy and Delicious*, about an 11-year-old white boy in southern Georgia whose world is turned upside down because his father is dying. With so very few black children as protagonists in films, it is worth interrogating Zeitlin's choice to cast a young black girl in the protagonist role and to set the story in a Louisiana swamp.

Some of the reviews of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* describe the film as celebrating America's enduring spirit of freedom. Christy Lemire described *Beasts* as "sheer poetry on screen; an explosion of joy in the midst of startling squalor and one of the most visceral, original films to come along in a while."[58] A.O. Scott, of the *New York Times* describes Hushpuppy as an "untrained sprite" who "allow[s] us, vicariously, to assert our innocence and to accept our inevitable disillusionment when the world falls short

of our ideals and expectations."[59] Perhaps the most interesting praise of the film comes from Mike Scott of the *New Orleans Picayune*: "Every great culture has its towering icons of mythology … and, now, there's Hushpuppy." But Scott's praise of the film disturbingly elides many of its real problems. Scott describes the images of extreme poverty as "bayou steampunk"; the Bathtub residents of alcoholics, drug addicts, and abusers with little to no basic education Scott admires as "fighters … a wizened brand of survivors who are willing to fight all day for their right to eat and drink, sing and stumble all night long." And most troubling of all, Scott describes Hushpuppy's abusive father as a "sinewy nurturer and a firm believer in tough, even gruff, love."[60] The positive reviews of the film tend to focus on the cinematography, which is both gritty and ethereal (shot with a shallow depth of field), and the "pleasure" of viewing a small black child who is whimsical, poetic, spirited, and who, as Sexton observes about the Webster and Arnold characters, recreates the "endearing black child" as a pickaninny character.[61]

Vince Mancini, in his caustic review of the film, asks "I thought we weren't supposed to fall for the Magic Negro and the Noble Savage anymore?" and yet *Beasts* presents young Hushpuppy as just that. Though traditionally, pickaninnies were not portrayed as "magical negroes," *Beasts* effectively unites these two stereotypes into one little girl: Hushpuppy. Magical negroes "use their powers to help the white characters" and they "offer a type of 'folk wisdom' … to resolve the character's dilemma,"[62] in this case to help the Bathtub residents after the flood, and to make sense of her father's abuse, and his impending death. It must be noted that a film told from a young black child's point of view is an unusual occurrence in Hollywood, and while *Beasts'* production elements classify it as an independent film, the film's popularity grew when it was picked up by Fox Searchlight (a division of Fox Entertainment group) for distribution, and ultimately benefitted from wide theatrical and DVD releases.[63] Such wide distribution and promotion means a very large audience viewed this film, which underscores my argument that the general public often only sees, and enjoys, such limiting images of black children. And while a young black girl protagonist is a valuable step in the right direction, the accoutrement of the film merely repackages old stereotypes for a modern audience.

The film's first image of Hushpuppy shows her kneeling in the dirt, making a mud pie and holding a (black) baby chick as she listens to its heartbeat. She is dressed in a dirty and torn girl's undershirt, and what appears to be boy's orange underwear. As I will discuss in detail below,

Hushpuppy's gender identity is under constant assault from her father, and the boy underwear paired with the girl undershirt is a sartorial indication of the child's struggle for a gender identity. Pickaninny characters are often portrayed as gender neutral, and such is the case with Hushpuppy. Hushpuppy narrates the film in voice-over, but her phrases and simplistic wisdom are delivered in an almost depression-era, stereotypically "black" dialect style: "All the time, everywhere, everythin's hearts are beatin' and squirtin', and talkin' to each other the ways I can't understand. Most of the time they pro'ly be sayin': I'm hungry, or I gotta poop. But sometimes they be talkin' in codes." In fact, as Mancini states "watching po' black characters deliberately misuse words and grammar in folksy phrases written by white people … feels hokey at best and offensive at worst,"[64] and while many of the characters speak in an exaggerated "Cajun" twang, Hushpuppy and her father (when he is not screaming abuse at her) both speak as Jim Crow-era whites imagined po' black folks to sound (Figs. 3.4 and 3.5).

It has long been an American idiosyncrasy to equate nature with spirituality and Hushpuppy spouts an Emersonian transcendentalism throughout the film that belies her young years: "I see that I am a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes it right." What is most disturbing about the nature = spirit message in *Beasts* is that it is used to justify and

Fig. 3.4 Billy Thomas as "Buckwheat." *The Little Rascals*, "Bear Facts." Hal Roach Studios, 1938, frame grab

Fig. 3.5 Quvenzhané Wallis as "Hushpuppy." *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Directed by Behn Zeitlin. Cinereach, 2012, frame grab

romanticize the notion that these poor people were just "born this way." Hushpuppy accepts the abject poverty and filth as "natural," a "piece in a wider universe." Her acceptance leads her to view with suspicion the "others" across the levy, an interesting twist on othering that works to justify the Bathtub resident's abhorrence of the city and modernity, of cleanliness and sobriety. But what this reverse othering does is naturalize the Bathtub resident's animalistic behavior. It comforts the spectator that "these people" are not going to invade their space (opposite the fear of blacks moving to the suburbs established in *Precious*). Yet this film is not about spirituality at all; in fact, the only "spirit" that dominates throughout the film comes from a bottle. Everyone is drunk; everyone celebrates beer and the "right" to stay drunk day and night. The film instead celebrates the "beauty" of a marginalized group whose members embrace, with all their being, the notion that "ignorance is bliss," and poverty equals spirituality or closeness to nature. They *choose* to stay marginalized, something white middle- and upper-class audiences can take comfort in.

The notion of poverty as spiritual is rooted in the United States' Puritan past, in which sparse living was considered to be closer to God. The transcendental power and beauty of nature was also championed by such white literary giants as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who solidified the notion of nature as spiritually pure. *Beasts* does not offer a pristine, orderly nature of the sort Transcendentalists dreamed of. Rather,

it presents nature as disordered and dirty, and associates the residents of the Bathtub with savagery and ignorance. This racial separation of urban and rural, however, becomes entangled with the historical white fear of nature in the form of the unknowable and the dark jungles of Africa (or South America, or any place populated with people of color), the subject of much nineteenth-century travel narratives. In *Beasts*, the trope of blacks as dirty animals and nature as "magical" or spiritual is represented, however poetically, by a harsh and corrupting landscape.

While many critics have argued that the film does an interesting job of presenting the residents of the Bathtub as living in a "racist-free" zone—both black and white co-mingle amicably and help each other after the flood—particularly amidst all the dialogue references to "animals" living together in nature and knowing their place (even Hushpuppy at one point recognizes that without her abusive father to take care of her, she would end up as some animal's food), the film's aesthetics suggest racial differences through the visual metaphor of dirt and filth. Though none of the other characters live in pristine conditions, they are never shown as physically dirty or living in as filthy a condition as Wink and Hushpuppy—who only wears underclothes in the Bathtub. In an early scene, the camera follows Wink into his garbage-strewn trailer, he opens an ice chest and uses a meat fork to spear a raw chicken and then place it onto a makeshift grill outside. But the camera also captures this raw chicken, sitting bare (not wrapped or separated) on top of watery-ice in which Wink's beer bottles are also floating. Raw chicken has the potential to carry the deadly *Salmonella* bacteria and the ice in which Wink's beer floats may also carry blood and fluids from the dead chicken, raising the chances of being infected with such a virus. This is a significant visual image of uncleanness, as Wink later is diagnosed with a disease of the blood, something killing him from inside. The suggestion that the filth of their existence, and Wink's non-stop alcohol abuse, is a probable cause of the disease is inferred from this first scene's commingling of beer, ice, and raw chicken.

Beer, and alcohol in general, functions as a uniting element among the Bathtub's residents that sets them apart from the "across the levy" folks. The film establishes an "us vs. them" attitude during the first scenes when Wink and Hushpuppy are out in their makeshift boat. They are looking over the levy at the nearby cityscape and Wink tells Hushpuppy it is "ugly" over there and "beautiful" where they are. At first Hushpuppy looks doubtful, but to *please* her father, she concurs. One subtext in the film is the notion of civilization as confining and bad. Order is portrayed as the

enemy of the residents of the Bathtub. But as mentioned earlier, freedom in the Bathtub is a crude race toward self-destruction. During the opening party scene (in voice-over, Hushpuppy explains that in the Bathtub they have more festivals than anywhere), Wink is riding on a ramshackle float drinking from a bottle and shouting at passersby. The camera next cuts to little Hushpuppy, who is holding a bottle of water. She watches her father and raises the bottle to drink in similar fashion—inferring that the pattern of alcoholism is born. Hushpuppy tries desperately throughout the film to win the love of her father, and near the end, after the storm, Wink offers her a drink, and she accepts; the scene ends with them drinking alcohol together amicably. This rare moment of father–daughter bonding is positioned within a popular social narrative that posits black poverty and alcohol or drug use as both a racial and generational defect as well as a rejection of (white) "civilization." While poverty abounds in the Bathtub for both white and black, Hushpuppy and her father are highlighted as more animalistic and savage than their white counterparts, as we will see in the crab-eating scene.

It is only ever Wink and Hushpuppy who are shown traipsing through the bayou mud, or living in a garbage-strewn space. When the film shows Hushpuppy eating the aforementioned chicken, she is seated on the floor in Wink's trailer surrounded by garbage, with half a chicken in her hands, which she has difficulty maneuvering. Hushpuppy's difficulty in handling the dead chicken is a marked contrast to her earlier skill at holding the live black chick to her ear as she listened to its heartbeat. Here she fumbles and struggles to hold onto the "dead" chicken, prefiguring her struggle to "hold on" to her father when he later dies. Her face is covered in grease and bits of chicken, suggesting animal-like "feeding" rather than eating—a trope that is repeated in the "beast it" scene. (This scene is also similar to the chicken scene in *Precious* when she also "feeds" on a bucket of chicken, her face covered in grease and chicken pieces, before she vomits it up. One of the age-old trope, or "social codes," for blacks is their penchant for fried chicken, which is evident in both films.) No plates or utensils are ever used, except Wink's meat fork, suggesting a rural backwardness. In the crab-eating scene, when her white "Uncle John" is showing Hushpuppy how to use a knife (representative of civilization) to crack open a crab, her father flies into a rage and begins screaming at her to "beast it"—to open it with her hands, not use a utensil—to "beast" it, like an animal (Fig. 3.6). The others are shocked at his rage at first, but then they begin chanting at Hushpuppy to "Beast it!"

Fig. 3.6 "Beast it." *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, frame grab

The consistent message her father badgers her with throughout the film is to be an animal (and to be male); do not rely on any kind of human mechanization or tools, however helpful. What follows is, for Hushpuppy, a rejection of modernity in the sense that Wink forces her to learn to live as the animals do—without tools. And while there is value in Wink teaching Hushpuppy to rely only on her hands, it is also limiting in that she later views the trappings of modernity and (white) society with suspicion, as we will see in the flood scenes. This message unites the major black characters in the film with dirt, animals, and a willful ignorance. In particular, Wink's rejection of cleanliness, sobriety, and anything modern or urban results in his early death and his daughter being orphaned, left to the mercy of the Bathtub residents, including the "teacher," Bathsheba.

The film romanticizes the folk wisdom of Bathsheba, the Bathtub's white "teacher." But the information she teaches is a mixture of fact, myth, and superstition. As Bathsheba tells the children the tale of the extinct Aurochs, the music is light and playful while the camera dances around her as she in turn animatedly dances around the children while telling the story. The camera holds Bathsheba with close-ups and medium shots, suggesting the story is quaint and delightful, even childlike in its innocence. Bathsheba's animated telling of the Auroch story cuts between close-up and medium shots, the camera moving fluidly as Bathsheba moves, adding to the film's fairy-tale aesthetic, as the captivated children watch her. The accompanying musical score is high-pitched, light and playful, underscoring the childlike quality of Bathsheba's "teachings." The type of wisdom that Bathsheba imparts, the fable-masquerading-as-fact, suggests notions of pagan belief systems that are often viewed by white society as uncivilized. *Beasts* foregrounds superstition as somehow ethereal and philosophical, even pastoral, and when Bathsheba "predicts the apocalyptic arrival of the Aurochs, an extinct species of cattle,"[65] the children listen wide-eyed and accepting.

Bathsheba's tale of the Auroch's return from extinction becomes the basis for Hushpuppy's beasts, whom she imagines threatening her at key moments throughout the film.

The film's embrace of magical realism[66] in the form of the Aurochs contributes to the whimsical and romantic portrayal of filth and abuse. Within the menagerie of Wink's and Hushpuppy's "pets," there are numerous shots of a large pig laying in the dirt, or rooting through the mud as Hushpuppy plays or philosophizes nearby. That pig, however, is transformed into the fantasy beasts, the Aurochs, Hushpuppy's version of the animals that she imagines are constantly trying to get her. When we first witness Hushpuppy's magical imagining of the Aurochs, they are not cattle as Bathsheba described, but her own pig complete with long horns and more hair. In popular culture, pigs are often portrayed as dirty animals (in reality they are no dirtier than any other farm animal; they wallow in the mud as a way to cool off as they do not have sweat glands). That the "beasts" that pursue Hushpuppy are pigs suggest a number of symbolic meanings. Pigs are content to lie around in the muck and eat, similar to the lives of Wink and Hushpuppy. The pig also represents the Bathtub and its residents and their contentment with poverty. These magical pigs appear to chase and threaten Hushpuppy at key moments in the film, particularly when she is being chased or abused by her father, or feels threatened by him in some way. Indeed, the Auroch pigs threaten Hushpuppy throughout the first part of the film, just as she is threatened by Wink, her environment, the storm, and later, the forced evacuation. It is not uncommon for abused children to create a fantasy world in which their abuser is imagined as something other than their loved one. In this case, the Aurochs can be seen as symbolic of her father, his violence toward her, the filth of their existence, and finally his death (extinction) which leaves her all alone.

But the Aurochs are also an "interpenetration of irreconcilable worlds"[67]—the make-believe world of a little six-year-old girl who secretly hopes her mother is out there somewhere—and the terrifying world of abuse that she inhabits. It is this fusion of terror (of her father) and hope (for a mother—and femininity) that the Aurochs come to represent, as we see when Hushpuppy visits the bar, Elysian Fields. Indeed, the diner-cum-bordello is filmed as a magical space, with ethereal dots of pastel lights, swaying half-clothed women, and singing and dancing patrons. As Agnes Woolley astutely observes:

> Arriving at a low-lit floating Bordello—emblazoned with the legend "girls, girls, girls"—the children are immediately seduced by a group of cooing, cosseting women in varying states of undress. Each child slow dances with their surrogate mother watched over by the adult male punters, whose presence intimates the provisionality of the encounter. Shot in womb-like ambient reds and warm oranges, the scene is clearly designed to evoke those maternal qualities of comfort, security and tactility of which they are deprived in the Bathtub. Following her own symbolic mother into the kitchen, Hushpuppy is given a dish of carefully prepared delicacies to eat with cutlery in place of the whole barbecued chickens she is forced to chew off the bone in the Bathtub … [By] situating the domesticated female kitchen firmly in the realm of fantasy, the film demonstrates the inadequacy of [but no less desirable] stereotypical feminine qualities for survival in the 'wild'.[68]

This magical scene is contrasted with the terrifying vision of the Aurochs that stalk, then chase, Hushpuppy and the children when they return to the Bathtub.

The Auroch apparitions also mark a point of convergence of Hushpuppy's childhood imagination, her struggle to survive in extreme conditions, and her persistent belief that her life matters in some way—a child's rationalization of her father's abusive treatment of her. The Auroch fantasy allows her a semblance of agency in a world where she continually faces threats and abuse. For Hushpuppy, the Aurochs become a "link to a precarious but necessary past"[69] where her missing mother resides. Hushpuppy's imaginary relationship with the mother who abandoned her connects the magical realism of the Aurochs—an extinct species—to her fantasy about a different (better?) life. For Hushpuppy, the magical realism of the Aurochs, their reappearance despite their extinction, functions to "recuperate the real, that is, to reconstruct histories that have been obscured, or erased."[70] In other words, if the Aurochs still exist, so might her mother.

The Aurochs appear for the final time when Hushpuppy and the girls return from seeing their imaginary "mothers" at the bar. The Aurochs chase the girls, as they get closer to Wink's shack. All of the girls look back, scream, then run ahead, leaving Hushpuppy alone with the Aurochs [implying that the other children also see the Aurochs]. Significantly, as she crosses a small bridge to her father's shack, she turns and faces the terrifying Aurochs. A shot/reverse shot series of close-ups of the Auroch's and Hushpuppy's eyes ensues, and then the camera pulls back to a medium

shot as Hushpuppy says "I guess your kinda my friend"—the Aurochs then all kneel down to her, yielding to her newfound mastery over fear. This epiphany occurs while she stands on a "bridge"—the visual space between fear and courage, between child and adult, between life and death. In this scene, the fearful and the magical—the harshness of life and the false dream of a mother's love—is simultaneously confronted and let go, as Hushpuppy is freed of her father's abuse (through his death), but sadly realizes her mother will never return. Significantly, Wink dies while holding Hushpuppy, his arm around her as she lays on his chest. She listens to his heart slow, then stop—alluding to the opening scene when she listened to the chick's heart and philosophized about her place in the universe.

What is particularly disturbing in *Beasts of the Southern Wild* is its playful, poetic, and even whimsical depiction of child abuse. As bell hooks describes: "All the vibrancy in this film is generated by a crude pornography of violence. At the center of this spectacle is the continuous physical and emotional violation of the body and being of a small six year old girl called Hushpuppy … while she is portrayed as continuously resisting and refusing to be a victim, she is victimized. Subject to both romanticization as a modern primitive and eroticization, her plight is presented as comically farcical."[71] Critics have described Wink as a "rough father," "neglectful," "a sinewy nurturer who believes in tough love," and "non-traditional"[72] rather than describing him as alcoholic and abusive. Yet, as hooks asserts, it is the "mythic focus [of the film] that enchants. And yet it is precisely this mythic focus that deflects attention away from egregious sub-textual narratives present in the film,"[73] most particularly the (impossible) nature of black childhood and the black child experience. The many instances of child abuse that occur in *Beasts*, are, according to King, "part of a behavioral script that defines suffering in silence as a course of dignity, courage, and ennoblement."[74] Hushpuppy, through Wink's abuse, is schooled in holding back her emotions, which, as hooks argues, turns Hushpuppy into the stereotypical strong black Jezebel figure as it simultaneously masculinizes her.[75] Wink's frightening outbursts in which he insists that Hushpuppy not cry function as just such ennoblement, which many of the film's critics seemed to find endearing. American social mythology prizes an internal self-control of emotion, a "manning up" of internal strength, but while the film celebrates that masculine, no-emotion ideal, it ignores the terror the child feels at her father's rages and physical abuse; it ignores the horror of the process of achieving that internal self-control. It is Hushpuppy's negotiation with that terror that the camera compellingly targets.

It is worth noting how expressive young Hushpuppy's face is. In every scene with her father, Hushpuppy adopts a closed-off, defiant look. As soon as her father appears in the scene, her face changes. Her little mouth tightens in a semblance of the "manliness" he requires of her, and her eyes are both defiant and watchful because she never knows when she will have to run from his abusive rages. For Hushpuppy, staying silent—"not crying"—is a survival mechanism; it is a lesson in self-control *in order* to survive Wink's abuse. Wink's instances of physical abuse (he slaps her, hits her, chases her, screams at her, and gives her alcohol), would suggest that there would be severe consequences to her small black body if she were to cry or show emotion in front of her father. Her father also rains down a constant stream of emotional abuse on his young daughter: "I got to worry about you all the damn time! You're killing me! You're killing me!" These are unfortunately prophetic words, and they condition Hushpuppy to later feel responsible for her father's death. And it is that abusive discourse, coupled with his raging alcoholism and physical abuse of Hushpuppy that also positions Wink as the stereotypical black brute.

What many viewers found enchanting about little Hushpuppy's "strength and fortitude," instead calls attention to the ways in which black childhood is regularly positioned as tragic. She is starved for kindness, love, and compassion. As Bernstein argues, white childhood is "laminated to the idea of innocence," but black children are still portrayed as the "nonsuffering black pickaninnies [that] emptied black childhood of innocence."[76] Wink's emotional detachment from his child is heartbreakingly reinforced when Hushpuppy and her friends are at the riverboat bar. She tells the woman in the kitchen that she can "count on two fingers how many times she's been lifted [picked up the in air and hugged]." The woman hugs her even tighter, swaying side to side, rocking her momentarily as a mother would. We see Hushpuppy close her eyes at the profoundly sad, yet emotionally delightful feeling of being hugged, but only briefly as she tells the woman she has to go home now. For the viewer, this moment underscores a wholesomeness normally associated with childhood, but that is often missing in cinematic images of black children and black childhood. This lack of emotional connectedness and kindness is in some ways brought to the fore by so many reviews of the film that ignore the abuse, or worse, romanticize it, in favor of *Beasts*' technical aesthetic wonders (similarly, Disney's *Song of the South* was also aesthetically whimsical—bright, happy pastels and cheerfully singing animals—and romanticized historical notions of the

"happy slave"). King points out that "the image of black bodies maltreated and in pain carries within it meanings that, even when absolutely horrible, are accepted, categorized, and forgotten almost at once,"[77] and, in the case of *Beasts*, abuse and neglect are not so much forgotten as made philosophic, magical, even spiritual by a camera that glides softly over Hushpuppy's sad, yet defiant face. That the cinematography of *Beasts* is beautiful, even ethereal in places, cannot be denied, but its presentation of the black child and black childhood within such filth-as-beauty is a recurring motif throughout the film, naturalizing the notion of black childhood as tragic. Black and brown children are often used to voyeuristically enjoy what David Walker has dubbed "squalor porn."[78] As King states, "the pain-free, white American body exists easily in the cultural imagination and cultural productions of social agents within the United States … [but the] historical and everyday (or commonplace) sign of suffering, the wounded black body, is walled off" and separated, exoticized and romanticized to such an extent, and very effectively in *Beasts*, that the multiple materialities and cultural spaces of black children are reduced on film to stereotypes and caricatures that merely present to us old pickaninnies with new faces.[79]

Rather than disparaging the restraint of modern life, as do other parts of the film's narrative, the scene in which Hushpuppy and her companions have been taken to the shelter after the flood offers a feeble critique of her (and their) choice to remain in the Bathtub. The camera pans slowly to reveal Hushpuppy all cleaned up, in a blue dress complete with white lace collar, and with her wild uncontrolled hair neatly, and beautifully, brushed and coiffed. Hushpuppy's expression for a brief moment reveals the wonder at her own reflection—is this really me?—particularly in light of the suppression of her very girl-ness and femininity by her overbearing father. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, in order to be considered feminine, black women must avoid "so-called male characteristics." The film does underscore Hushpuppy's femininity; for instance, through the camera's soft, ethereal close-ups of her gentle, even maternal, handling of the chick. But her outward expression of traditional feminine traits is continually challenged by Wink's demand she suppress them. And so, while momentarily awed at the beauty of her own reflection, she then interprets the blue dress as a restraint on her freedom, rather than as an opportunity to be a girl. Hushpuppy's resistance to the makeover works as a visual cue to ally the viewer with her desire to return to the deceptive "freedom" of the Bathtub. Her resistance to the feminizing dress

also naturalizes the historical belief that "label[ed] Black women unfeminine and too strong."[80] But what that one glimpse of a clean and dressed Hushpuppy suggests instead, is the *potential* of Hushpuppy if only she would abandon the false idea of a freedom that is a veritable prison of poverty and ignorance. The scene is rich in sartorial symbolism of the blue dress (civilization) as stifling constraint and her usual outfit of dirty underclothes (nature) as freedom.

At the film's end, Wink lies dying and stares at his daughter as she feeds him the fried alligator from the woman at the whorehouse. The alligator becomes symbolic of the family-that-never-was, as Wink always told her stories of her mother killing, then frying, an alligator (apt considering the "beasts" metaphor throughout the film). Even at this last, Hushpuppy attempts to please her father by providing him with one last manifestation—that is, memory—of the woman he lost. In this final scene, the black dysfunctional family is complete: missing mom, drunk and dying father, emotionally and physically abused and unloved child. And at this last moment, Wink withholds from her that which will make her whole: he does not say he loves her, does not comfort her, but gruffly tells her not to cry—to "man up"—his last instruction to her is to deny her gender. She places her head on his chest (a recurring image throughout the film as Hushpuppy listens to different animal's heartbeats) and the sound of his heartbeat is heard, slowing until it stops.

The ending is poignant—Wink is crying as he tells Hushpuppy not to cry, violating his own "man-up" rule. However, the final scene is unsatisfactory as Hushpuppy, after lighting the makeshift funeral pyre and pushing it out into the bay, leads the sorry band of drunkards, the "beasts" of the Southern wild, up the Bathtub road in defiance of the storm, civilization, progress, hope, and love. While this last scene suggests Hushpuppy has full agency, the film has framed her decision to stay in the Bathtub as the only *natural* place for an uneducated, emotionally damaged black child to be. That she leads the "parade" of misfits and drunkards after her father's funeral merely highlights her acceptance of her place in the universe *as natural*—that is, in nature (the swamp) and in the social hierarchy—rather than transcend it—which was the film's project all along. In that sense, the film ends in such a way as to reproduce cultural notions about black childhood and the Magical Pickaninny—the presentation of blacks as animalistic or magical continues the cultural circulation of long-held beliefs about black people that are still very much a part of dominant cultural discourses.[81]

"Just Some Black Girl's" *Butter*

Precious and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* both present images of black children that are rooted in historical attitudes about, and early images of, black children. Both films reinterpret these old stereotypes and represent them to spectators within new discursive frameworks that *perform* childhood—where the trappings of childhood, that is, innocence and bourgeois accoutrement, are played out in film to the expectations of the adult audience. The performance of childhood also is a performance of whiteness in that social expectations about childhood are articulated through expectations of whiteness. As Robin Bernstein argues, "childhood innocence—itself raced white, itself characterized by the ability to retain racial meanings but hide them under claims of holy obliviousness—secured the unmarked status of whiteness" in Western society.

Harvey Weinstein's 2011 political satire film *Butter*, directed by Jim Field Smith, is a comical jab at the 2008 Presidential election (Hilary Clinton versus Barack Obama for the democratic nomination) and the antics of the fundamentalist political group called The Tea Party. The film is set in Iowa, the [media endorsed] center of white American election politics, and contains a collection of wacky, overly neurotic white characters. The plot revolves around a couple that maintains a position of local royalty and influence as the "butter carving" champions of the state. Along comes a young black girl, Destiny (beautifully played by Yara Shahidi), who has been shuffled from foster family to foster family (all of whom are white and featured in a charming but sad montage of the zany families she has lived with) and ends up with Jill (Alicia Silverstone) and Ethan (Rod Corddry) Emmitt, the film's Perfect White Couple. (Destiny's voice-over claims they are the "whitest people I'd ever met.") While the film's project is undeniably satire, the use of the black child *as a satirical image* merely reinforces my argument that Hollywood cinema views "real" childhood as white. It is a satire *because* black children in film are rarely portrayed as the norm for childhood.

In *Precious* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, the spectator witnesses "the production of racial memory through the performance of forgetting [it],"[82] so that the films both present what appear to be "new" discursive relations for black children that instead work to re-define already established racial differences, or in Stuart Hall's words, the "preferred readings" of what childhood is and should be that in turn supports the "institutional/political/ideological/ order"[83] of childhood as white. And so it is

a common thing to *not* see black children in starring roles in Hollywood cinema productions. *Butter*, however, presents a little black girl very differently from the other films: she is clean, well-dressed, intelligent, and, though a ward of the state, not living in abject poverty, that is, not positioned in a slum, a swamp, a jungle, or an urban environment like most portrayals of black children. But what struck me about *Butter*, and one of the reasons I include it here, is its *denial* of the black child protagonist in both the film's climax and in its extra-diegetic promotion. Unlike *Beasts* and *Precious*, *Butter* is useful because it draws attention, self-consciously, to the historical erasure of black female individuality and agency. Only after "fixing" the white crisis does the child then find her own place—but in an all-white world.

There are some beautiful, but atypical, images of Destiny in the film: riding her bike on a dirt road flanked by tall, green corn fields; riding her bike around a bright and happy (all white) pure Americana country fair; eating cotton candy as she strolls around the fair; in her room, which is quite large and very pink; eating dinner with her new family—bathed in Norman Rockwell pastels; at school surrounded by happy, smiling white children; and carving her first butter sculpture inside a display window at the county fair to the applause of the (all-white) audience. Ultimately, the film *is* a satire and can be interpreted on at least two levels: as a reenactment of black (and white) stereotypes, and as a critique of such canned stereotypes. *Butter* presents an ambiguous portrayal of the "typical" black child in crisis that, in essence, challenges that very stereotype. For the most part, *Butter* presents Destiny as a typical ten-year-old girl who seeks to be a part of a typical middle-class family, with the exception that she is the only black face throughout the entire film. But for all of *Butter's* unique and positive portrayal of an African American child, its use of stereotypical *framing* of that child's situation—foster child, drug-addicted mother—allies it with the problematic portrayals of black children found in both *Precious* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*. Instead, within the framework of satire, the film rearticulates old notions of blackness as "other" and reaffirms white childhood as the norm (Fig. 3.7).

While much of the film's race references are firmly rooted in its satire, Destiny's negotiation of her new surroundings is framed by common stereotypes about black children. Destiny is, of course, an orphan. She is a ward of the state, a foster child, who dreams of her mother "coming back for me any day now." The film never mentions the child's father and thus, the typical "black dysfunctional family" with the "absent father" provides

Fig. 3.7 *Butter*. Directed by John Field Smith. Los Angeles: Michael de Luca Productions, 2011. frame grab

the background for Destiny's character. In the first school scene, her teacher notices her artistic talents and says "we expect great things from you," which results in a slow pan of all the children staring at her with fixed (fake) smiles on their faces, resembling the creepy-white and robotic perfection of the women from *The Stepford Wives* (Brian Forbes, 1975). The class's overexaggerated social "acceptance" of Destiny functions instead to set her apart as Other. One young blond boy even tells her he "thinks black people are really cool." In this scene, as in others throughout the film, Destiny's presence, her blackness among the whiteness, highlights both her difference and her role as the "representative" black person—her individuality discursively removed by the boy's "black people are really cool" comment. That she is an outsider who is welcomed is not the same as being *accepted*—rather, the young boy's comment reduces Destiny to the stereotype of "coolness" and the expectations white's have about black people. The reference to coolness hints at the phenomenon in which white youth idolize and fetishize black cultural artifacts, something Yvonne Bynoe argues "is really more of a projection of [white] beliefs about Black people rather than a true understanding about the humanity of African-Americans."[84] The only way the white child knew how to relate to a black girl was through racially essentialized, and culturally learned discourses about blackness as "cool." As Anna Beatrice Scott argues, Destiny's otherness has "simply created" for the white boy "another white fantasy [that is] … vindicated by blackness itself."[85] The white boy's "knowledge" of blackness both elevates and excuses him of any racial insensitivity. Similarly,

the filmmaker's assumptions about what blackness is allows him to satirize a culturally constructed notion of blackness.

In *Butter*, Destiny's function is the role of the Magical Negro. But unlike Hushpuppy in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, Destiny is both educated and street smart, wise beyond her young years, with her butter-carving ability highlighted as an unusual, and therefore threatening, talent. Her position as a foster child—"no family, no money, and no connections"—implies social invisibility, and lends a socially determined "authenticity" to her character. Destiny is marginalized, similar to Hushpuppy and Precious Jones, but *Butter* both *erases* blackness while at the same time relying on its redemptive power to "fix" the whites around her.

There are numerous white redemption scenes between Destiny and the white characters: when Jill first sees Destiny's carvings of her original family; Destiny's moving speech about her first butter competition carving; and when Ethan reveals he was afraid to adopt a baby and that is why they wanted an older child, Destiny places her hand on his arm and tells him it's alright to be afraid. Destiny's wise insights throughout the film function to assist the white characters to come to terms with their internal dilemmas, reassure them if they are unsure of an action or feeling, and to help the white characters achieve a higher understanding, all of which are actions of the classic "magic negro."[86] In terms of childhood, however, Destiny is not portrayed as innocent and instead demonstrates a wisdom far beyond her young years. Though her non-innocence itself is not threatening in *Butter* (the opposite of what we will see in Chaps. 4 and 5 with black boys), it does place her outside of culturally informed notions of childhood—children are not supposed to have enough life experience to be wise: while Destiny *can be* the Magical Negro; she *cannot at the same time* be an innocent child.

Throughout the film, Destiny is the epitome of calm detachment as she helps the whites around her with quiet and confident reasoning and subtle wit. But these moments only highlight the centrality of the white crises in the narrative while marginalizing Destiny to her role as Magic Negro. Destiny's internal crisis, her search for a loving family, her insecurity, (She does not even unpack her suitcase.) are all subordinate to the conflict/crisis among the white characters. Destiny's talent is where her story and the white crisis intersect. Black children are rarely portrayed in film as having talents other than the stereotypical dancing, singing, rapping, and so on. But in *Butter* Destiny is a master at carving and creates beautiful but-

ter sculptures; indeed, it is her phenomenal talent that threatens Laura's elevated social position.

As the patient and long-suffering Magical Negro character, Destiny selflessly agrees to a rematch after her sculpture's authenticity is questioned (reminiscent of African American poet Phillis Wheatley, who, in order to have her first poetry volume published (1773), had 17 white Boston men vouch for the book's authenticity) during the competition. After the rematch confrontation, a social worker shows up at the Emmitt household with information about Destiny's real mother, who they sadly learn is deceased. But the social worker gives Destiny a picture of her real mother laughing and holding her as a baby. That photo, which represents everything Destiny has desired throughout the film, becomes her butter sculpture in the final showdown between her and Laura (Fig. 3.8).

During the competition, both Laura and Destiny carve in front of the judges and a live audience. But during the night, Laura's boyfriend breaks into the hall to sabotage Destiny's carving. Significantly, out of all the sculpture's parts he could have chosen, he melts away the baby's face in an attempt to help Laura win. When the participants arrive the next morning and see the damaged sculpture, Destiny's behavior solidifies her Magical Negro status: she is nonplussed at the setback, does not cry or rant, merely tells her friend that "it's over, I've lost." She stoically and gracefully concedes defeat to the white woman, Laura (Fig. 3.9).

Yet the significance of the sabotage cannot be lost on Destiny, or the viewer. The "nameless" orphan who does not even know who she is, having just found her mother (deceased), who is placeless, is symbolically removed from her mother again by the melting away of her butter-baby face. Such an erasure suggests a broader "facelessness" of black children, the "just some black girl" sentiment of the *Hunger Games* blogger who

Fig. 3.8 *Butter*, frame grab

Fig. 3.9 *Butter*, frame grab

was so offended by the sight of a black girl playing the role of an "innocent" child. As Debra Walker King states: "Both the discomforting visual image of black bodies in pain and the more soothing image of pain-free white bodies amass value on a field of racial hierarchy. This field of struggle is where contesting images and power relations are in constant play. If struggle is denied or rendered invalid by some implied or imposed judgment, the images are sustained as normalized paradigms of human worth. They maintain their assigned worth only as long as their functions within various social processes remain unacknowledged or invisible."[87] The struggle here for Destiny, has been "rendered invalid" by the judges as they do not see the baby's melted face as a flaw in the sculpture; on the contrary, they *assumed* that it was an *intentional obliteration* of the child's identity. Through the violent act of erasure, the visual text of Destiny's sculpture is transformed from a loving mother/daughter moment to an image of a[ny] black woman holding a faceless, nameless baby—"just some black girl." The sculpture's faceless black baby echoes the cultural absence of black female children from the landscape of childhood, particularly because its very *absence* is considered *normal*.

Not surprisingly, Destiny's sculpture wins the competition anyway—the judges describe it as: "True art … so tragic, so touching … and to be touched yourself, you merely have to look at the sad, melted face of this unloved child." And in one final, magical moment, Destiny, surrounded by her adoring new white family and the cheering white crowd, quietly walks over to a visibly distraught Laura and tells her "this isn't all you have." Destiny wraps her thin, brown arms around the lost and broken white woman in a last act of (magical) healing. Laura softens and hugs the child in return—spirit restored; or, as Hughey describes it, "the anguish and cruelty endured by the [magical Negro's] sacrifice labors to transform

the white character into a morally improved person."[88] We are left with the knowledge that Laura has changed and become a better person. (In the film's last image of Laura she is campaigning for governor.)

And it is in the act of redeeming the white couple—who by the film's end have permanently adopted her—that Destiny finally finds her very own permanent family. Although the film's satirical intent pokes fun at Iowa and its politics, on a meta level the racial dynamic also suggests that there are no "good" black families with which to place Destiny. And, as we learn near the film's end, her biological mother has died of a (typical) drug overdose, further relying on notions of the troubled black family to solidify the satire. Destiny's voice-over marks the film's final scene, as she unpacks her old, battered suitcase for the last time, marveling at her good fortune to be loved by such a Perfect White Family. (The film also infers the couple's good fortune in acquiring a magic negro.)

As I mentioned earlier, one of the more disturbing aspects of *Butter* is not only that it relies on the Magic Negro stereotype, but that the *promotion* of the film, like the destruction of the sculpture baby's face, also denies the black child. None of the film's cover art or posters include Yara Shahidi. The list of stars on the cover art for the DVD does not include her name or image, and yet she is one of the two main protagonists. While the official trailer for the film does feature Shahidi in select montage scenes, she is not listed as one of the stars when the actor's names all pop up on screen. The trailer for the film announces Shahidi's character only as "THE ORPHAN."[89] The film is marketed as if the main story revolves around Laura only, when the film's dual narrative is shared equally by Destiny and her impressions of, and negotiations with, white people (Fig. 3.10).

According to *Butter's* screenwriter, Jason Micallef,[90] the role of Destiny was the only part they actually had to cast as the other actors were already chosen or had volunteered. *Butter* is Shahidi's fourth feature film. (She had previous roles in *Imagine That* [2009], *Unthinkable* [2010], and *Salt* [2011]). Shahidi also has had numerous television appearances, including the popular sitcom *Entourage* (HBO 2007) and a recurring role in *In the Motherhood* (ABC 2009) as Esther, and currently plays the oldest daughter, Zoe, on ABC's hit comedy *Blackish*, so she is not a newcomer to the screen. Yet, the lack of Shahidi's name or, more importantly, her image in the film's promotion perhaps suggests the producer's belief that the film

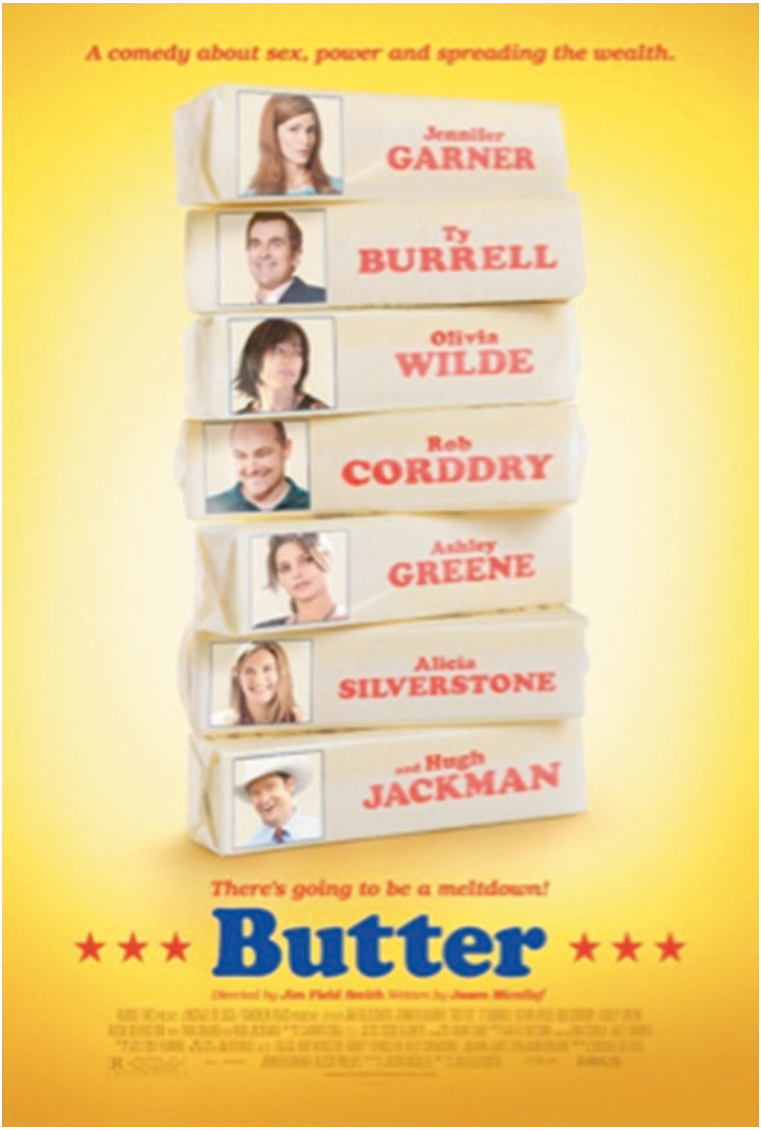


Fig. 3.10 The official poster for the film and the Blu-ray cover

Fig. 3.10. continued.

would have wider appeal if audiences believed it were an all-white cast, even though Shahidi is in the trailer. As King reiterates, black children "maintain their assigned worth only as long as their functions within various social processes remain unacknowledged or invisible,"[91] and although without Destiny and her noble wisdom the white character's crises would

not have been resolved, nor experience redemption, there is no formal acknowledgment of a black child's role in that white redemption in the promotional materials. Indeed, it is Destiny's act of compassion for Laura that underscores her Magical Negro role and her vital part in the narrative logic of the film.

The visual rhetoric of the competition scene showcases the Magic Negro child by positioning Destiny screen-right facing screen-left, her small figure in scale larger than either Laura or Bob, and her head "haloed" with light—which is also literally "haloed" by her hair band. The black child here functions as the knowing [but not innocent] angel that redeems the white woman. As Thomas Cripps states: "Historically, if a black person is thrust into a white universe, it is inevitable that the white person will become a better person."[92] And in the promotion of *Butter*, it is Laura's story that outshines Destiny's: "The White characters' dilemma, not the Black characters' gifts or spirituality, serve as the primary focus in these films."[93] It is a significant discursive practice to elide the black child character from public advertisement for the film, an institutional discourse of exclusion of black children from major Hollywood works that is not applied when white children star in Hollywood films. For instance, there is a long list of young white child stars who were prominently featured on the promotional material for their most famous films: Andy Rooney, Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, young Drew Barrymore, Ricky Shroder, Macaulay Culkin, and Corey Feldman, to name a few. Except for Jaden Smith, who I discuss in detail in the next chapters, black children rarely hold a prominent place in the advertising of a Hollywood film (including a lack of starring roles) (Fig. 3.11).

But the absence of the black child from film and popular discourses about childhood is not limited to cinema as the recent Hollywood remake of *Annie* (2014) demonstrates. It was a bold move for writer/director Will Gluck[94] to cast the traditionally white, iconic redheaded Annie as a young black girl, played by *Beasts'* Quvenzhené Wallis, and there has been a large public backlash to the casting of a black girl in such an iconic white-child role. The film has garnered considerable backlash for its non-traditional casting. Virginia Pelley of *The Daily Banter* historicizes and contextualizes the Annie character:

> Annie's race had nothing to do with her character, but it has been argued that her hair color did. Negative stereotypes from the 19th century still lingered in the early part of the 20th century that red hair was undesir-

Fig. 3.11 *Butter*, frame grab

able (likely because it was associated with the Irish, who begun flooding U.S. cities in the mid-1800s and were roundly unwelcomed and despised). Redheads were associated with fiery tempers and "wickedness." Therefore, Annie's red hair served to marginalize her in a way that made her more vulnerable as a character in 1924 but would be anachronistic today.[95]

Much of the criticism of casting a black Annie alludes to Annie as a significant childhood cultural marker. One commenter, Me-me, stated that she just did "not like seeing a black girl in a role I grew up with … I hate seeing black people take over and in my eyes ruin childhood memories I adore."[96] Me-me's cultural notion of a childhood that cannot include black children is one example of the discursive nature of the concept of childhood in American culture. The casting of a black girl in such a culturally significant representation of childhood would suggest in some ways a movement towards more equitable imaging of black children from Hollywood filmmakers. Not surprisingly, the racist outrage at casting Wallis as Annie was fully unleashed online through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram. Interestingly, this image (including the offensive rant) was posted on Twitter[97] (Fig. 3.12):

Fig. 3.12 Twitter, frame grab

This image is the modern equivalent to the Topsy-Eva comparison from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and as such, it denotes the historical persistence of beliefs about black children as inherently pickaninnies who are "parasites" that "infect" the "freckled-face" innocence, not just of the original Annie character, but of American childhood itself.

Despite the not so surprising amount of public backlash against the casting of Quvenzhené Wallis as Annie, the culturally discursive practice of denying black children the status of child is evident in ways beyond the film itself. In particular, the popular retailer Target has been (ironically) the target of heavy criticism for their clothing line based on the new *Annie* film: similar to the film posters for *Butter*, none of the clothing line's posters contain images of Quvenzhené Wallis as Annie. Instead, a white girl

Fig. 3.13 Annie collection poster, Target.com

with long flowing hair covers most of the in-store posters, particularly one featuring the iconic Annie-red jumper outfit. In some cases, these are the only posters in select stores (Fig. 3.13):

To be fair, in some of the other clothing line ads, there ARE girls from a variety of ethnicities, though all are very light skinned, but it was the white girl in the replica of Annie's classic outfit that caused a modest amount of public outrage. (I say modest because the outrage over the erasure of Wallis pales in comparison to the amount of racist commentary against her casting.)[98] In response to the online petition demanding the removal of the offensive Target Annie ads, the company stated (Fig. 3.14):

> With regard to the marketing of the collection, girls from a variety of backgrounds were featured within the campaign, reflecting that anyone can embody the spirit and character of Annie.
>
> As for the involvement of Quvenzhané Wallis, we had conversations with her team about being in the campaign, but ultimately it did not come to fruition. Fortunately, we had the pleasure of working with Ms. Wallis a number of times, including appearances at Target's sales meeting in September and a launch event in New York City in November. We had a great experience working with Ms. Wallis and appreciate her efforts in promoting this collection.[99]

But the negative attention on the store ad's "white-washing" of Annie resulted in the clothing line being pulled out from Target stores. The Target ads and the *Butter* promotion demonstrate the culturally discur-

Fig. 3.14 Annie clothing line, Target.com

sive practice of presenting American childhood as white and works in tandem with a variety of other methods of cultural production that function to reinforce messages of what and who should embody childhood and innocence. The erasure of *Butter's* Yara Shahidi and *Annie's* Quvenzhené Wallis from the film's promotional material exhibit the unconscious cultural myths about who should *represent* American childhood.

Conclusion

While having black characters in film is not a rare thing anymore, and in general African Americans are represented in much more diverse ways throughout visual media than at any time in America's history, there are still areas in cinema where black representation is severely lacking, particularly images of black children. As I have argued, there is a need for more diverse images of black children and childhood, images that diverge significantly from old notions of the pickaninny or savage. The discourse of childhood and cinematic imagery both would benefit from more inclusiveness of all types of children. All three of these films—*Precious, Beasts of the Southern Wild*, and *Butter*—are rare because they feature young black female protagonists. Yet they are not so rare in their depiction of those young black girls: the mammy, the pickaninny, the Jezebel, and the Magic Negro. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse explains, stereotypes function in a unique circular manner: "Social reality seems to endorse the stereotype. Social representation echoes social realities which are in turn modeled upon social representation."[100] More importantly, our cultural discourse about childhood, innocence, and who should or should not be considered a "child," continues to frame how cinema depicts both white and black girls, as well as boys, which we will see in Chap. 4. And so we are left with very old racial discourses that are re-visualized and re-contextualized for modern audiences whose cinematic experience of young black girls is all too often tied to those re-productions of the West's racial discourse.

Notes

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23. *Precious* had nominations for Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role (Gabourey Sidibe),

Best Achievement in Directing (Lee Daniels), and Best Achievement in Film Editing (Joe Klotz). The film won awards for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role (Mo'Nique) and Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay (Geoffrey Fletcher). *Beasts of the Southern Wild* had nominations for Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role, (Quvenzhané Wallis, who at nine years, was the youngest person ever nominated for Best Actress.) Best Achievement in Directing, and Best Writing, Adapted Screenplay.

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40. Richardson, "Push, Precious, and New Narratives of Slavery," 171.
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