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COMMITTING SOCIOLOGY

Beauty

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Abstract

Beauty is not race neutral. It is a racialized category/perception which emerged through centuries of European colonization, Indigenous genocide, African/Black enslavement and indenture resulting in an aesthetic hierarchy with Blackness at the bottom. The coloniality of aesthetics means that still today hair perceived as Black in texture and styling and darker skin on African descent bodies are the repositories of anti-Blackness. However, Black women, children and men continue to fight back by (re)creating Black antiracist aesthetics focused on valorizing Black skin and hair.

We often say, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder." However, in Western Hemispheric societies continuing coloniality means that ideal beauty is white or light-skinned, applies differently to Black women and men, and we can take up or resist that ideal. Beauty is racialized, so are beauty judgements (Banks, 2000; Craig, 2006; Hobson, 2005; Nuttall, 2006; Tate, 2016; Taylor, 2000, 2016). Beauty is not race-neutral. It is part of the black/white, inferior/superior opposition of colonialism and enslavement (Tate, 2009/2016). The coloniality of beauty's anti-Blackness remains in the white/light skin ideal, colorism, "the straight hair rule," and discrimination against natural Black hairstyles like dreadlocks, twists, chiney bumps/bantu knots, and afros in workplaces and schools. The discussion which follows fleshes this out.

Blackness emerged through colonialism, enslavement, and their aftermath. Europeans constructed Black women as different from white women- psychologically, culturally, morally, and physically (Morgan, 1997). European travel writers described African women as promiscuous, able to cope with the pain of childbirth, savages, naked, shameless, and able to feed their children "over their shoulders" because of their distended breasts (Morgan, 1997). They were constructed as hypersexual (Guy-Sheftall, 2009; Hobson, 2005; Sharpley-Whiting, 1999, 2007), pathological (Gilman, 1992), ugly (Nuttall, 2006; Taylor, 2000, 2016; Tate, 2009/2016), and masculine (Beckles, 1999).

Skin is the most visible signifier of racial difference (Mercer, 1994). Skin lightening by white European women was practiced for centuries, for example, by ancient Greeks and England's Elizabeth I who used ceruse or white lead. European women in Anglophone Caribbean colonies bleached their skins, with cashew nut oil for example, and practiced bonneting to make their white racial superiority visible on their bodies because enslaved mixed-race women's skin could also look "white" (Coleman, 2003). Skin lightening is now a *transnational, transracial*, multi-billion dollar industry though the group most reviled for this practice is Black women (Tate, 2016). The European idea of dark African descent skin as ugly persists as we see in the general societal preference for lighter skin. For example, brown skin in the United States and United Kingdom (Landor & Smith, 2019; Jones, 2000; Weekes, 1997; Wilder, 2010), or "browning" in Jamaica (Barnes, 1997; Brown-Glaude, 2007; Rowe, 2009), and skin-lightening in the African continent (Glenn, 2008) and the diaspora (Charles, 2009). This "preference" relates to societal racial structuration *not* Black pathology (Tate, 2016). For example, in Jamaica and other former British colonies lighter skin equates with wealth and middle-class/elite status (Brown-Glaude, 2007; Glenn, 2008). Therefore, Black skin lighteners do not want to be white, they want to gain the benefits of light skin in contemporary times (Tate, 2016).

Hair is not a natural, biological "fact." Hair is racialized. Grooming hair makes personal and societal "statements" and cultural practices invest it with "meanings" and "value" (Banks, 2000; Mercer, 1994, p.34; Tate, 2017). However, "the straight hair rule" (Banks, 2000; Tate, 2017) of colonialism and enslavement leads to racial discrimination, even against school children. In the United States in 2013 12-year-old Vanessa Van Dyke was bullied by other students and threatened with expulsion from her school in Florida for her natural hair. In the United Kingdom in 2016 a boy who was banned from school had to take his case to the High Court for the right to wear braids. In South Africa in 2016, Pretoria High School which during apartheid was whites only, allegedly told Black girls to straighten their hair and not have afros. To address this issue, in July 2019, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo signed the *Crown Act NY S6209*, joining California and others in banning discrimination against Black natural hairstyles in workplaces and schools. Schools and employers cannot enforce so-called "race-neutral hairstyling" under appearance policies restricting natural Black hair textures and hairstyles like braids, locks, twists, and afros.

Black communities have always resisted the anti-Blackness of dominant beauty norms through Black anti-racist aesthetics (Tate, 2007, 2016; Taylor, 2000). In the 20th century, for example, in Jamaica's Rastafarianism and its valorization of dark African descent skin and natural hair and Black Power's "Black is Beautiful." In the 21st century, we see this in the burgeoning of Black natural hairstyles, anti-blackfishing/racial cosplay discourses, and the variety of existing Black beauty models. Sociology needs to decolonize beauty/appearance studies.

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