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Gabourey's Beautiful Gift

By Katti Gray

The overnight sensation enters from stage left, hand-in-hand with the movie-maker who kick-started her stardom. Far from the misery of her image on the Big Screen, Gabourey Sidibe's face is glossed and powdered and pretty as it wants to be. As fly girls of a certain generation say, it is "beat," aglow in Hollywood success and Sidibe's self-satisfaction.

The star of *Precious*, with movie director Lee Daniels, discusses with artistic thinkers at The New York Times cultural center the real-life situations in their fictional tale of a brutalized, but battling-back black girl. And—bam!—the afternoon's cultural critic brings up the expected. "The majority of women you see (on screen) are light-skinned," et cetera, says the critic, who is moderating this conversation between artists and their inquiring devotees.

Sidibe jumps right in, not wincing or wining, just laying down the facts of her experience: "I got called 'skillet,' 'midnight.'" Once upon a time, those epithets used to hurt, she adds. "My father is 100 percent Senegalese, I'm not supposed to have light skin. I'm African ... I'm pretty. My confidence (cannot) come from an outside source. I have to believe that I'm beautiful I have to believe that I'm valuable," she explains.

A college psychology major before she got into the movies, she speaks in a voice more like a Manhattan prep school grad's than the straight-out-the-projects character she commands in *Precious*. She laughs easily and often, muses, observes, endears herself to those who are listening, watching and wondering how a plus-sized, full-faced sister—African to the bone—made it this far in a sphere that still tends to resist whatever is not nipped, tucked, light, bright and, well, you know. Big Mamas and Africans have only gotten so far in Hollywood but also, sorry to say, in the minds of way too many black folks.

Knuckleheads and haters posted vicious things about Sidibe's looks on YouTube and other places. Still, she forges on, already sealing deals on new movie projects.

Yes, Sidibe is her own kind of beautiful. She conveys that message regularly to her little sisters, 13-year-old twins. "They are just at that age when they're about to hate themselves," Sidibe says. They are bigger in size than their peers, she adds.

Detonating the demon of self-hatred demands a speak-to-that-mountain resolve. This is among the gifts an exemplary Sidibe gives. More than many of us, she knows that beauty can be unbound. It is its very own force of nature. Sometimes, like a thousand midnights, it is magnanimously dark and deep-down lovely.