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Sabrina E. Robinette
Gettysburg College

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The Imposition of White Beauty Standards on Black Women

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of racist beauty ideals on black women through a survey of personal testimonies and an examination of media's role in perpetrating white beauty. Without sufficient black representation in media, Western beauty standards have excluded black women from defining beauty, which inflicts psychological, physical, and even economic harm on women of color. Companies make profits off of black women's insecurity from products such as skin lightening cream, chemical straighteners, and hair dye, all of which are an economic burden on black women at best and are life-threatening at worst. Often, black women are forced to turn to conforming to these harmful white beauty standards in order to be taken seriously at the workplace, as whites have controlled the narrative over "professional" hairstyles and clothes. Much of these ideals stem from media, and in a world where media is largely produced for the white heterosexual male gaze, the solution is to ensure that black women have a creative space in filmmaking and other media production; however, with systemic biases plaguing the industry, black women are rarely in directorial positions with creative control.

Keywords

beauty, intersectionalism, black women, media, racism

Disciplines

Africana Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Women's Studies

Comments

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Sabrina Robinette

Prof. Redden

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The Imposition of White Beauty Standards on Black Women

The pressures to conform to the mainstream media's beauty standards are tangible for women of all ethnicities. However, for African-American women, these pressures become all the more oppressing due to the white ideals of beauty dominating the cultural definition of what it means to be attractive. The facial features that are most sought after and that many women have surgery to attain are all predominately white features: high cheekbones, a thinner nose, and overall facial slimness. There has been a long history of Western ideals of attractiveness determining a woman's worth, and these ideals become even more harmful when they impact black women's self-confidence and make them believe their worth is equivalent to how well they match these ideals. Because whites control the narrative on what determines attractiveness, they are able to dominate the beauty industry in general and define what is professional attire or hairstyles for women; this is yet another way in which Western ideals of appearances oppress black women and limit their ability to express themselves in their workplace. Although there are many African-Americans fighting to stop this injustice, standards of beauty are implanted into our subconscious from an incredibly early age due to the influence of media, advertisements, and the general consumerist nature of our society, a society that has demonstrated time and time again that it is willing to profit off of internalized white supremacy. Skin-lightening creams, plastic surgery, and hair

products are all ways that companies can make money off of black women's desire to appear more traditionally attractive, or whiter. The media, such as movies, advertisements featuring supermodels, beauty pageants, et cetera, fail to recognize black women the majority of the time, and when they do, it is an ideal "whiter" black woman, a woman with straight hair and lighter skin. By claiming that this equates to good representation of the black community, the media is attempting to trick black women into believing that this is what black beauty looks like: an imitation of white features. White ideals of beauty are a form of oppression that operate through the media's attempts to make black women feel insecure about their blackness and profits off of their desire to erase their identity, and the only way to combat this oppression is to change the media itself.

White standards of beauty have always been the prevailing definition of attractiveness in American culture. However, there was a fair amount of the black community that refused to accept this narrative. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois (1923) scoffed at the idea of "sunlight hair and blue eyes, and straight noses and thin lips" being attractive features in women; rather, he preferred "intricately curly hair, black eyes, full and luscious features, and that air of humility and wonder which streams from moonlight" (p. 57). Du Bois's disagreement with the mainstream narrative of beauty was shared by many other members of the black community, displaying a separation in cultural ideals. Booker T. Washington (1899) clearly shared this belief, revealing his preferences in a letter he wrote while studying abroad in all-white Holland: "In the matter of physical appearance... I think our people are far ahead of the Hollanders. I do not think I exaggerate when I say that I have not seen in all of Holland a single beautiful

woman” (p. 1). Far from blindly accepting the white beauty ideals that were undoubtedly being pushed at the time, Du Bois and Washington represented the black men who were unwilling to adjust their personal ideas of beauty to mainstream culture. Nikki Giovanni (1988) wrote much later than Du Bois or Washington, but she argued most beauty contests were “damned boring” until Vanessa Williams won the title of Miss America, on account of all the contestants being “little miss blondies” (p. 37). Giovanni’s qualm with the beauty pageant industry being too monochromatic is easily proven valid by looking at photos of pageants in the fifties and sixties, the same ones she would have grown up watching. Both black men and women, then, demonstrate that their standards of beauty differ wildly from the prevailing—the white—interpretation. However, black beauty is not celebrated frequently enough to erase the detrimental impact that lack of representation can have on women from a young age.

These Western ideals of beauty are implemented as a method of oppression that controls black women. One of the most harmful ways in which this can damage black women is through Western society’s tendency to instill in women the connection between beauty and self-worth. June Jordan (1992) demonstrated the weight of the responsibility of severing this connection between white features and beauty: “Some of us must devise and improvise a million and one ways to convince young African-American... women that white skin and yellow hair and blue eyes and thin thighs are not imperative attributes of beauty and loveliness” (p. 208). If black women are experiencing a lack of confidence due to these bizarre concepts of what is “attractive” or not (and “attractive” very often means what is appealing to the white male gaze), then these ideals are encouraging black women to either change who they are or to silence their

voices. As long as whites are in charge of the narrative of beauty standards, people of color will suffer under these unrealistic expectations. June Jordan (1995) also offered her take on how these ideals oppress black women in more tangible ways: “White Western authorities in beauty... have denied and denigrated whatever and whoever does not fit into their white Western imagery. Some people who have been systematically excluded by white Western tradition will never know anything beyond hourly work at minimum ways” (p. 121). One way this could impact black women’s ability to get employment is the discrimination against natural hair in the workplace. Because whites control the narrative on appearance, they can decide what is professional and what is not, and therefore can control the aesthetic requirements for what is necessary to succeed in the workplace. Starting at an extremely young age, black women are exposed to these harmful standards which prime them to feel excluded and unwelcome. Cornel West (2001) argues that the lack of acceptance leads to lower socioeconomic status and higher chance of risky behavior: “Ought we to be surprised that black youths...devalued by alienating ideals of Euro-American beauty...exhibit high rates of crime and teenage pregnancy?” (p. 86). Lack of acceptance within the professional or academic community can lead to seeking it in more harmful areas, and the idealization of white features primes young black women to feel less welcome and confident. The media’s constant romanticizing of white features encourages black women to lose their identity by pressuring them to purchase skin-lightening cream, plastic surgery, and using make-up to redefine their features.

Unfortunately, this issue is an institutional one that has extensive and variant manifestations and impacts. Because of the broad nature of the discrimination

surrounding black beauty, Maya Angelou (1996) argues that the solution has to be a combined effort: “Then when it’s institutionalized...attacks on black beauty... then you’ve got a situation in which the struggle for hope requires deep organizing, mobilizing power, and pressure” (p. 192). Angelou’s solution requires a change first and foremost in the representation in popular media, and in order to guide our actions into the future, we need to acknowledge past successes. In 1966, Howard University’s homecoming queen wore natural hair to the dance, breaking the trend of artificial straightening; this is around the time that it became more accepted for black women to wear afros and for black men to grow their hair out (Lestor 94). It is the smaller battlefields of what children are taught that manifest later on in their lifetimes. If young black girls, for instance, see dark-skinned black women with natural hair on their favorite TV shows or in the cosmetic advertisements in the newspaper, then we can begin to eliminate the priming of Western beauty ideals that plagues many black children today. This in turn would hopefully reduce sales of skin-whitening cream, an industry that thrives off of white supremacy and the insecurity of black women. Assata Shakur’s (1987) autobiography confirms the prevalence of skin-whitening cream while she was growing up, as well as one horrifying incident she recalled of one black girl’s mother forcing her to wear a clothespin on her nose in the hopes that it would grow thinner over time (p. 32). One might like to believe that we are past the point of black women subjecting themselves to physical harm in order to look whiter, but manifestations of this same issue crop up today. Ignoring completely the awful side effects of skin whitening cream, yet another reason that industry deserves to be killed off (nytimes.com), a recent study reveals that women who chemically straighten their hair and use permanent dyes

have a significantly higher chance of breast cancer (nih.gov). The most shocking part of the study: “Among African American women, using permanent dyes every five to eight weeks or more was associated with a 60% increased risk of breast cancer as compared with an 8% increased risk for white women” (nih.gov). Use of chemical straighteners was found to increase risk of cancer by 30% for both black and white women, although there are many more black women using chemical straighteners than white women (nih.gov).

The study seems symbolic of the consequences of Western standards of beauty being relentlessly perpetrated. The majority of black women do not naturally have straight hair, so to conform with white ideals of what a professional hairstyle looks like, they are quite literally putting themselves at risk of death. The media romanticizes lighter hair, and the vast majority of black women do not naturally have that. Yet again, in order to conform to these standards, they risk life-threatening disease if they choose to dye their hair blonde. The concept of “traditional beauty” is entirely based upon white supremacy and in order to achieve that, black women are forced to alter their features in potentially lethal ways. The beauty industry relies upon insecurities in order to thrive, and it comes as no surprise that harmful chemicals are being used in skin-whitening creams, hair straightening solutions, and dyes; there is no concern for the health of the person purchasing the products, only the profit that they earn from selling them. The best way, then, to destroy this vicious cycle is to destroy the control that whites have over mainstream media in order to sever the connection between white features and beauty. Eldridge Cleaver (1967) pointed out the inequality that seems inherent in the white judgement of beauty: “Black people should not participate in Beauty Contests

staged by the white mother country, because Beauty Contests are one of the greatest tools for brainwashing people that the white man has ever devised” (p. 1). In the same article run by the Black Panther Party’s newsletter, Cleaver goes on to suggest an interesting solution to the problem of the white-dominated beauty standards: “We need to back away from that jive... So let them go their white way and we will go ours -- deep off into the beautiful world of Blackness” (p. 1). Cleaver’s idea of a separate black beauty contest can perhaps be applied to media. The segregation of media consumption, upon first glance, seems that it would solve a lot of the issues surrounding Western beauty ideals. Ideally, by forcing white beauty and black beauty into two separate categories, black women will no longer be expected to resemble white women and will no longer be pressured into buying skin whitening cream or straightening their hair with harmful chemicals. However, in many ways it seems a flimsy solution. What about the centuries of rhetoric that have come before, and the imprint it has made on our culture? How do we erase that programming to the point where such a transition would not be influenced by pre-existing biases so that the black standard of beauty does not resemble the white? Logistically, such a separation would be problematic, and morally even more so. Should we as a society stop all attempts to co-exist in media? Creating separate media for different races— “separate but equal”—would limit exposure to other cultures and excuses whites for having prejudiced beliefs about beauty. A more feasible solution has to be reached, but as previously pointed out, the problem is an institutional one. The focus should turn from the media itself to the producers and target audience of the media.

Media is mainly constructed for the heterosexual white male gaze. The sexualization of women in music videos, movies, and TV shows is far more common than the sexualization of men. Movies and TV shows offer male power figures more often than male heartthrobs, yet it is rare to see a film without a traditionally attractive woman in the cast. Perhaps the best solution to the white media controlling mainstream beauty is to simply allow more space for black creators, especially black women. Of course, this seems obvious, but the issue becomes more complicated when the discrimination of black content creators is taken into account. The underrepresentation does not only apply to blacks— “Minorities make up more than 36 percent of the U.S. population but represented only 10 percent of lead characters in movies and sat in 12 percent of director’s chairs in 2011, the last year for which data is available” (washingtonpost.com). Despite recent successes, such as *Black Panther*, *Get Out*, and *Moonlight*, films that feature a majority black cast or are produced by a black director are so rare that each time one comes out, it is treated as revolutionary and groundbreaking, usually rightfully so. However, of those three films, all were directed by black men rather than women. Representation in movies is also in a dismal state: “Movies with 31 percent to 40 percent minority casts — the share closest to how America looks — accounted for just 2 percent of the top films from 2011 examined for the 2014 report by the UCLA’s Ralph J. Bunch Center for African American Studies. People of color wrote only 7.6 percent of the 172 movies examined” (washingtonpost.com). The rarity of proper representation in films means that the romantic female lead of a film is more than likely going to be white the majority of the time, and everyone who grows up watching these films is going to be unconsciously

programmed to view the epitome of attractiveness and desirability as a white woman. In order to turn this around, we as a society need to reach a place where a black-produced film with a majority black cast is not groundbreaking every single time one comes out. Hollywood must be restructured to allow for black filmmakers, actors, actresses, producers, and directors to become just as common as their white counterparts.

Black women especially need to be given more power in filmmaking. A black female director with a majority black cast will be much less likely to produce a film tainted with the Western ideals of beauty than most of the directors active today, and if a generation of young black women were to grow up watching these films rather than most of the blockbusters today, perhaps society would be taking its first step to a more diverse world of beauty, and a destruction of the traditional ideas of what beauty means. However, it is not enough for these movies to simply exist, because they already do; these kinds of movies need to be produced at a higher rate and to be acknowledged by mainstream audiences. This includes ensuring that white-directed and black-directed films receive the same amount of funding for advertisements and production, which is currently a prevailing problem in the industry (washingtonpost.com). Because ideals for beauty are cemented early in childhood, children's shows must also feature more black cast members and have more black creators involved in the production. Furthermore, the black women portrayed in both films and shows should range from light to dark-skinned, not just light-skinned with straight hair. Hopefully, this would decrease sales for skin-whitening creams, and if enough progress is made, perhaps the skin-whitening industry could be killed off forever. Young black women should learn the inherent beauty of their natural appearance from their childhood.

The impact of the discrimination that black women have suffered in the world of beauty is immeasurable, but not irreparable. If the media continues to perpetrate the Western ideals of what a beautiful woman looks like, then black women will continue to be oppressed and to feel as if they need to strip away their identity to fit in and be accepted. However, by shifting the focus of the media, by changing who creates it and by catering to the black female gaze rather than the white male gaze, perhaps the definition of beauty will change from thinner facial features and straight blonde hair to simply being natural. Perhaps the definition of professional hairstyles will broaden to allow for natural hair so that black women in the workplace are not forced to risk breast cancer just to be taken seriously. Advertisements and television purposefully twist the American public's ideals of beauty, which creates a market for skin-whitening creams, straightening solutions, plastic surgeries, and other cosmetics to attempt to rectify the insecurities that black women have to face after being subjected to the brainwashing effect of watching white women occupy the exclusive definition of what it means to be attractive. If the discrimination against black filmmakers and directors, especially black female directors, can be erased, perhaps these Western beauty standards can too. Although society has a long way to go, the first step is to make the public aware of this issue. That alone will bring more attention to unconscious thought patterns that have developed in Americans' minds about what a beautiful woman looks like, or what a professional hairstyle looks like, and by observing one's own thought pattern, employers may find that they are indeed discriminating when they had been unaware of it, and black women may realize that their ideals of beauty were conditioned from a young age

and that there is nothing wrong with their natural hair or facial structure; it is, in fact, beautiful.

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