THE POLITICS OF BEAUTY

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Abstract: Transformation/In Loree's Beauty shop/hot combs sizzled/against/wet oily scalps/branding/grown woman fantasies/into tender young/heads./Thick busy afros/became/long glossy black curls/transforming/natural Black queens/into/commercial mahogany princess. (Boyd, 1997).
The politics of black hair is defined as challenges to the traditional ideals of beauty that affect all of us globally. As an example of this, blonde hair and blue eyes are now globally seen as the perfection of beauty. This is evident from an examination of the media arts and entertainment industries. The politics of black hair in media arts education is a dissertation proposal for online media studies, black studies and feminist studies curriculum development designed for post-secondary education. The basis for developing the curriculum will be Donna Kakonge's graduate research on the politics of black hair called *Afro Forever* (1999)*,* also known as *What Happened to the Afro?* (2006), done at Concordia University's Communications department back in 1999. The aim of the dissertation and online project is to broaden my scope of research from my master's thesis on the politics of black hair to a wider curriculum framework.
Keywords: Politics of Black Hair, Curriculum Development, Donna Kakonge, OISE/University of Toronto, Beauty, Media Arts Education, Black Hair and Media Arts Education, Online Education, Dissertation on the Politics of Black Hair, Politics of Black Hair and Online Education, The Politics of Beauty

Introduction

In the 1960s *hooks* recalls that "many young *black* folks found just how much political value was placed on straightened *hair* as a sign of respectability and conformity to societal expectations" (5) (del Guadelope Davidson et. al, 2009)

This was still true 20 years later.

Back in the mid-80s, watching Oprah Winfrey's bouncing and behaving hair was like a dream come true. I never knew that black hair could do that. I rushed to a salon, telling them to duplicate the Oprah 'do on my head, and they did. The bad part is that just like what once happened to Oprah, my hair fell out. I was left with no hair on my head to duplicate any 'do.

Nina Simone sings "Black is the Colour of My True Love's Hair" and actually I once thought my true soul mate was a bald man. But the inside love (that's me) does have black hair. Learning to love myself and my hair is a never-ending project, so much so I've decided to make it my concentration of study at the graduate level. (Kakonge, 2006)

My currere with black hair politics began when I was sitting with some friends of mine at a Montréal university pub, talking about what I often do – hair. One of them said to me, "why don't you do research on hair?" I thought she was crazy, and that I would never find information on the topic,

but I was wrong on both counts. I had been thinking and talking about hair for so long that I was sure my first thought as a baby was a kinky one. It was a natural choice for me to do research on hair. This was back in 1998.

Now 50 years after the start of the Civil Rights movement, I found out that everybody is talking about black hair these days. It's like when Dr. Ruth came out talking about sex and everyone was discussing it. I don't know who started the black hair talk, maybe Jesus himself, but black hair is the top pick of writing topics, music, documentaries, and Internet sites.

With the growing sophistication of technology, and the millennium on its way, I decided to catch up with the times and do my master's project as an Internet site.

Finding a metaphor for the site was easy. I had spent a lifetime searching for the perfect salon. I wanted to create a salon with hairdressers that paid more attention to your head than the telephone. I wanted to create a salon that encouraged you to feel beautiful naturally. I wanted to create a salon with top-rate service, but low-rate prices. With the dream world one can create on the Internet I built a virtual one called Salon Utopia.

Cammarota and Fine (2008) discuss being inspired by the movie *The Matrix* (1999), in order to get at the truth in their research. The visual reference for my research goals is the movie *American Beauty* (1999). In this movie, the character Angela was seen as the quintessential beauty with her blonde hair and blue eyes. Lester, played by Kevin Spacey was enamoured with this young woman to the point of fixation. There is a character Brad in the movie that is in love with Lester's daughter Janie – who has dark hair and does not fit into the "typical American beauty" picture. Brad loves Janie because she is not "ordinary," which he accuses her friend Angela of being.

Natural black hair and natural black beauty is so unordinary in North American society that black people are completely absent from the film *American Beauty*. Just as Brad and Lester were seeking to fight the ordinariness of their lives in different ways, however similar ways, natural black hair and natural black beauty is something that should be included into the visual frame of the ideal American beauty. Young people need to recognize this, especially young black women so they do not aspire to be anything different from what they are. It may not be ordinary, however as Brad could recognize in Janie, it is still beautiful.

This is also echoed from the "Black is Beautiful" movement from the 1970s. With huge afros and hot combs thrown away, as depicted in the cover photo of this dissertation, black people embraced their beauty, while media followed by introducing more black characters on TV and in commercial advertisements. More black people were getting jobs, notably for the purposes of this dissertation as

teachers. The acceptance of their natural black hair in academe continues to this day, such as Dr. Afua Cooper sporting an impressive afro and Dr. Althea Prince wearing lovely natural locks. Dr. Bernice Moreau wears natural hair, teaching at Tyndale University. These professors are role models. bell hooks who I had met back in the early 1990s at Carleton University was wearing a short well-kept afro at the time. It fit her happy and welcoming smile perfectly. All these women are examples that "Black is Beautiful."

Now, with the extraordinary opportunity to complete my PhD in CTL at OISE/University of Toronto, I am going to expand this topic of black hair to online curriculum development, inspired by my Foundations of Curriculum online course with Dr. Heather Sykes.

Why an online course?

I did my 90-page master's thesis entitled *Afro Forever*. I also did a master's project, a 26-page website called *Salon Utopia*. On this website Salon Utopia, there was an online community where I analyzed and included the responses of about 30 participants who took part. The participants were diverse and were from various disabled, disability, cultural, religious, sexual orientation and gender backgrounds. As well, for the thesis, I included a videotaped session that I transcribed of four black women, discussing black hair.

Stemming from this research, I have written articles on black hair politics for *Panache Magazine*, an International black woman's magazine and written about beauty in general for Canoe.ca's *Lifewise* section. I have done commentaries for the CBC on black hair politics in Montréal that has been syndicated and replayed. Most recently, I keep an online blog where I often write about beauty issues, as well as feature beauty issues on my successful magazine *Donna*.

The politics of black hair is displayed in books like *Tenderheaded* (Harris, et. al, 2001) to the Princess of Wales plays *'Da Kink in My Hair* and *Hairspray* to movies like *Barber Shop* (2002) and *Barber Shop II: Back in Business* (2004) *and* Chris Rock's *Good Hair* (2009) to songs played on Flow 93.5 in Toronto. Everyone alters his or her hair to gain more power in society. Mariame Kaba is also a contributor to the book *Tenderheaded.* In her work, Kaba discusses the straightening of black women's hair as an agent for political power. Keeping one's hair natural is also a source of political gain by using one's ethnicity to move forward in society. At the time I did my master's thesis with the title *Afro Forever: Research Paper on Salon Utopia*, I did not see I was using my natural hair to obtain personal and professional power in the employment I chose after graduation from Concordia University's media studies program, working as an Announcer/Producer for Radio Canada International's "African Eyes" program.

Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Deborah Durham and Jude D. Fokwang (2002) write in *Identity, Culture and Politics*, about "The Domestication of Hair and Modernized Consciousness in Cameroon: A Critique in the Context of Globalization" (that African women consume Western ideals in their choice of hair design and do not control the flow of hair aesthetics in the global marketplace. This is true, not just in Cameroon. However, even non-African cultures are strongly affected by Western ideals. In Grant McCracken's *Big Hair: A Journey into Transformation of Self* (1996), he focuses on the effect big hair had on a mainly Caucasian group of celebrities in the 1980s. These women used their hair, a big part of one's image, to advance themselves in their chosen profession of glamour.

The same can be said of the South Asian man who gets a haircut to work in arts journalism, the Jewish and Hispanic women who straighten their hair for the job interview and the older men who colour their hair to look more hip, or alternatively use their grey power. In all these cases, some form of alteration has been made with the aim for advancing economically.

Time and time again I have seen students in the post-secondary schools I work in changing their appearances through hair and even missing classes because of hair appointments because they believe it will help to advance them socially, professionally and educationally. Our cues for the choices we make often come from the way we have been educated. The media educates all of us on how to look (both hair and clothes) if there is a role we want to play with the career path we choose in higher education. The online forum for this executed curriculum development will aim to allow a flexible schedule for students of all backgrounds. As well, as online discussions may become heated, which is entirely possible, especially when discussing notions and ideals of beauty and ideas around natural black hair, the Internet allows for a comfortable barrier and a free exchange, as well as flow of information – thus, its success.

An online forum allows for an ideal learning environment where video, podcasts and photos can be exchanged. Assignments can be dealt with electronically. Hundreds of students can feel free to be judged on their intelligence, rather than their looks.

To add additional narrative to the dissertation, historical views of black hair dialogues conducted by video, compared with present day black hair dialogues conducted by email will be included as well.

Definition of the Politics of Black Hair/Beauty in Education

The politics of black hair includes traditional beauty standards that affect the livelihood, existence and self-esteem of those students who fall outside of the normative construction in media arts programs. For example, blonde hair and blue eyes being the traditional model of what is beautiful,

many people fall out of this paradigm. Thanks to the globalization of the media industry, in 1996 a young black man in Kampala, Uganda could be seen wearing a Beverly Hills 90210 T-shirt and Ugandan women straighten their hair, and some even bleach their skin with Javex. This paradigm of beauty, although something that needs to be continually challenged, works within a geopolitical context.

The natural, super curly aesthetic of black hair has been a potential source of low self-esteem for many black people, especially women. Due to the fact this aesthetic goes against the grain of what is seen as mainstream beauty (straight, brunette, red and especially blonde hair), an entire industry has been created to alter the natural hair of black people so they can feel better about themselves for a mainstream beauty standard that is influential around the globe.

Research project

The curriculum will outline the following, inspired by the model set up by Dr. Heather Sykes et al. for the online Foundations of Curriculum course, as well as adaptations from Donna Kakonge's previous graduate research on black hair politics done at Concordia University in Montréal.

Reasons and purposes for undertaking this project/Methodology

Many students undertake arts and entertainment courses at a variety of schools in Toronto, as well as all over the world. Many of these programs do not ever reveal a critical analysis of the politics of black hair and beauty that the students will face out in their chosen field. This post-secondary curriculum and teaching development is based on the politics of black hair from a media arts perspective. The target student-clientele includes undergraduate college and university students. The aim is to help students form a critical analysis of black hair politics in the areas of arts and entertainment education, so they can work to add to the existing paradigm of beauty knowledge.

I did my 90-page master's thesis entitled *Afro Forever*. I also did a master's project, a 26-page website called *Salon Utopia*. I have written articles on black hair politics for *Panache Magazine*, an International black woman's magazine and written about beauty in general for Canoe.ca's *Lifewise* section. I have done commentaries for the CBC on black hair politics in Montréal that has been syndicated and replayed throughout Canada. Most recently, I keep an online magazine where I frequently write about beauty issues also on a blog. The politics of black hair is displayed in books such as *Tenderheaded* to the Princess of Wales plays *'da Kink in My Hair* and *Hairspray* to movies like *Beauty Shop and* Chris Rock's *Good Hair* to songs played on Flow 93.5 in Toronto, and I am sure it will become apparent in the new black radio station CARN 98.7.

Another purpose of the project is modeled after Julia Cammarota and Michelle Fine's work in *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* (2008) where the students participating in the politics of black hair research will choose to understand the truth of how they have been deceived by the standard beauty myth (Wolf, 1997) and participate in their own self-discovery and collective inquiry towards redefining notions of beauty that are more inclusive of their personal beauty. This question is posed by Cammarota and Fine: "Under what conditions can critical research be a tool for youth development and social justice work?" The online curriculum I plan to develop would aim to answer this question. To construct the curriculum and actually conduct it within an educational institution or a learning centre would be the ideal forum to test out its validity and effectiveness.

Cammarota and Fine use the *Matrix* (1999) as inspiration for their research. The movie that inspires my research is *American Beauty* (1999). Themes around being "ordinary" and "ordinary" beauty are prevalent in the film. By focusing on The Politics of Black Hair in online curriculum with 300 students or research participants, wider frameworks of beauty will be explored and a malleable theory will be determined.

Course Management Systems (CMS) or Learning Management System (LMS) to conduct the research on my own can be found through Moodle.org to create a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) that is Open Source. I can conduct a free course to make it accessible to anyone wanting to learn about the politics of black hair, as well as draw from my research samples along with the students. This will create a collaborative learning environment, similar to the one Dr. Sykes created in a social constructivist framework. I know of many people who could connect me, as well as draw upon my own resources for potential participants for the course. I would also include postings on Craigslist and Kijjii in various geographical regions. Advertisements will also be posted at various colleges and universities all over the world to encourage participants. As well, participants will come from advertisements on *Donna Magazine*, as well as promotions on Twitter and Facebook. I am hoping to have a selection pool of 300 students over four months to work with. An evaluation of the course will be conducted by using SurveyMonkey software to tweak the course for future use. Participants will also be recruited from ReporterConnection.com.

The methodology will also include qualitative comparative research methods where a select sample of interviews that were done in 1999 for my master's thesis, will be compared with qualitative research done in 2010.

As well, survey research will also be used by utilizing SurveyMonkey software and the respondents will be the visitors to *Donna Magazine*. The online curriculum PAR project, the

qualitative research, as well as the survey research will make up the primary research portion of the dissertation. Secondary research will also be used to add context to the issues surrounding the politics of black hair. The other mixed method research methodology that will be used is currere that will be expressed as an arts-based research method as I include personal entries from my journal included from my research in 1999, as well as from this dissertation and present day research through my hair blog. A comparative analysis will be done. The aim is develop theory around the extraordinary beauty of natural black hair and how this can be emphasized in post-secondary media education, as taken from the concept of ordinary beauty posited by the movie *American Beauty* (1999).

Literature Review of Beauty Knowledge - History of Hair Politics

The following is just a brief history of hair politics and analysis, particularly in the United States, but the issues are still relevant to Canada:

And in still other 'houses of worship' throughout Virginia and in such cities as Philadelphia and New Orleans, a fine-toothed comb was hung on a rope near the front entrance. If one's hair was too nappy and snagged in the comb, entry was denied (Russell et al., 1992).

The Color Complex goes into a historical analysis that mentions among many things the "one drop rule" for blacks in the United States. With this rule in effect, (not being sure of how much it holds true in Canada) what is black hair?

Black hairstylist Nantil Chardonnay, of Nantil for Egypt III hair salon in Montréal, maintains that virtually all of today's popular hairstyles can be traced to early African cultures. But she laments that it has usually taken a white woman - like Bo Derek with her braids in the 1980 hit film "10" to popularize, even among blacks, what has been a traditionally African hairstyle. Although some black women in the sixties and seventies were wearing beaded braids and cornrows as an expression of their African heritage, this was not considered a mainstream thing to the black community until after "10" came out. In Chardonnay's words taken from the Color Complex, "I thought it was very shallow of them [African-American women] suddenly to want to copy someone else who was copying our culture to begin with" (Russell et al., 1992).

Obviously, historically and even now, white people play a great influence in black acceptance or rejections of beauty.

We have started re-creating our image bit by bit and piece by piece, thumbing our noses at Mr. Society. In fact, we are so good at our own recreation that Mr. Society has started to imitate us: Bo Derek's cornrows, Barbara Hershey's full lips, and Coppertone skin. The difficulty lies in having to

constantly justify and defend our individuality - as Black women, a group that has long been ignored or dismissed (Boyd 1997).

The history continues. There are no longer houses with fine tooth combs at the door to keep the truly nappy-headed out, but straight hair is still seen as the access to power. And there does exist doors of industry, commerce, business and the like that pass over a black person and scrutinize them on the clothes they are wearing, the jewellery and its amount, maybe even the car they drive, the makeup in some cases, and definitely the hair to gain access - to get through the door. Of course, one would have to have money to even play in these games of society and class.

Since middle class women have been sequestered from the world, isolated from one another, and their heritage submerged with each generation, they are more dependent than men are on the cultural modes on offer, and more likely to be imprinted on them. Marina Warner's Monuments and Maidens explains how it comes about that individual men's names and faces are enshrined in monuments, supported by identical anonymous (and "beautiful") stone women. The situation is true of culture in general. Given few role models in the world, women seek them on the screen and the glossy page (Wolf, 1997).

It is the middle class of any segment of the population who traditionally attend the post-secondary institutions that will be the focus of my curriculum development. When Wolf wrote The Beauty Myth during a huge wave of second generation white feminist theory, the Internet was not as popular as it is today, and women were more isolated.

Many women do seek their role models from the screen and the glossy page. The typical image of beauty that is displayed is white, blonde, blue-eyed, slim, able-bodied beauty. Women of colour are affected by these images when they straighten their hair, and even some colour their hair blonde. It was popular during the 1980s for many people of colour to wear coloured contact lenses, turning their "brown eyes blue" (Gayle, 1977).

People of colour, especially women, who enter media arts education programs at the post-secondary level, are striving to be the kind of role models that Oprah Winfrey, Connie Chung, Margaret Cho and Ellen Degeneres are now. On a smaller scale and appealing heavily to the African-Canadian community, would be playwright/actress Trey Anthony who is queer and falls out of normative ideals of beauty with her Jamaican heritage. Other women such as Jill Scott, current actress on HBO and Angie Stone, singer/songwriter, are African-American women who have a strong role model appeal on a slightly marginalized level, however this does show improvement.

Many of the young women in these media arts programs want to be stars. What often ends up happening is that they become stars at a price; plastic surgery, bulimia, anorexia, hair dying and hair straightening. White women are plagued by this pressure to be "beautiful" too. Enter the politics of black hair/beauty in media arts education (Giddings, 1996).

Everyone alters his or her hair to gain more power in society. Dr. Mariame Kaba, PhD, is also a contributor to the book Tenderheaded (Harris et al., 2001). In her work, Kaba discusses the straightening of black women's hair as an agent for political power. Keeping one's hair natural is also a source of political gain by using one's ethnicity to move forward in society. At the time I did my master's thesis with the title Afro Forever: Research Paper on Salon Utopia (Kakonge, 1999), I did not see I was using my natural hair to obtain personal and professional power in the employment I chose after graduation from Concordia University's media studies program. I worked on an African radio morning show with African colleagues for Radio Canada International.

Francis B. Nyamnjoh, Deborah Durham and Jude D. Fokwang write in Identity, Culture and Politics, about "The Domestication of Hair and Modernized Consciousness in Cameroon: A Critique in the Context of Globalization" (2002) that African women consume Western ideals in their choice of hair design and do not control the flow of hair aesthetics in the global marketplace. This is true, not just in Cameroon. However, even non-African cultures are strongly affected by Western ideals. In Grant McCracken's Big Hair: A Journey into Transformation of Self (1996), he focuses on the effect big hair had on a mainly Caucasian group of celebrities in the 1980s. These women used their hair, a big part of one's image, to advance themselves in their chosen profession of glamour. The same can be said of the South Asian man who gets a haircut to work in arts journalism, the Jewish and Hispanic women who straighten their hair for the job interview and the older men who colour their hair to look more hip or use their grey power. In all these cases, some form of alteration has been made with the aim for advancing economically.

Time and time again I have seen students in the post-secondary schools I work in changing their appearances through hair and even missing classes because of hair appointments because they believe it will help to advance socially, professionally and educationally. Our cues for the choices we make often come from the way we have been educated. The media educates all of us on how to look (both hair and clothes) if there is a role we want to play with the career path we choose in higher education. My dissertation will analyze the media and cultures of people of colour; red, brown, gold, black and white, however with a specific emphasis on black hair, to show how the majority of us succumb to the education of the media and our culture for political gain through our appearance. The development of

online media studies/black studies/feminist studies curriculum will be the result of the research and the call to action.

Situating Interdisciplinary Curriculum for the Politics of Black Hair

Black hair itself is something visual and that has been the subject of documentaries such as *Good Hair* by Chris Rock (2009). For the purposes of this dissertation's theory, the concept of ordinariness in *American Beauty* (1999) is the focus. However, Chris Rock's *Good Hair* (2009) is an important documentary of focus for this dissertation. This documentary shows the lengths, as well as expense many black women will go to in order to conform to the *American Beauty* standard. This is also displayed in the clear and simple writing style of this proposal. This curriculum being influenced by a media studies framework, although based in black studies and feminist studies – the ultimate aim will be for it to lead an enlightened or altered knowledge about black hair and beauty, as related to what Du Bois (1903/1990), Dewey (1929/2004), hooks (1994) and Cole & O'Riley (2002) discuss during the third session of the Foundations of Curriculum Course (Sykes, 2010) on Who's Knowledge Counts? (Sykes, 2010). The knowledge that will count in this curriculum development will stem heavily from the students themselves. It will be a participatory and inclusive curriculum where students can share their stories and follow the path of learning along with the professor. Thus, the course will be heavily steeped in currere (Pinar, 1975).

Drawing again on Michelle Fine's work (Participatory Action Research Collective, Internet), the curriculum will take shape through the media interviews, in-class and out-of-class media projects stemming from media studies. Along with this will be a focus on black studies and feminist studies reading material from many black female scholars such as Michelle Wallace (1990), to bell hooks (1993), and Althea Prince (2009). There will also be documentaries shown such as Chris Rock's *Good Hair* (2009), TV shows such as *'da Kink in My Hair* (2006) and Internet explorations concerning black hair.

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