



STAR COUPLE

Mod Squad's

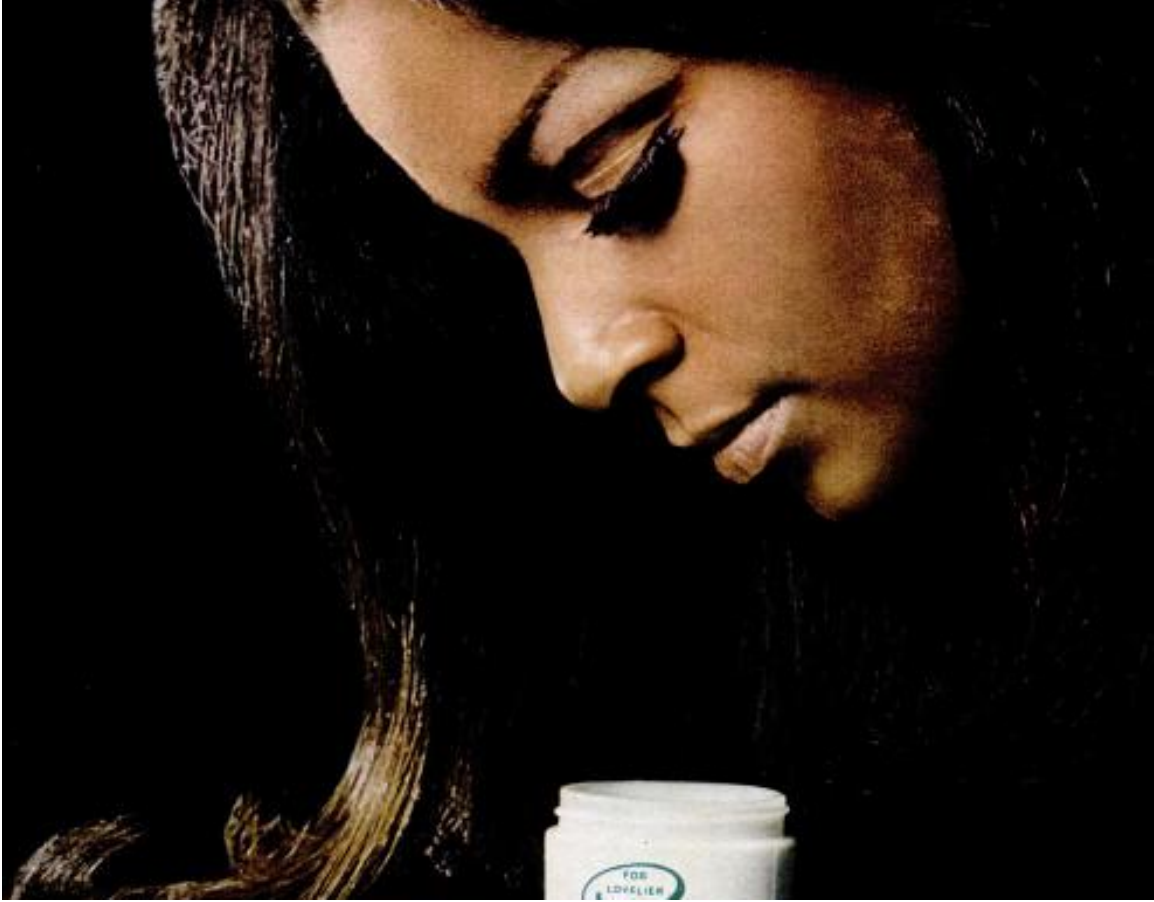
Cl... with...




 there's a
 no-fuss hair
 groomer for men
 in a hurry. Men
 who care about good grooming,
 but don't want to make a big
 thing over it. With Duke Natural,
 all you do is spray. First with
 Easy Comb to help glide that comb
 through your hair. Then, New,
 Improved Spray Sheen to bring
 your Natural to life, as never
 before. \$1.50 each. Or mail \$3.25
 for the set to Supreme Beauty
 Products, 1808 S. Michigan
 Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60616
 And for you girls who wear it like it is,
 remember Raven As Natural, for
 instant grooming. (No xerox keeping
 a Natural man waiting.)

The Beautiful.





Joe Bobman

Michelle Wallace's "Black Superwoman" in Advertisements

These four images were all published in Ebony magazine in March of 1970. The first image is a clip from the front cover of that issue and features Clarence Williams III and Gloria Foster. The other images are all advertisements.

The cover image presents a particular positional relationship between Clarence Williams III and Gloria Foster. Williams, with his arm around Foster and his intense gaze on the camera, occupies a very different position than Foster, whose gaze is directed at Williams. The caption text reinforces this ordered relationship, naming Williams by his acting role and Foster simply with the word "wife." Michelle Wallace and Eldridge Cleaver's texts offer some ways of reading this image in the particular way it frames this relationship. Williams' serious face, stern gaze, and afro signal the Black power macho archetype of which Wallace speaks, and the affectionate gaze that Foster (also exhibiting her afro) is giving Williams connects to Wallace's description of her conception of women's roles at the side of a masculine Black revolution. This image presents a portrayal of this particular human relationship in a way of which Wallace is highly critical, and I would agree

with her. The front cover presents Williams as an actor and Foster as a wife, despite her own extremely successful professional career.

I hadn't intended on including the front cover in this journal entry, but I think that it frames the second and third images in a useful way. These two images are clips of hair-product ads from that same issue of *Ebony*. They are all for the same company, called Supreme Beauty Products. The masculine product is called Duke, the feminine product is called Raveen.

The gender narrative presented by these series of advertisements resonates very strongly with the narrative that Michelle Wallace in "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman." Black women have two places in these images: they are either positioned alongside strong black men or alone. The black woman as a supporter of the black macho figure appears in the advertisement for "Duke Natural," again alongside the man, marginal to him in the narrative of the ad, and with her focus on him. The text of the ad reads "No sense keeping a Natural man waiting," signaling the "Natural" man's importance and the woman's subordinate role.

In contrast, the two women presented in the ad for the feminine products are starkly alone, whether they wear their hair in an Afro or straightened. There is no supportive man at their shoulder, no partner with an affectionate adoring gaze. Michelle Wallace wrote that she grew up with strong, independent women all around her, and recoiled from their hyper-exaggerated strength and perhaps their exaggerated independence as well. Confronting those images, she writes that she found the masculine Black power figure appealing, she wanted to be a "woman of the powerful [man]" (133). In a sense, these images capture the two gender narratives that she perceived growing up as a young black woman in the United States, and, given these two highly racialized and gendered roles, she chose the image of the powerful black male with a woman at his side.

I think that these images are not only examples of the gender and race narratives that Michelle Wallace speaks about in her book, but historical artifacts of the construction of those narratives. That is, for girls and young women like Michelle Wallace, these images served as highly visual representations of very specific forms of relationships based on gender, class and race. I struggled with Wallace's work somewhat because I lost at times the distinction between individual people and the construction of gender and racial norms that are not only restricting but codes for power relations. That is, I struggled with a text that at times seemed highly critical of women that Wallace knew and found too independent, too strong. I would argue against perceiving independent or strong women as part of a racist and sexist system, because I feel that to do so suggests that their strength marks complicity in the perpetration of systematic oppression against them. Or, while I posit the images above as resonating with the archetypes Wallace describes, I don't feel that that, for example, feel that the "The Beautiful" woman portrays a poor role models to readers of the magazine. I don't believe that Wallace was arguing that, although, again, it was something I struggled with while reading it. Reading the introduction that she wrote years later clarified much of this for me; I think that she focused her attention on the systematic reinforcement of sexism and racism in gender narratives and less critical of individual people who may or may not find

personal fulfillment and personal empowerment in being individual, in being
“natural,” in being “strong.”