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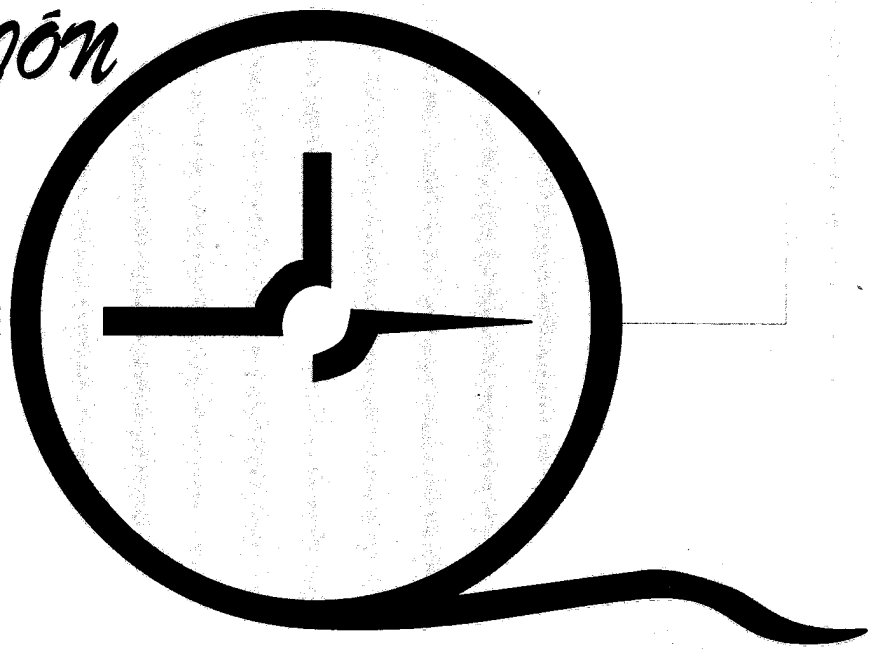

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'EMPTY BED BLUES': TERRY McMILLAN'S *WAITING TO EXHALE* (1992), NOVEL INTO FILM

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> I woke up this morning with an awful aching head
> My new man had left me just a room and an empty bed.
> When my bed gets empty, makes me feel awful mean and blue
> 'Cause my springs getting rusty, sleepin' single the way I do.
>
> "Empty Bed Blues" (1928)

Since its publication, and especially after landing on *The New York Times* best seller list, Terry McMillan's third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), has generated serious critical academic discussions, and hot arguments between female and male audiences—predominantly black; Forest Whitaker's film adaptation of the novel simply sky-rocketed the controversy which is, basically, the never-ending story of black women "airing the dirty laundry" (Reed 1993, 3) in public, and complaining about their black lovers' lack of understanding, tenderness, and a decent dick. Personally, and using McMillan's own words, I think *Waiting to Exhale* is much more than "another example of the male-bashing-to-make-a buck" book. And the writer adds: "For people who accuse me of male-bashing, I have a pat answer: `I didn't write a story about all men. And if the shoe fits, wear it.´" (Randolph 1993, 23). Is it just mere coincidence that the shoe seems to perfectly fit many of the lovers/ex-lovers, husbands/ex-husbands of black women readers *and* moviegoers? The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast Terry McMillan's novel and Forest Whitaker's film version, to concentrate on some of the male characters who marry, date, make love or simply fuck these women, to show to what extent McMillan's sexual discourse subverts, undermines or perpetuates derogatory stereotypes of black men in both the novel and the film adaptation.

Compared to the works of those more or less canonized female African-American writers such as Toni Morrison or Alice Walker, Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* has become *a social phenomenon* (De Witt, 1995); it sold almost a million copies before the paperback edition was released, it was on the best-seller list for weeks, and it has been translated into different languages, Spanish included. Trying to digest her overnight success, McMillan complains: "I feel more like a rock star than a writer" (Randolph 1993, 23-28). Who is Terry McMillan, the African-American writer who has to wear sunglasses even at night to protect her privacy? McMillan is a 41-year-old single mother who has a

college education, who has gone through several abortions, who is over her alcohol and drug addiction, and who has been physically and psychologically abused by men. And it was out of her personal biography, and her frustration at having had men in her life who "got her nowhere" (Randolph 23-28), that she decided to write *Waiting to Exhale*. *Waiting to Exhale* is the story of four women in their mid-thirties, who have a college education, who are professionally successful, financially independent, and sexually uninhibited, but who happen to sleep in an empty bed. How come, then, some critics wonder, that an apparently flat argument provoked "a call-and-response feeling" between McMillan and her readers? (Bobo 1991, 14). In McMillan's own words, her female readers can easily identify with her protagonists because these sour-sweet situations seem familiar to them, and, as the writer herself admits: "it is funny ... but at the same time it breaks their heart" (Randolph 1993, 23-24). McMillan's avid readers and unconditional fans could not agree more with the writer:

> I tell you why she is selling. Because she is just like one of us sitting right here talking about all the stuff that we usually talk about. That's why we could identify. Anybody who's been single could definitely identify, because you've met some Michaels and been in some relationships with some Russells. And then she writes it just like we would say it. (Bobo 1995, 16).

And what is *the stuff* that these women are talking about? According to critic Tracy Johnston:

> ... mostly there is talk about sex and men. Good sex. Bad sex. Good men. Bad men. Weird men. Con men. Bad guys who stick around and good guys who never call back... Ironically it is the good men in the book whose voices aren't believable. It's as if McMillan had to invent them, as if she hasn't actually heard them yet. (Johnston 1993, 15).

Using musical terms, we could define the structure of the novel as jazz-like oriented; McMillan's work is divided into 32 sections—the first four chapters introduce the readers to the four women protagonists, and the rest are repetitions, variations, interactions of these women's empty bed blues. As for the narrative voice, we could say it is polyphonic since we hear variations of voices; the first person narrative for Robin and Savannah, and the third person/omniscient narrator for Gloria and Bernardine. And why these black women's empty bed blues? These black women are in pain because they are afraid of solitude; in their quest for Mr. Right, they are sick and tired of kissing too many frogs; in their search for multiple orgasms they find pitiful lovers; and, most important, men always leave them with their broken hearts and, like in Aretha Franklin's soundtrack song, "It Hurts Like Hell."

Bernardine/Angela Basset. After eleven years of marriage, Bernardine wakes up on a Sunday morning to hear that her busband is leaving her for a white woman who happens to be his secretary. Bernardine regrets helping him to start his successful business, "putting her dream on hold and learning how to decorate" (McMillan 1992, 33), not cutting her hair for him, and avoiding the sun so as not to get too dark. But the thing she regrets most is their boring sexual life:

> So you stopped wearing the garters, the G-strings, the lace and those four-inch heels. You hid all those videos that had given him most of his ideas. You stopped pretending to enjoy all together and started giving him mummy pussy. You simply stopped moving. (McMillan 1992, 36).

Trying to forget the nightmare of a painful divorce, Bernardine starts to sleep around to find out in shock that

> [Herbert, her new lover] had made the mistake women were often guilty of: confusing orgasms with love. Herbert didn't have a clue that on those dry nights when Bernardine needed to get her parts oiled, she simply knew who to call. She used him. But so what? That's what they'd been doing to women for years, she thought. (McMillan 1992, 91).

Luckly Bernardine will meet James, sensitive and educated, and who is the most impeccable male character of all. He is even sexy.

Robin/Lela Rochon. It is no wonder that Robin's favourite movie is *Body Heat*. Although her friends call her a nymphomaniac, Robin defines herself as "a little generous in the loose-sex department" (McMillan 1992, 56). She is not too shy to announce that "one of [her] major weakness has always been pretty men with big dicks" (McMillan 1992, 38), and there she has three simultaneous lovers. Russell, unemployed, secretly married, and a liar—in Robin´s friends' words, Russell is "nothing but a whore with a dick" (McMillan 1992, 178). Troy, also unemployed and a drug dealer, is another three-day-fuck-affair for her. Finally, Michael, well off, professional and educated, but pitiful in bed; Michael has problems putting a condom on, doesn't know what the word foreplay means, comes in seconds, has a little dick and still thinks that his thing is a "lethal weapon" (McMillan 1992, 63). No wonder Robin calls him "Mr-No-Can-Fuck-Michael" (McMillan 1992, 233).

Savannah/Whitney Houston. Savannah had not had sex in five months and by the time she moved to Phoenix was on such a starvation diet that she decided to give some to Lionell, a sexy black man who turned out to be a liar, unemployed, and also disgusting in bed:

> He put his face between my legs and started licking and chewing like a wild animal... I was scared he was going to bite my clitoris off—if and

> when he found it ... I wanted to get this shit over ... I pulled him up on top of me, and in an exasperated voice, yelled, "Please, put it in!" ... He went to work, and during this whole ordeal, not once did he kiss me... All of a sudden his face became monstrous and contorted, and the next thing I know, he started growling like a bear. Really, fucking growling. "Grrrrrrrrr!" he said. (McMillan 1992, 127).

Contrary to Lionell, Kenneth is one of the few tender and passionate lovers, financially independent, with a college education, and a great body, but who happens to be very much married with kids:

> I am in deep trouble. All it takes sometimes is a touch ... I wish he wasn't so tender, I wish he didn't make me feel like the Little Mermaid or like I weighed fifteen pounds, and Lord knows I wish he could open up a nationwide school: How to Eat Pussy, so the rest of these men out there can take a crash course. (McMillan 1992, 277).

Gloria/Loretta Devine. Finally, Gloria, a single parent for 17 years who "had locked herself inside an emotional prison" (McMillan 1992, 407), and had lived for her only son, only to realize that the most important man in her life is leaving her after graduation day. In shock, she also finds out that her son's father is homosexual. Fortunately for Gloria, Marvin moves to the vacant house across the street, offers to fix *anything* in the house, and ends up *fixing* Gloria's sentimental life too. In view of these four women's biographies, it is probably Savannah's statement which best summarizes these women's—and the author's—preoccupation with being alone:

> I want to know why I'm thirty-six years old and still single ... There is nothing wrong with me. Shit, I'm smart, I'm attractive. I'm educated, and my pussy is good, if I do say so myself. What happened to all the aggressive men? Where the fuck are they hiding? (McMillan 1992, 351).

And, then, as a kind of Greek choral response, one by one, these women start a lengthy litany which, to the reader´s surprise, very much highlights current derogatory stereotypes on black men:

> They're just scared to make a damn commitment, they're with white women. Or gay. Or married. They're ugly. Stupid. In prison. Unemployed. Crackheads. Short. Liars. Unreliable. Irresponsible. Too possessive. Dogs. Shallow. Boring. Stuck in the sixties. Arrogant. Childish. Wimps. Can't fuck. (McMillan 1992, 352).

Ironically, and despite the never-ending list of name calling, it is a black man, and not a woman, who has been chosen to direct Terry McMillan's film

version. Forest Whitaker can't see why people make a big thing out of it: "I directed a film about a drug dealer, but I wasn't one." (Ansen 1995, 3). Furthermore, for director Forest Whitaker, directing this film has even been instructive: "I have new insights into women. I can't pinpoint what they are, but I'd recognize them in real life." (Luscombe 1995, 69). The actresses were also happy with Whitaker: "They know I am an actor, so they trusted me." (*El País* 1996, 39). Terry McMillan herself co-wrote the script with Ronald Bass, and she trusted Forest Whitaker too. As with the book, the movie has become an instant financial success—the first week-end the film made $14 million at the box office—, and it has generated nationwide debate. The *Newsweek* critic puts it this way: "A few months ago, black men had their *march*; with *Waiting to Exhale*, black women have their *movie*" (Samuels 1996, 50). Another appealing thing might be the fact that the sound track has also been on the Top of the Pops—Whitney Houston not only plays a role in the film, but she also performs three songs—, the singers are all black female and, as critic Christopher J. Farley thinks, the "*Waiting to Exhale* sound track is a virtual Who's Who of divadom" (Farley 1995, 11).

As George Bluestone discusses in *Novels into Films*, the cinematic equivalent of the literary interior monologue does not usually work effectively (Bluestone 1957, 47-48). Thus, adapting McMillan's jazzy narrative voice into cinematic language proved to be complicated because of the sequential, repetitive, and intereactive story line—together with the polyphonic quality of the novel. Whitaker solved the problem by introducing a voice off screen (very much criticized by Spanish film critics: see *ABC,* 23-I- (1996:89), and by framing a quartet out of the loose jazz written discourse. Thus, the musicality of McMillan's literary text somehow remains. Contrary to the novel's linear narrative, the film's is circular: it starts on New Year's Eve when a travelling camera follows these four women's separate lives, getting ready for the night. Despite sons, lovers, and husbands, Gloria, Robin, Bernardine and Savannah are alone. Unlike the claustrophobic open setting—all these women are in rooms—the ending of the film takes place in the open air where a slow motion camera follows these women's celebration around a fire. The camera lens goes from sharp to soft, blurred focus, gets close ups of these four women, and ends up with a frozen image.

Although we agree with Robert Giddings that "a successful adaptation of a novel should not be the book, but a work of art in its own right" (Giddings 1990, 10), there is a significant information from the novel missing in the film version to reduce women not only to being worried about being lonely, but also to being neurotically obsessed with finding Mr. Right. Just to give an example of what the camera lens blurs, not much attention is paid to their professional lives: Bernardine has a job, and Savannah has been promoted. As for these women's education all four have been to college, Gloria has even got a degree in Drama. Also, in the novel these women are not as superficial as they might seem in the

film version and, apart from shopping until they drop dead, all four are engaged in a black organization, and all four care about parents who are/were sick or on welfare. As for black culture, McMillan's novel is saturated with external symbols. To start with, hers is a story about black men and black women. The protagonists read black magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence*. They watch popular T.V. shows like *Ophra's*. They collect beautiful works of art made by their black brothers and sisters. They listen to music that couldn't possibly be blacker, from rock to rap: Paula Abdul, Aretha Franklin, Bobby Brown, Janet Jackson, Freddie Jackson, The Temptations, Smokey Robinson, C.C. Hammer, and the list goes on and on.

As for the way black men are portrayed in Whitaker's version, I will argue that they do not get a fair treatment. In her article "Black Women in Fiction and Nonfiction," Jacqueline Bobo highlights that because they have mostly been portrayed as sexually promiscuous, black women should "reconstruct the ways they are represented." (Bobo 1991, 72). There is no doubt that Terry McMillan—novelist and screenwriter—does empower black women's sexuality. My complaint is that, far from the variety of complex male fictional characters, in the film adaptation the male protagonists are, as a whole, static characters who are reduced to mere caricatures; they show a lack of psychological depth, and their clumsy sexual behaviour is somehow exaggerated. Most surprisingly, and contrary to the generalized idea that black men are sexual animals with a huge, gorgeous, and uncontrollable dick attached to them, the film version—more than the novel—emphasizes these men´s pathetic attitude in bed, and questions the mythical 12- inch black dick.

Significantly enough, and just to give an example, in the film adaptation there are two instances in which black male sexuality is totally deconstructed. I am refering to Robin and Michael's, and Savannah and Lionel's love making. These two climactic love scenes have in common that the two black men are on top, could not care less about their women's needs and timing, come in seconds, do not satisfy their women at all, and still think they are irresistible in bed. Furthermore, in the process of reaching their climaxes, both male lovers utter some kind of animal-like groan. It is interesting to point out here, that the framing of these love making scenes further highlights the caricature effect: the camera starts with a medium shot of the respective couples to focus later on a close-up or extreme close-up of the black man's face, thus exaggerating the ugly gesticulation and perspiration of these men. Male psychological inferiority is also shown by way of using a low-angle-shot in the scene where Robin rejects her drug addicted lover Troy. She is shot from below to magnify her growth, emphasize her power, and diminish his.

Film adaptation starts with "men are dead in Denver," and, as far as the movie shows, for Gloria, Savannah, Robin and Bernardine, they are not much more alive in Phoenix, Arizona either. The underlying theme of Terry McMi-

llan's *Waiting to Exhale*—both novel and film adaptation—is the frustrating complexity of human relationships—love, sex, friendship, marriage and divorce—together with the terrifying sensation of living in solitude. Gloria, Savannah, Bernardine and Robin are smart, sensitive, beautiful, and sensual women who, in spite of wearing the sexiest and most provocative *Victoria's Secret* underwear for their many frustrating casual sexual encounters, have not found Mr. Right yet. These women's empty bed blues has a lot to do with the pathetic lovers they meet. Especially in the film version, McMillan's sexual discourse both "promotes reimaging the black female cinematic icon" (Gibson-Hudson 1991, 53) and challenges all kinds of current derogatory stereotypes of black men. The film version of McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale* presents not only images of black males with drugs and alcohol addictions, but also blademen who are unemployed and criminals. Most surprisingly, even shockingly for some, and in contrast to long lasting assumptions of black male animal-like sexuality , McMillan's black male characters simply do not function in bed. In Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*, the writer gives her female fictional characters "permission to scream" (McMillan 1995, 52) because these black women are in pain and their empty bed blues obsession will only end when they find a smart, tender, and sensual lover. Only then, will they exhale.

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