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Fashion, Culture, and The Body
Paper Two
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The Fear of Natural Hair

Throughout this essay, I am working to theorize the fact that many of the current hair straightening regulations that are forced upon black women by higher institutions stem from a general fear of the black body as dangerous, consequentially creating a desire to retain the idea of the white body as a more "superior" power in everyday society. This fear and subsequent regulation has been normalized throughout history due to the manipulation of various scientific theories, wrongly assigned generalizations of the black body that ignite fear, and cultural markers such as dolls and media representations that underpin what is essentially viewed as "good" vs. "bad" hair culture. A euro-centric "straight-hair look" has generally been used as a marking point into order to lead women towards maintaining their hair in ways that adhere to this "ideal" look. The difficulty thus found with black women is that the natural shape and form of black hair generally grows "outwards and upwards" instead falling down into the "neat" and laid position of the "ideal" European women. Due to the differences in length, texture, and shape of black hair it was often used as justification to stabilize the notion of "inferiority" among black individuals. In the 1900s, these marks of difference were then used to justify the establishment of slavery by marking the black body as an inferior species. Though academics later discredited the idea of black hair as coming from a completely different species than white individuals, the consequences of using hair as racial marker has created unequal and damaging preconceptions of the black women in the workplace, educational system, and in everyday society, based on the hair regulations they chose to adhere to. We can gage the weight of these regulatory acts of inequality by referring to the video clip in Figures 1. It is coverage of protest at Pretoria Girl's High in South Africa. The young women attending the school are protesting against the

punishments and chastisement they have received during school, concerning the maintenance of their natural hair by their teachers. The school has determined that wearing black hair in its natural form, in styles such as afros and dreadlocks, is said to cause disruption to school as well as not "fit" the look of the school uniforms. The school is thus encouraging black female students to tame their hair through the use of straightening tools, hair ties, or using relaxers which can potentially damage their hair, in order to mold into the generally white-eurocentric stereotype that the school upholds. The video begins with the statement of a graduate of the high school saying, "It wasn't written in the code of conduct but they tell you that your hair is very untidy and it's not appropriate for the school uniform. You must flatten it somehow and you need to make yourself, look presentable. It's understandable if your hair is really in your face and everything, but if your hair is neatly tied and your Afro is neatly tied why must you be apologetic… Why do black girls always receive the short end of the stick?" Discussion of this questioning on why hair needs to be straightened, as well as why black women are constantly being targeted for simply being natural is the essential focus of this paper and critical to the understanding why natural black hair has been feared as a "bad" or dangerous fashioning of the body, while the idea of straight white hair been as deemed as the complete opposite, an "good" and "ideal" fashioning of the body.

This misconception of "good" vs. "bad" hair that is currently disrupting this school environment can be analyzed through early colonial racial studies. For example, in the work of Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, in "Hair: Styling, Culture, and Fashion" they analyzed the effect of the early depiction of "The Great Chain of Being" on the perception of the black body. After the realization that man was a descendent of the ape, there was a desire among academics to find the "missing link" that separated humans and their very similar animal

counterparts. Since the white body was depicted as closest to God, and the black body as closest to the ape, the black body was thus claimed to be “inferior” and “animalistic.” Biddle-Perry and Cheang theorized that this early depiction enforced the justification of black oppression and the necessity for continued enslavement practices. Also, because the primary determinants of “race” at the time of this depiction were based on physical characterics, scientists were led to study hair because of its lack of deterioration and ability to be studied from a distance. These black hair findings were closely compared to having a similar textures of wool, leading to the conclusion that black individuals were descendants of a completely separate species than the human race. Biddle theorizes that these race theories were manipulated in order for white authorities, such as academics, to avoid losing the political and economic power they held at the time, due to their classification of the “black race” as inferior. Further fueling the necessity for white authorities to prolong “black as inferior” race theories were academic anxieties surrounding the physical health and power of the black body, as well as bodies with darker shades of hair than “fair and straight haired” ideal of the “proper” woman. Biddle-Perry and Cheang theorize that the British anxieties concerning the conservation of fair hair and the physical abilities of dark and red headed children to be less susceptible to disease, “contained implicit concerns over british racial degeneration.” Thus the black body, as well as bodies with naturally darker hair, posed a threat of potentially disrupting the white normative. Though on a much smaller scale, the regulation to suppress the natural state of the black female’s hair at Pretoria Girls High is an act that can been perceived as stemming from an authoritative dodging of the anxieties that accompany black hair when it is seen as a potential force that can visually disruptive a white normative setting.

When further analyzing the power of regulatory practices, Biddle-Perry and Cheang quote Mary Douglas’s statement reading “Societies symbolize the body and its functions through

rituals as a way of articulating fears and anxieties around pollution and purity.” In terms of analyzing the regulations of the school's hair policy, it is clear that the hair regulations are determined through directly comparing black and white hair texture. There is a separation between the “pure” style of straight hair and the “polluted” style of the young female with dreads who was told that she was “dirty” because of the way she chose to style her hair. This separation or what is perceived as “pure” vs. “polluted” drives the enforcement of black hair regulation. The defining of what is perceived at “pure” aligns with Anderson’s definition of fashion as a form of idealism. The flattening of these black females hair required by the institution they are attending, exemplifies that there is an underlying idealistic notion that drive this hair regulation. Biddle-Perry and Cheang go on to say that, “The cutting of hair often occurs as a part of the imposition of authority, in schools, barracks, prisons and workhouses. Native American girls’ hair was worn long.. But their hair was put up or cut off in Federal schools in order to eliminate native cultures and overwrite them with white american culture(Cheang 38)” Similar to the act of culturally silencing Native Americans by cutting off their hair, the act of straightening black natural hair in order to align with the “white-eurocentric” beauty standards is an act of silencing and overwriting the culture and pride that accompanies the active wear of natural black hair. This regulation renders the black female body as a seemingly useless symbol of chastisement unless it is willing to reinforce the “power” held by the white “superiority” by conforming to the eurocentric beauty ideal.

Not only was black hair seen as a culturally polluted fashion, it was also represented as a highly political hairstyle that proved to be disruptive to theories of “white power.” In “Unhappy to be Nappy”, Ingrid Banks discusses the “Afro” hair style of Angela Davis as a political statement. In order to describe the effect of Davis’s image on several FBI wanted posters while

wearing an Afro, Banks quotes Davis's statement saying, "While the most obvious evidence of their evidence of their people's power was the part they played in structuring people's opinion about me as a "fugitive" and a political prisoner, their broader and more subtle effect was the way they served as generic images of a Black women who wore her natural hair." The wanted poster served to align the natural Afro style with dangerous political agendas allowing perceptions of the black body to be wrongly generalized. The politicizing of Davis's natural state can give insight to why the female student of Pretoria Girls High have been so heavily chastised. When analyzed with Anderson's definition of fashion as representative of the self vs. society, the Afro can be seen as a fashion that sets the girls apart from their peers thus creating a political statement due to fears of the natural black body and the "agendas" that accompany "so-called untamed" hair. The idea of natural black hair as adjacent to political uprise, fuels fears of it's power against the white majority thus leading to extensive representations of the "white ideal" in everyday society in order to counteract this "disruptive" black force.

The common method of counteracting the power of the "black natural state" is the showcasing of the ideal white-eurocentric women through subtle but ingrained cultural cues. There is a common idea of beauty as stemming from the blonde-haired and blue-eyed representations of the white woman. Through mass media and television this idea has been disseminated but more subtly it has also been injected into mainstream cultural ideas through the small cultural cues of american industry. In "Mythologies" Roland Barthes analyzes the effect of French toys on a children's general understanding of the world around them. He says that, "French toys literally prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of Nature which has created soldiers, postmen and Vespas"(Barthes 53). He then goes on to say

that, “Toys here reveal the list of all of the things that the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians etc”(Barthes 53). When analyzing this it becomes apparent that from young ages, children are constantly conditioned to follow pre-determined social patterns. This concept of conditioning is prevalent in the discussion that surrounds the impact and validity of the Barbie dolls. When describing the practices of dressing and fixing the Barbie’s hair in chapter nine of “The Clothed Body,” Patrizia Calefato says that “All of these ritualistic games concern the establishment of taste and aesthetic scene”(Calefato 81). It can be theorized that the smooth and silky hair of the doll can contribute to setting the precedence for which the beauty of a woman is determined. These concepts are then presented to women at young ages in order to control the perception of what is deemed ideally beautiful, with those belonging to Black, Jewish and even Irish ethnicities falling far from the presented ideal. In reference to the power of fashion ideals on what is perceived as natural, Entwistle’s theory that, “Fashion turns culture into nature, it *naturalizes* the cultural order” (Entwistle 144) can be analyzed to understand the affect and general power that cultural cues, such as dolls, have on determining what is perceived as ideal and “natural” later in life. This process of the naturalization of cultural norms can be witnessed through women’s acceptance of social normativity in order to shed away from their fears of objection by their peers. This fear of objection is commonly reduced by active acts of hair management in order to silence the “disruptive” nature of natural hair.

Though black and other non-eurocentric ethnicities suffer from the social plague of not fitting into a blond and blue eyed “naturalized” order, there is also underlying idea that the “blonde stereotype” is not easily attainable, even by the common blonde. In “Blonde Loveliness Needs Great Care” the The Washington Post highlights the need for proper bleaching and other forms of preparation on already blonde hair to reach the ideal shade of “fair hair.” In “The

Feminine Ideal" Thesander says, "The natural body, through various artificial means, is re-formed into a cultural image of femininity" (Thesander 9). The idea that methods of artificial means are needed to achieve the "natural look" are encouraged through the main character's "urgent" discussion about the need to constantly upkeep up her "blonde look." Not only is the straight and fair haired character idealized, her urgency also reaffirms the need to conform to the ideal visual appearance of an "ideal" white woman at the time. Published in 1935, this article ran during a long period of racism, furthering adding fuel to what was perceived as "good" vs. "bad" hair in the American society of the time. Further analysis "good" vs. "bad" hair can be analyzed through the discussion the "moral symbolism" associated with fair hair in "Coloured White, Not White" by Richard Dyer. He analyzes Maria Warner's discussion of Cinderella. She specifically notes the contrast between the "good" and "golden-haired Cinderella," and the darker hair of her "evil" sisters and stepmother. These moral contrasts are commonly associated with hair in order to enforce common societal stereotypes and push the idea of the white-eurocentric hair look as morally "good" thus socially degrading women would do not fall into this category.

When analyzing the effect of panopticism in relation to the pressures that historically align with the "Afro," the power of the "white gaze" is relevant to why the straight and fair-haired ideal of the "proper" woman is still prevalent today. In Michel Foucault's "Discipline and Punish" he says, "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 3). The natural body from which the "Afro" grows lies within this same constant ring of surveillance. The individual is being watched not just aesthetically, but also politically, and the only way in which the female black body can assimilate, and divert eyes of social disapproval is through the black woman's converge to the stereotype of the ideal white woman. While

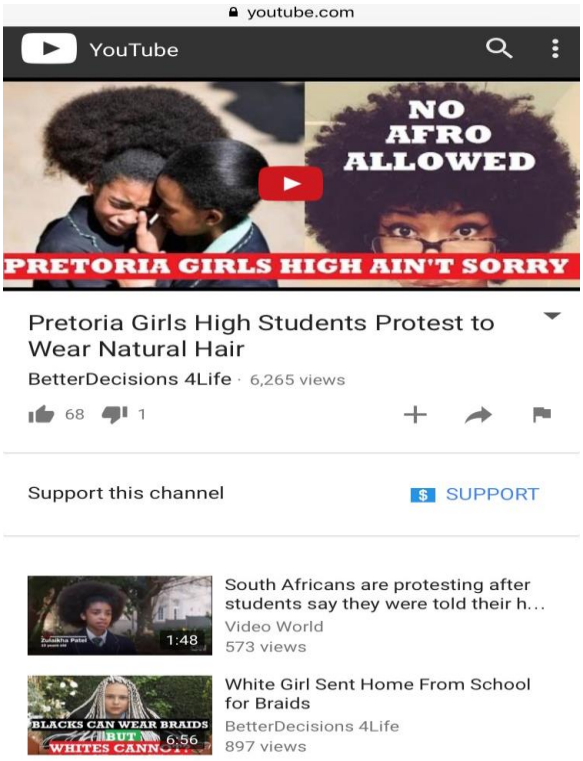
analyzing the power of the panopticon, Jane Tynan writes, “Once the prison becomes a metaphor for how people are organized throughout modern society, we can see how Foucault saw social life as embodied subjectivity. The anxiety we feel about our bodies – particularly concerns about appearance – result from this scopic regime of modernity” (Tynan 6). Although black hair styles, such as the Afro, are natural and not adorned fashions, their presence in society is constantly being watched. The process of constantly observing black natural hair, stems from the anxieties of the oppressor, the white “superiority,” while also working to create anxieties among the oppressed, the black female. Richard Dyer theorized that the power of the white majority lies in the fact that white is actually representative of an “absence.” White bodies therefore, did not disturb the social order, but set a precedent that others can then disturb. In order for the black women to become part of this invisible “white force” she has to render herself invisible as well through deliberate processes such as straightening one’s Afro. In Richard Dyer’s, “Colored White, Not White” he says, “The idea of whiteness as neutrality already suggests its usefulness for designating a social group that is to be taken for the human ordinary.”(White 47) This general acceptance towards white as the ordinary allows for the white body to remain “superior” because the conformance of all other bodies to its characteristics set it as the norm.

The regulation of the black female body is thus dependent on the characteristics of the white body and as generalizations concerning black bodies continue to circulate the regulation of black hair is becoming consistently more oppressive, as seen in Figure 1. The fear of characteristics of the black body have formed through several historical misconceptions of “black” as a whole, and in order to maintain superiority over all other ethnicities that don’t fit the euro-centric white ideal, cultural cues and authoritative racist regulations have been instilled into the “norms” of society, as well as specific formal institutions such as Pretoria Girls High.

Figures

Figure 1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nOFUvqJnT_s



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