

Normative White Femininity: Race, Gender and the Politics of Beauty

Kathy Deliovsky, Brock University, has research interests including gendered processes of racialization, anti-racism, feminism and social justice.

Abstract

This article is an exploration of how racialized beauty norms invoke a cultural discourse of racially coded degrees of femininity and beauty. White patriarchal discourse represents white women as the "Benchmark woman" - a hegemonic ideology and social location that define dominant and subordinated femininities.

Résumé

Cet article est une exploration de la façon dont des normes de beauté basées sur la race invoquent un discours culturel des degrés féminité et de beauté codés selon la race. Le discours patriarcal blanc représente la femme blanche comme le barème de la femme - une idéologie hégémonique et la localisation sociale qui définit les féminités dominantes et subordonnées.

As I was preparing to write this article, a memory of my nine-year-old daughter flashed through my mind. One evening while fixing her curly hair into twists she exclaimed, "Mommy I want blonde hair!" Considering she is of mixed African and European ancestry with very curly and brown hair, this would be somewhat challenging. I replied that she has beautiful brown hair. Why would she want blonde hair? She replied in frustration that she hated her curly, frizzy hair and wanted it to be "blonde and normal like the girls on TV." Given that the images on TV are predominantly of Europeans, I realized "blonde" to my nine-year-old daughter signified not just the colour of hair but a white aesthetic represented by straight hair. I remember feeling a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. I wanted my daughter to love all aspects of herself, curly frizzy hair included. Having experienced so much anti-interracial animus directed toward my partner (Jamaican) and myself (Macedonian) prior to having children, I suspected that having mixed children would be an uphill battle. As a result, I would need to fortify my children from potential self-hatred that arises from living in a world that privileges whiteness and disparages blackness. In preparation I read books, talked to knowledgeable people and did most things that I was advised. Very importantly, never did I purchase a white Barbie doll for my daughter! So what happened? Why did my daughter hate her curly, frizzy hair and desire "normal" hair? While I write this introduction with some jest there is a seriousness that belies the humour; for, in a culture that places value on women's physicality, hair and other physical markers represent a powerful

political aesthetic that belies the salience of race for gender normativity.

This recounting of my daughter's desire for "normal" hair is about situating this paper in the context of lived experience where the traumas of racialized beauty norms express themselves. As a woman of European descent with mixed children, I have watched, with sadness, my daughter respond to the terrorization of white beauty norms (Chapkis 1986). Thus, this experience is the springboard into my exploration of how racialized beauty norms invoke a white cultural discourse built around gender, race and ethnicity and are used as a sophisticated means of self-regulation. Borrowing from Sandra Bartky (2003), I call this cultural discourse normative white femininity - the white capitalist patriarchal compulsion to adopt styles and attitudes consistent with an imposed white feminine aesthetic. This compulsion is a central element in the reproduction of whiteness and white femininity. In this context, my daughter's desire for "normal" hair is no surprise and speaks to a hierarchy of racially coded degrees of femininity and beauty that culminate in normative definitions of white femininity.

Research Sample

This exploration into normative white femininity derives from my qualitative research on white female identity. It examines the various ways power is coerced, compelled and negotiated through women's choice of sexual partners, sexual orientation, engagement in racial/social inequality and with normative feminine beauty standards. My examination transpired (between 2002 and 2003) through the oral testimonies of 12 Canadian women of Northern and Western European descent and 12 Canadian women of Eastern and Southern European descent. Within these two groups were women from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and their ages ranged from 17 to 70 years. Nine of the women were involved with men of

African descent and two identified themselves as lesbians. I located these women primarily through referrals from acquaintances, friends and colleagues. The interviews were tape recorded, later transcribed and contextually analyzed. Although the women's responses were recorded verbatim, they were not transcribed as such. Superfluous exclamations, comments and digressions, not related to the question, were omitted.

Opening the Circle

The data suggest that white women's identities and lives are not only shaped by structures of gender inequality but also by white privilege. Signalled as the bearers of the "white race," they are both privileged and contained by this gendered and reproductive signification (Deliofsky 2005). This racialized reproductive signification functions to define the acceptable conduct of their "race," gender and to some degree, ethnicity and class. Indeed, a uniform social requirement of white women's acceptable conduct is their conformity to normative white femininity. My contention is that white women's gender oppression is functionally consistent with their white skinned privilege.

In the context of a Eurocentric society, the reproduction of whiteness is contingent on a hegemonic normativity specific to the regulation of white women. Heterosexual normativity is first and foremost about white patriarchal production of a white feminine ideal. Looking at Western representations of the feminine ideal from antiquity to the present one encounters modifications in the standards over time. In contemporary western culture the regime of feminine regulation centers on a universal, homogenized ideal of beauty that encapsulates the domination of a western beauty aesthetic represented by, for example, the Barbie doll, or the countless variations of idealized white feminine beauty.

Consistent with Gramsci's 1971 concept of hegemony, where domination of

the ruled is internalized as an unquestioned feature of their own moral conscience, white women's consciousness is subject to a similar form of complicity. As Frankenberg (1993) has told us, whiteness operates beyond the visible to shape and articulate identities, which may become complicit in their own reproduction. In relation to normative femininity, this taken-for-grantedness requires an examination of the images of femininity to which the research participants refer. My goal in the first part of this essay is to elaborate "normative femininity" to draw attention to the insidiousness that whiteness plays in constructing white femininity as normative. As Sally Markowitz (2001) argues, the racial dimensions of femininity have slipped away from (white) cultural awareness, making it difficult to discern the complex intersections of race and gender ideology and consequently how whiteness is a mark of power. With this in mind, the second half of this paper brings into focus the racialized and heteronormative aspects of normative femininity.

Discipline and Normalization of the Female Body

Some feminist scholars have turned to Foucault to elucidate the complexities of women's subjectivities. Both Susan Bordo and Sandra Bartky use Foucauldian approaches to highlight the ways women are subjected to the self-regulating and policing regimes of patriarchally defined beauty. According to feminist philosopher Susan Bordo this self-regulation reflects "the discipline and normalization of the female body" (Bordo 2003, 166). This discipline and normalization occurs as a form of social regulation that through the contemporary regimes of beauty, diet and exercise train the female body into docility and obedience to cultural demands (2003, 27). Furthermore, these cultural demands of perpetual physical improvement ensures the production of self-disciplining, docile bodies (2003, 166).

Sandra Bartky identifies this

self-regulation as the result of "normative femininity" (Bartky 2003, 41). She argues that, "femininity is an artifice, an achievement" through which "disciplinary practices...produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine" (2003, 27). As such, while we are born male, female or intersex we become masculine or feminine by the disciplinary practices and rules of patriarchy. The practices of these disciplinary tactics, Bartky argues, are not merely sexual differences but are part of a process through which the ideal feminine body is constructed. It, however, "is a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed" (2003, 33).

While both analyses explicitly draw on Foucault's concepts of power diffusion and self-regulation, they are also tacitly premised on Naomi Wolf's "beauty myth." Wolf argues the "beauty myth," perpetuated by tools of "masculine culture," indoctrinates young girls into believing that their identity "must be premised upon their 'beauty'..." (Wolf 1990, 4). The effect, she argues, is that girls "...will remain vulnerable to outside approval, carrying the vital sensitive organ of self esteem exposed to the air" (1990, 4). This early indoctrination into the "beauty myth," Wolf claims, makes girls/women susceptible to impersonating "heroines" of adult female culture whose highest embodiment are the models in women's health and fashion magazines. In this regard, masculine culture paints a picture of what women should look like. Similar to Wolf, Helene Cixous argues that patriarchy metaphorically declares to women: "We're going to do your portrait so that you can begin looking like it right away" (Cixous 1976, 892). Significantly, this portrait and its concomitant beauty myth suggest also a behavioural dynamic. In this way, patriarchy's portrait of women is crucial in directing the substance and form of normative femininity.

But more needs to be said here. Indeed, while patriarchal disciplinary tactics may construct a normative femininity, it is far from being race-neutral. In the context of

a society founded on European imperialism and colonialism, normative femininity is never signified outside a process of racial domination and negation. My contention is women's bodies, as sexed and raced, are represented "through an optic saturated with racial and sexual visibility" (Deliovsky 2002, 238). Historically, white women's whiteness and femaleness have been interwoven and conflated in such a way as to constitute hegemonic femininity (Collins 2004). Understanding this connection is vital because it is this "historical schema" (Fanon 1967) of whiteness that constructs normative femininity as white.

Normative Femininity: Gender, Beauty and Behaviour

Turning to patriarchy's portrait of women, what does it actually look like? As my daughter's exclamation suggests, the portrait reflects a woman with blonde hair. I asked the research participants, "what kind of feminine images do you think Canadian society promotes in the media and in magazines?" They unanimously stated that the feminine images promoted by the media were those that were slim and beautiful. Notably, and a "fact" riven with contradiction, the images they described were ones they believed the media promoted and not necessarily ones that reflected their own beauty ideals. Sera, for example, exclaimed with frustration, "we're all supposed to be skinny and beautiful." Melissa exclaimed that the image promoted was "a blonde, big-boobed, beautiful thin woman." Priscilla said, "[t]hat perfect model, no stretch marks, no cellulite." In another example, Antonia with exasperation exclaimed, "[we are suppose to be] five foot seven and one hundred and twenty pounds...the blonde or brunette with the robust chest but...tiny everywhere else." And with an air of resignation Natasha said, "ones that most cannot achieve..."

Ironically drawing attention to patriarchy's successful appropriation of beauty, health and fitness, many of the women recognized the "absurdity" of the

images. This recognition, however, did not stop the women from emulating them. Gina, for example, revealed that when she was young she studied magazines in order to "cultivate a certain image." She said, "I studied *Glamour* and *Elle*, all those magazines. I would practice my makeup and hair for hours in order to look like the models...I never felt that I lived up to the image." Similarly, Gail stated that she "will sometimes buy fashion magazines for the images and cut them out...to emulate them." She said that she wondered how she compared. When I asked Gail how she felt she compared she replied, "I don't think I compare to them...I don't think my body fits with how ideal bodies are represented." This sense of shortcoming is not unique to Gina or Gail. None of the women felt they lived up to the images. Britney replied "no one is really happy with the way they look."

These feelings of insufficiency are, of course, no surprise. Reports like these are just some of the observable manifestations of Wolf's "beauty myth." Promoted by the diet, cosmetic and fashion industries, and as of late mainstream culture's love affair with cosmetic surgery, the beauty myth's notion of the ideal beauty comes back on girls and women "as self hatred, physical obsessions, terror of ageing, and dread of lost control" (Wolf 1990, 2). Natasha is a fitting example of how the beauty myth reverberates back on women and is experienced as personal deficiency. She said, "I had a thing with being thin...My friends were really tall and slim. I was one of the shortest ones and I really tried to look like them. I starved myself for three days and [then] I passed out." Gina's statement reflects a similar experience with bodily deficiency. She explained that her role models came out of fashion magazines and it taught her "to hate [herself]."

Explaining this phenomenon, Wolf states that the beauty backlash is disseminated and legitimated "by the cycles of self-hatred provoked in women by the advertisements, photo features and beauty

copy in the glossies" (Wolf 1990, 55). And indeed, many of the women's narratives reflect this experience. Antonia, in another example, spoke of the moments of self-doubt that arose from the inundation of these feminine images. She said, "[i]t's everywhere. You get it from the media and it is so overwhelming. Then you...feel like 'oh I am a fat slob' and you feel the pressure to lose thirty pounds." Isabelle said, "when I look in front of the mirror I am constantly assessing how I look because I know I will never look like that." Similarly Gina comments on the pressure for constant self-assessment. She states that, "it is relentless...you have to be thin at all times..."

These women's responses suggest that there is constant self-surveillance and self-management in service of this beauty myth. When women do not give the appearance of self-care and weight management there can be self-condemnation and condemnation from family and society for having "let oneself go." This failure to live up to the beauty myth is, of course, most painfully experienced at the personal level. Gina, for example, said, "I have always felt lacking, inadequate, like somehow I was never enough, not thin enough, not tall enough, not pretty enough, just never enough."

Hence, self-regulation does not mean the women are dupes to the social and cultural forces at play. They see beyond the falsity of the images; however, being "real" (embodied, unmodified, not air brushed) in the context of "normative femininity" invariably means not being "enough." Not being enough generates a constant tension between conforming to normative femininity and being real. Gail, in the example above, while realizing that the images she emulates are not real, uses them as a guide for self-improvement. In this way, normative femininity, which no real women can measure up to, regulates desire and behaviour because, as Bartky argues, "the technologies for femininity are taken up and practiced by women against the

background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency" (Bartky 2003, 33). Tammy's adolescent experience exemplifies this force. She recalls,

I tried to follow that image to a T - I had the streaked blond hair. I already had the blue eyes, thank you god! I would have gotten blue contacts if I hadn't. We were teenagers and we wanted to look beautiful...there was a lot of stuff portrayed on TV by stars and you would follow them...because whatever you see on TV must be beautiful...

As Tammy suggests, normative femininity defines what is beautiful and functions like a gold standard (Wolf 1990). Regardless of whether the ideal is or is not attainable is inconsequential to the fact that this gold standard exists. Bordo argues it is the created image, the unreal, that captures women's "most vibrant, immediate sense of what is, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves" (Bordo 2003, 104). The pursuit and practice of trying to attain the unattainable, which is never meant to be, nor can it be, achieved, is what creates desire and regulates women's behaviour.

Sexuality and The Beauty Myth

Normative femininity is clearly more than aesthetics and appearance. The hegemonic formation of the foregoing elements signals their behavioural dynamic. Key features of both performance and behaviours are the regulation of desire and the construction of feminine heterosexuality. In *Pretty in Punk*, Lauraine LeBlanc argues that not only is normative femininity determined by patriarchy, it also demands heterosexuality of women (LeBlanc 1999, 136). During my interview with Isabelle we grappled with the issue of heteronormativity and femininity and its implications for desire and sexuality. I asked if she had a sense of how women in the lesbian community who identified as "butch" related to the promotion

of the prevailing feminine images. She responded by saying that, "I think a lot of butch women know [they are] not attainable and so it is incredibly painful because [these images] are what you are supposed to look like and never will look like...there is not only a value but...a behaviour attached to looking that way." As such, there is conduct in service of the beauty myth that is a function of what Adrienne Rich calls "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 1979).

I have argued elsewhere that heteronormativity for white women in the context of a white capitalist patriarchy calls not only for a compulsory heterosexuality, but a compulsory white heterosexuality (Deliovsy 2005). One telling component of the anti-interracial animus directed toward white women who were intimately involved with black men is the notion that they are "too beautiful to be with a black man" (Deliovsy 1999). Many white women, who were considered stereotypically attractive, were admonished by family and friends for wasting their stereotypical good looks on someone "black" and racially undeserving. Time and time again they were reproached with "but you are so pretty. You don't have to settle for a black man. What's wrong with you?" (1999, 67). This discourse suggests that the most sensible and appropriate expression of feminine desirability that makes the fullest use of stereotypical white good looks is to put those good looks at the disposal of a white male. At the heart of this discourse is the notion that the bodies of white women ought to be regulated in service of and for the pleasures of white men and to the higher ideal of heteronormative white supremacy.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?"

I have suggested that patriarchy's portrait of women reflects two criteria: one based on physical ideals and the other based on behavioural dynamics. But, this still does not reveal the whole picture.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?" Marcia Ann Gillespie

answers the question by saying that America's mirror (and Canada's I would add), screams back,

Blondie, Rapunzel, Cinderella, Marilyn Monroe, Christie Brinkley, Diane Sawyer, Michelle Pfeiffer. Oh yes, sometimes, the look changes...But no matter that they may sing the praises of voluptuous this year or dark sultry the next, the objects of beauty are always overwhelmingly white. And as the ambitious so-so singer named Madonna knew when she reached for the bleach and peroxide, blonde is still considered the apogee.
(Gillespie 2003, 202)

Given the previous responses of the research participants and my daughter's exclamation, Gillespie is right indeed. Gillespie clearly apprehends the implicit racial component to Western feminine beauty ideals. Who is typically blonde and beautiful in Western culture? The answers are fairly obvious, but I think it points to an important issue in how white femininity and white racial imagery are represented in popular culture. Richard Dyer in *White* argues that, "[w]hites are everywhere in representation. Yet precisely because of this and their placing as norm they seem not be represented to themselves as whites but as people who are variously gendered, classed, sexualised and abled" (Dyer 1997, 3).

In a manner similar to how white people are positioned, white femininity is positioned as normative because it is not seen as white *per se* but rather as just femininity. In this way, most of the women in my study were able to point to the many defining characteristics of normative femininity, such as beauty, class and heterosexuality while never naming them as white. In this framework, race is an absent presence, operating "invisibly" beneath white discourse, while at the same time animating implicit racialized norms of beauty

and femininity.

In view of Western ideals, it is white women who are primarily represented as thin, blonde and beautiful in these images. But, we need to ask who are we not seeing represented and how this strategic "invisibility" is achieved and what are its implications. These questions are important because who we see and do not see and in what cultural contexts, reveal entrenched dominant cultural values and sensibilities that point to two primary issues. One issue is that as recently as 10 years ago Africans, Asians and Aborigines were essentially "invisible people" (Biagai and Kern-Foxworth 1997, 155); they were excluded from popular culture's editorial coverage as well as advertisement depictions. The second issue is the context in which racial and ethnic representations are seen to exist. Numerous studies have revealed that when not "invisible," representation and coverage of racially marginalized women is most often distorted, unrepresentative and demeaning (1997, 155). In one instance, Gina stated, "you don't really see images of Asian women unless it is context specific...Asian women would be seen selling 'Asia' if you know what I mean." Calling this representation "contextualized in otherness," Lilly argued that, "women who are from the South Pacific, for example, have this exotic background going on...their beauty is tied to their [race]. It is not them as a beauty."

Gina's and Lilly's reflections are interesting because they speak to an issue central in representations of beauty in a white capitalist patriarchy and draw attention to who is permitted to be an icon of "beauty." Susan Bordo, for example, states that,

consumer capitalism depends on the continual production of novelty...to stimulate desire, and it frequently drops into marginalized neighbourhoods in order to find them. But such elements will either be explicitly framed as exotica, or,

within the overall system of meaning, they will not be permitted to overwhelm the representation and establish a truly alternative or "subversive" model of beauty or success. (2003, 25)

Establishing a truly alternative model of beauty suggests that there is a standard model of beauty from which anything else is a deviation. This standard is not women of African, Asian, Aboriginal or Latina descent, though as individuals they may be contextually beautiful (i.e., beautiful in spite of...). Contextualized within their respective racial frames, as a group, they represent and signify the exotic/erotic but not the beautiful.

Mirroring this argument, Gina believes that the beauty industry categorizes different groups of women according to their ethnicity or race. She recalls that when she was a young woman she was frequently told that she was "exotic and sultry looking." Sera had a similar experience in being told that as a young Italian woman she had "that sexy ethnic thing going on." When discussing with Allison the issue of feminine images and representation she relayed to me an experience she had as a young woman. Referring to my dark brown hair and eyes and olive coloured skin, she explained that, "I had a friend who had your colouring. She looked a little like you but she had the Bianca Jagger lips. A [white] male friend of mine described her as the kind of girl you look at and you can't get it out of your pants fast enough."

Allison explained that she was put off by the comment and asked him what he meant. She explained that "he said you are the type that [guys] date and take serious." Allison described herself as a girl who had the "long flowing blonde hair and freckles." The implication here is that the European ethnic "Other" with her dark colouring and full lips conveys sexual access for (white) masculine pleasure, while the wholesome (white) girl next door with the "flowing

blonde hair and freckles" you take home to mother. Gina (Macedonian), Sera (Italian) and other non-Anglo-Saxon white women are, therefore, exoticized/eroticized within their respective ethnic frame. They are not viewed as beauties in their own right but as "ethnic" beauties. Their ethnicity separates them from an Anglo-Saxon norm/ideal. It is important to understand, however, that while these women are relegated, contained and marginalized within the category of "ethnic" beauty they are nevertheless white relative to negatively racialized women. Whiteness, as a process of positive racialization, confers on all white women access to white femininity. And while not all white women (working class, "ethnic" and lesbian) are granted "full" membership, racially marginalized women are relegated outside the boundaries of white femininity, for they occupy the category of subordinated femininity (Collins 2004). Some racially marginalized women (for example, celebrities) may be invited to sit at the table of white femininity. This invitation, however, is "always already and only honorary, contingent, itinerant and temporary" (Davy 1995,198).

These responses illuminate the disturbing patterns in dominant racial and ethnic representation in popular culture. With respect to beauty representations, Bordo argues, there is a homogenization of images in Western culture. This homogenization means those racial, ethnic and sexual markers "that disturb Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual expectation and identifications" (Bordo 2003, 25) are, oftentimes, smoothed out or eliminated. But I would also argue that, sometimes, racial and ethnic markers, for example full lips or "big butts," are appropriated into normative definitions of feminine beauty and become markers of beauty when on the bodies of white women (for example, full lips on Angelina Jolie are designated as beautiful and seductive). Interestingly, such appropriations of "primitive" and highly sexualized attributes can be traced to white, Victorian, middle-class women's

appropriation of "Hottentot" physiognomy (Gilman 1986).

Normative definitions of feminine beauty, however, are not totalizing forces; they can and do shift and change in response to historical conditions (Bordo 2003). But, in terms of dominant beauty and racial/ethnic representation, the message is clear - it's a white woman's world ("straight, "Anglo, middle-class, at that). This message is reinforced by the fact that racially marginalized women are either noticeably absent in dominant cultural representations of beauty or when they are represented are whitified, "contextualized in otherness" or distorted. As the models of feminine beauty, white women (sterilized of any "ethnic" identification) occupy the apex of a beauty hierarchy. It is their feminine beauty that becomes normative (Collins 2004). As Sally Markowitz argues, "[i]t is not difficult, after all, to find a pronounced racial component to the idea of femininity itself: to be truly feminine is, in many ways, to be white" (Markowitz 2001, 390).

These white feminine representations, however, are not "real" as the women themselves conveyed earlier. If the women we see gracing *Cosmo*, *Glamour*, *Elle*, etc., are not Gail or other "real" women of European descent who are they? They are white patriarchy's regurgitation of what constitutes "hegemonic femininity" (Collins 2004), ironically, represented by popular culture's plastic and celluloid icons of white femininity, such as the Barbie doll, Pamela Anderson or Madonna.

But the Barbie doll, among others, is just one contemporary manifestation of a white feminine beauty ideal. Idealized representations of normative white femininity have existed long before Barbie's entrance onto the scene. In a complex argument that I am simplifying, idealized representations of white femininity occurred in distinct historical phases within the context of European colonialism/slavery and imperialism (Dyer 1997; hooks 1981). These idealized representations portray white

women as bathed and permeated by white light (Dyer 1997). This glowing representation was constructed alongside their positioning as the moral custodians and bearers of the white race. White women were accorded a position of moral superiority above all non-Anglo-Saxon women and at the same time were contained within rigid identities/categories of virtuous lady and mother. These categories were not separate from "glowing" representations of white beauty. They, in fact, were conflated.

As a day-to-day ideal, the image of the glowing virtuous white woman no longer has the same social/cultural currency as it did in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Dyer (1997) points out, however, that the discourse surrounding this contradictory image and its symbolic referents retain their power in various forms of culture and commercial representation (1997, 131). He suggests that to "glow still remains a key quality in idealized representations of white women" (1997, 32) and can be seen especially in "the representations of the white heterosexual couple, the bearers of the race" (1997, 131). A key point is that white women's image signifies the apogee of beauty, motherhood and morality (Carter 1997).

Conclusion: Coming Full Circle

Homogenized representations of "whitified" feminine beauty become normalized and function as models against which women continually measure, judge, discipline and correct themselves (Bordo, 2003). While the research participants pointed out that the reigning images of feminine beauty are not real, they do not have to be real nor are they intended to be real. What is at issue here are the real effects of these images. These images are ideological and provide the benchmark for the discipline and normalization of women's bodies in order to minimize the distance between the "real" (embodied, unmodified, not air brushed) and the ideal (whitified

feminine images of beauty). Along the way, women learn (or should learn) that they need to have constant vigilance in their self-assessment, continually searching for methods of correction. Keeping in line with normative white femininity, Debra Gimlin (2001) argues, these methods require an enactment of a normative identity, which is premised on "the youthful 'WASP' who is the only truly valued member of contemporary Western Culture" (2001, 142). In this context, methods of correction such as cosmetic surgery must approximate the youthful WASP in order to confer beauty. This approximation means Asian woman, for example, getting "double eyelid" surgery, Jewish women getting a "nose job" and African women bleaching their skin (Chapkis 1986).

Women, however, also learn that feminine beauty has less to do with physical perfection and more to do with behaviour and decorum in service of white masculinity. Naomi Wolf argues, "beauty is a currency system like the gold standard. Like an economy, it is determined by politics" (Wolf 1990, 12). Assigning value to women's bodies, based on cultural and racial standards of beauty, is an expression of white masculine power relations in which all women are ultimately the losers; however, some lose more than others. This assignment of value placed on beauty, Wolf argues, creates a vertical hierarchy in which women must compete. By now it should be clear who are the winners and losers in this competition. As Patricia Hill Collins states, "these benchmarks construct a discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a normative yardstick for all femininities in which Black women typically are relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy" (Collins 2004, 193). But this competition is more than looking a particular way, while that certainly may help. Being a winner in this competition means behaving appropriately by the rules of normative white femininity, which is in line with compulsory white heterosexuality. The mantra that white women involved with black men are "too

beautiful to be with a black man" starkly reveals the connection between these two ideals.

We have now come full circle to patriarchy's portrait of women to find it has multiple complexities with differential implications for women. When we speak of femininity we must understand to whom it historically refers. When Sojourner Truth, for example, repeatedly exclaimed in 1851, "Ain't I a woman," as an African woman she was speaking to the scientific and social racism that proclaimed her body not quite female and human and therefore undeserving of the category woman/lady. Truth and other African women, who were "chattel beasts of burden" like Aboriginal women who were seen as exterminable "squaws" and like Asian women represented as docile Geishas, are vital examples that images of feminine bodies carry significant class and racial connotations.

Femininity, then, far from being race-neutral, is always already raced as white (Elder 1998; Frankenberg 1993; hooks 1992). In other words, white women represent the "Benchmark Woman" (Thornton 1995), an ideology that constructs "hegemonic, marginalized, and subordinated femininities" (Collins 2004, 193) relative to a white female norm. To be clear, I am not arguing that white women's bodies are truly valued in their own right but, rather, are deemed more valuable in the hierarchy of femininity and in the role of white reproduction and nation building (hooks 1990; Ware 1992). While white women clearly benefit from this arrangement, they are in many respects trapped in a gilded cage. For what is experienced as power and control is in fact the reproduction of normative white femininity whose practices are intended to regulate the white female body in docility and obedience to cultural and racial demands. As Collins argues, "[t]his ideology prescribes behaviours for all women based on these assumptions, and then holds all women...to standards that only some

women (including many White ones) may be able to achieve" (2004, 193). With this critical elaboration, my daughter's desire for "normal" hair because she hated her curly, frizzy hair comes into sharp focus. The narratives of the research participants (and my daughter's) call attention to the contradictory ways that intersecting identities are taken up in everyday engagement with white patriarchal strategies of feminine regulation.

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