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Beauty is Pain: Black Women's Identity and Their Struggle with Embracing Their Natural Hair

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Introduction

In the United States Black hair is viewed negatively because of its difference. Black females often deal with societal pressures to alter their kinky, curly hair from its natural state. To date, the social pressure of adopting a more Eurocentric (reflective of European descent—such as long, straight hair) look begins at an early age through socialization. The Eurocentric beauty standard plays a huge role in Black women's positive self-identity and their perceptions of their own beauty. At an early age, specifically between ages three and four, African American children have a good understanding of what "good" hair means and the social hierarchy it can create for themselves (Bellinger 2007). Black females are constantly told that they have "nappy" or "bad hair" and begin to internalize self-hatred. Theorists suggest, that this self-hatred journey begins at home, as a result of constantly being teased about their tight curly coils from many sources and close ties. As a result Black women receive messages that "nappy" hair is undesirable (Robinson 2011). In addition, Black females often have their hair straightened, relaxed, or chemically altered because of the societal pressures that remind them that their hair in its natural state is not acceptable or presentable in society (White 2005). One can argue that this is the case for the majority of Black females with "wild" curly hair, who have a weekly ritual, spend hundreds of dollars, and spend numerous hours trying to attain the White western ideal image. This is problematic in the Black community because Black women are constantly oppressed and devalued based on their physical appearance, essentially being brainwashed into erasing their

cultural identity. This is detrimental to the Black community due to the fact that Blacks are encouraged further distance themselves from their cultural roots, while forcing Blacks to abandon their African hair traditions (Randle 2015). In this paper, "good hair" is defined as hair that minimizes African ancestry and is more reflective of a European, Native, or Asian ancestry within the Black individual, it is usually wavy or straight in texture, and long. "Bad hair" is the extreme opposite of good hair—tightly coiled, thicker, and more likely to be short, clearly reflecting African ancestry (Robinson 2011). Further, Black females endure a host of negative effects due to the lack of available options to learn and care about natural afro hair which has created an enduring interlocking system of oppression for African American women that inhibits Black females from being free to express themselves and their beauty in a way that does not revolve around the Eurocentric standards. (White 2005). Racialized beauty standards combined with the color complex make hair texture and length an essential part of Black female identity (Randle 2015). Using an Afrocentric Black feminist perspective, I seek to understand how the Eurocentric standard of beauty negatively affects Black women's positive self-identity and enhances their struggle to embrace their natural hair. This paper will explore the history of Black hair, Black hair politics, Black hair in the workplace, and discuss how Black females who choose to wear their hair natural is a form of empowerment while simultaneously challenging social norms.

History of Black Hair

From one generation to the next, Black hair in its natural state has always been viewed negatively for its difference (Randle 2000). In the majority of Black households and

communities across the United States, a color caste system exists with a long and painful history; centuries of slavery linked with a lack of collective African identity has caused U.S. Blacks, who are primarily descendants of African slaves, to dislike their own blackness (Robinson 2011). The history examined in this paper of Black hair, dates back to pre-slavery Africa. In the 1500s, the slave ships came from Europe. According to Randle (2015), the first thing that was done to slaves, once captured, was to cut their hair off. This process was done by slave masters to strip Blacks of their culture and identity. In doing so, they were able to dehumanize them while making it easier to control the slaves (Randle 2015). According to Thompson (2009), slaves were forced to work in the fields all day and had little to no time to care about one's physical appearance, including one's hair. Further, in the 1700s, African American women covered their hair in head rags due to having no time to do their hair to attend to plantation work. African American women who worked inside had more time to do their hair, which mostly resulted in braids (Byrd and Tharps 2001).

According to Blay (2010), in many African nations, hair is a symbol of status, wealth, and prestige. Black people's issues with skin color and hair texture have their origin in White people's issues with skin color and hair texture (Blay 2010). According to many theorists, hair has always been a vital factor in defining one's identity (Brownmiller 1984; White 2005; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Patton 2006). During the 18th century, the new fashion was for white men of the upper class to wear wigs (Thompson 2009). In order to further distance Blacks from their cultural roots, and discourage any attempts to hang on to African traditions, Europeans began to categorize the appearance of Blacks including hair and skin tone, causing African hair to be viewed as unattractive and inferior by Europeans. Centuries of slavery combined with a lack of

collective African identity has caused U.S. Blacks, descendants of African slaves, to dislike their own Blackness (Randle 2015). This is true for African Americans. During the 1800s, hair was a symbol of one's slave status; today hair is a token of beauty, economic status, power, and one's beliefs. Women who have straightened their hair are still considered the beauty norm in African society today (Bellinger 2007). In the context of Western ideals, the same message tends to be internalized, in the sense that straight hair is stereotypically beautiful. As a result, Black women struggle with embracing their natural hair. According to Thompson (2009), most of the hairstyles that were worn by African Americans back then are still being worn today, such as twists, braids, Bantu knots (originated and were popularized by the "bantu people". The term "bantu" is a generic name for more than 300 African ethnic groups that cover a large geographic region of southern & central Africa) and dread locks. However, once the slave trade began, the Africans' connection to their hair was altered forever, and complicated by North America. If one's hair does not fit the Eurocentric ideal standard it is viewed as undesirable. As a result, Black women struggle with embracing their natural hair, celebrating the bodies that they are in and practicing self-love.

Black Hair Politics

Black women have endured internalized self-hatred in trying to maintain their hair in a way that is not their own natural hair. According to White (2005), the issue of hair, like that of skin color, carries historical and social baggage in the African community. Since slavery, the color caste system within the African American community has perpetuated internalized racism and self-hatred. White argues that "the system promotes a hierarchy among African Americans

that suggest that the more European one's features – the lighter one's skin, the less ethnic one's facial features and straighter and longer one's hair – the greater one's social value" (White, p.8). According to White 2005, the color caste system in which Whites are "better" than Blacks has influenced standards of beauty, and classism and social acceptability. The politics of hair is correlated to the politics of skin color in the African American community such that, the more European features one has, the more they are praised and valued in society.

In addition, according to White (2005), it should be understood that both phenomena, hair and skin color are a product of cultural hegemony and white supremacy that originated in slavery. Randle suggests, that girls as young as six were twice as likely to be aware of the color hierarchy and its social significance compared to boys (Randle 2015). Hair and skin color being highly politicized affects both men and women every day, however women are disproportionately affected (Collins 2000). Hair texture and how one chooses to style it plays a huge role in the caste system. In Brownmiller's (1984) book *Femininity*, she argues that long hair has been used as a measure of femininity for White American women and African American women have been held to the same measurement. Moreover, the measurement of beauty and femininity is taken even further as an African American woman's hair is more valued if it is both long and straight. While American women have been subjected to a standard of beauty the average woman might find difficult to attain, the African American woman is twice as subjected in that the standards were not even created for her. As a result, African American women have been constantly told and have internalized, that their looks are not acceptable and their beauty does not exist (White 2005).

According to Oyedemi (2016), the culture of straightening and relaxing one's hair is not only physical violence on the self, but a cultural violence as well that continues to be passed from generation to generation. In other words, Black women continue to internalize self-hatred trying to conform their hair to a look that is not their natural look and begin erasing their African hair traditions. This generational pattern is clear in mothers relaxing their children's hair at an early age, some as young as three years old. Furthermore, cultural violence also devalues hair that does not fit the ideal; as a result natural African hair becomes a victim of representation as "kinky" or "nappy". Both terms are extremely political and they represent the derogatory characteristics of hair of African descent that is tightly coiled, knotted or curled. Oyedemi (2016), conducted a study that examined trends and attitudes about hairstyles worn by Black African women identifying beautiful hair and only 15.1% of her participants identified the category of African natural hair as beautiful. Half of the participants in this study identified European and Asian category of texture and styles of hair as most beautiful. The results of this study clearly show evidence of symbolic indoctrination that involves the perception of beautiful hair as primarily of a European or Asian texture and style and has led to a trend where that specific hair type is associated with being beautiful and preferable rather than natural African hair (Oyedemi 2016).

Hair Is Not Just Hair

For the majority of Black women, hair is not just hair. According to Oyedemi (2010), for African Americans, the American social structure and its complex nature have a long history of oppression that shapes the experiences of culture, class, race, and identity of African Americans

through their hair. Hair plays such a vital role that one can argue that women are essentially

defined by their hair. African American hair is negatively viewed for its difference. According to

Bellinger (2007), Black women are taught that Black hair is a badge of shame. Bryd and Tharps

(2001) argue that it is impossible to ignore the fact that popular culture depicts Black women

with long, straight hair, which reinforces the idea that "good" hair is straight, long hair. This is

extremely problematic because there is a lack of representation of Black women who wear their

hair naturally in the media. Therefore, there are limited role models that Black women who have

Black hair can emulate, truly believe that their hair is beautiful, and feel comfortable embracing

their natural hair. As a result, this negatively impacts their self-identity since they are not close in

proximity to whiteness, or the Eurocentric standard of beauty then they are not valued or

considered beautiful in society (White 2005).

The culture of adopting the Eurocentric beauty standard of long, straight, hair involved,

amongst many acts, mechanically and chemically straightening one's hair to erase one's identity

(Oyedemi 2016). According to Robinson (2011), White-dominated culture has racialized beauty

in a way that hair that emulates European ancestry is viewed as more attractive than hair that

emulates African Ancestry. U.S. racial hierarchies glorify one standard of beauty, a standard that

devalues and excludes African hair textures, forcing Black females to fit into Eurocentric beauty

standards that actually work against them. Black females' perceptions of good and bad hair

portrays their internalization of White supremacy, and their struggle to conform Black hair into

White beauty standards (Robinson 2011). The absence of Black females embracing their natural

hair leads to this internalization of self-hatred. According to Thompson, the social comparison

theory is used to understand how and why people compare themselves to societal standards when

assessing their own behaviors (Thompson 2009). This theory supports the reasoning behind why

Black women continue to want to adopt the Eurocentric ideal image and conform to what society

wants Black women to look like.

Hair in the Work Place

The importance of hair also comes into play when it comes to Black women attaining and

maintaining professional jobs. Bellinger (2007) argues that straight hair remains the norm and is

usually needed to secure employment for African American women. According to Bellinger

(2007), relaxed hair, braids, weaves, and short hair are considered more professional; hence,

these styles are worn by middle class women most often. Conversely, supposed "natural"

hairstyles such as dreadlocks and twists are viewed as more radical hairstyles in the professional

world (Bellinger 2007). Randle (2015) states that although African Americans have an

abundance of hair options, there have been punitive measures taken by employers to restrict

African Americans from wearing their hair naturally in the workplace. According to Randle

(2015), in 2007, a Black woman in West Virginia was fired from her job at a prison for wearing

braids, which was perceived as inappropriate. One can argue that Black hair no longer carries the

same socio-cultural significance it did in centuries past, and "natural" hair remains an unwanted,

politically-charged marker in the workplace (Randle 2015). Breaking cultural norms such as

failing to attain straight hair has jeopardized maintaining a job for Black individuals. The

meanings attached to African American hair have led to many negative stereotypes and has

inhibited Black people's mobilization in society. Many African American women continue to

perceive their hair in its natural state as oppressive, undesirable, or even unattractive; as a result,

Black women find little power in their hair (Belllinger 2007). According to Bellinger (2007), the possibility that hair-styling practices, in any form serve as challenge to mainstream notions of beauty or allow Black women to embrace a positive identity is important for two reasons: voice and empowerment.

Black Power Movement

During the 1960's, people began viewing hair as a political statement and an indicator of the Black Power Movement (Bellinger 2007). The Black Power movement led by Malcolm X redefined blackness regarding a sense of self as Black American by reconfirming Black beauty through shaming assimilation such as, perms and chemical hair alterations. Natural Afro hairstyles became associated with political change and Black self-love and knowledge. For the first time in the U.S history, during this time period the look that was most praised and recognized was that of "dark skin" and "natural afro-hair" (Tate 2007). According to Tate (2007), within the black anti-racist tradition people are often motivated by the realization that a white dominant culture has racialized beauty, and beauty is defined by white beauty in terms of physical characteristics. Dash (2006) states that hair conking and straightening were perceived as symbols of self-hatred. On the other hand, the Afro became a marker of Black pride which celebrated Black hair. In addition, during the 1960s Black liberation movements projected the slogan "Black is Beautiful" (Dash 2006). For many African American women the choice to wear their hair natural is an act of resistance as they are refusing to identify with the status quo (White 2005). These women have challenged the universal standard, which has led to a huge self-transformation in Black women's lives. The Black Power Movement was a vehicle to empower

individuals who did not meet any of society's white-dominated cultural standards and brought a

voice to those who refuse to assimilate and abandon their cultural roots.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Black females continue to be understudied in academia. However, the

politics of hair and the construction of beauty and identity have recently received wide attention

in both the academia and popular culture. Moreover, the definitions of "good" and "bad" hair are

socially constructed and ingrained in our society from previous crucial historical events in the

United States. African American hairstyles continue to be a way to represent one's social class

(White 2005). Furthermore, the idea of having "good" hair relates to those who have straight hair

of European descent and excludes Black hair. Yet, Black women continue to aspire to attain the

White Eurocentric look and fail to embrace their natural hair. Natural Black hair remains

misunderstood, degraded, and viewed as unacceptable in every facet of society. Therefore, these

ideas of beauty are reinforced in order to maintain White supremacy and the status quo of the

dominant White culture which works to instill in Black women the idea that their hair is

unattractive and undesirable. For many African American women, deciding to wear their hair

naturally is their way of resisting to conform to what society wants Black women to look like. If

Black women continue to fail to embrace their natural hair, the internalization of self-hatred will

continue into future generations and this complex problem will remain unsolved. It should be

noted that the American beauty standard clearly excludes Black women features and praises an

ideal image that is not possible for Black women to attain. However, straightened, long hair

causes Black women to feel closer to whiteness, ultimately erasing their cultural identity. The

Afrocentric theory allows us to look at Africa's culture and history from its location, which will lead to Black women's self-acceptance if they pursue learning about their history. Future research should consider examining how socioeconomic status affects Black females' decisions of wearing their natural hair and further examine how Black women are portrayed in the media with a focus on how harmful the lack of representation of natural hair can be to Black females. If Black women embrace their natural hair first, this can lead to more representation in the media and allow more Black females to feel comfortable wearing their natural hair. Black women need to realize that the construction of Beauty was not created for minority Black females. This research should be used as a vehicle to empower other Black females to feel comfortable embracing their hair in its natural state; promoting the versatility of Black hair and emphasizing that kinky hair is beautiful.

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