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## Altered Beauty

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### African–Caribbean women decolonizing racialized aesthetics in Toronto, Canada

*This study reviews narratives of black Canadian women who problematize the racism that they face in relation to beauty. Critical Race Theory is used to analyze the effects of hair and skin discrimination and the consequences of ideological racism surrounding perceptions of beauty. The participants review material aids, discuss their past experiences with racism, and reveal anti-racist strategies in order to decolonize normalized grooming practices.*

*Her skin is dark. Her hair chemically straightened. Not only is she fundamentally convinced that straightened hair is more beautiful than curly, kinky, natural hair, she believes that lighter skin makes one more worthy, more valuable in the eyes of others. Despite her parents' effort to raise their children in an affirming black context, she has internalized white supremacist values and aesthetics, a way of looking and seeing the world that negates her value. Of course this is not a new story.*

—bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*

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#### INTRODUCTION

The daily negotiation of one's beauty is not a new phenomenon for black women. As Shirley Anne Tate (2007) explains, the topic of skin shade and hair texture remain a long-standing issue carried into the twenty-first century. Dark skin shades and natural, afro-textured hair are judged in society through the lens of a racialized aesthetic, in which these features are socially constructed and discriminately labelled as different. The grooming practice of altering hair texture or skin tone to make the diversity of black women's body surfaces *fit* within beauty norms further perpetuates

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the perception of straight hair and lighter skin shades as the Western standard. I identify myself as a dark-skinned black woman with locs,<sup>1</sup> tightly-coiled, afro-textured hair that is sectioned and grows in a twisted grouping. As an individual with dark skin and natural afro hair, I wonder how black women decolonize projected ideas and judgements that may conflict with their own views on beauty. Interviews with black Canadian women in Toronto reveal that despite the fact that black women find themselves in a dialectical position between being racialized by their beauty on the one hand and being expected to conform to ideological racism with respect to beauty on the other, some choose anti-racist strategies in order to decolonize themselves.

Since Critical Race Theory (CRT) is useful when analyzing race and racism on a structural, institutional, and individual level (James et al., 2010), this methodology can be applied in order to understand the lived experiences of black women and how they are directly affected by racialized aesthetics. For the present study, material objects such as hair- and skin-altering aids were presented in interviews to evoke conversations with the participants relating to times when they or others were judged for or discriminated against for their skin shade or hair textures. Narratives were analyzed in order to contextualize how black women face an interlocking experience of race, gender, and social difference. This study provides a historical context of the racialization and delegitimization of black skin and hair texture followed by an examination of how standards of beauty may be considered a form of ideological racism. Finally, grooming practices and the consequences of racism are discussed along with anti-racist strategies that are taking shape in the present day.

### RACIALIZATION OF SKIN AND HAIR



**Figure 1.** Fairy Soap ad.

Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps (2001) outlined a historic hair chronology that includes early discrimination of black hair from fifteenth-century to present-day America. West African hairstyles, each with its own unique style, were a crown of glory that indicated a person's age, strength, devotion to a spiritual deity, marital status, religion, ethnic identity, rank, geographic region, and even a surname from a clan. European contact during the time of the slave trade in the Caribbean and the Americas changed this traditional understanding. Slave traders shaved the heads of their Wolof, Mende, Mandingo, and Yoruba captives; this "was the first step the Europeans took to erase the slave's culture and alter the relationship between the African and his or her hair" (Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 11). How a female slave wore her hair was relative to her work

assignment, because a head rag hid the unsightly hair of the field slave and those working in the master's home often had styled hair imitating their white owners. The significance of African hairstyles was suppressed and replaced within a colonized system of bondage and judgment.

A general scan of nineteenth-century soap ads shows that they include visual and written descriptions that classified black hair as wool. This form of thinking reflects a time when black bodies were pathologized and constructed as inferior because of their dark skin and tightly coiled hair. "Science," such as eugenics, ranked such features at the bottom of evolutionary ranking. Racist nineteenth-century soap ads rationalized the superiority of white over dark skin, such as in a Fairy Soap ad (Figure 1) in which an African child is asked, "Why doesn't your mamma wash you with Fairy soap?" Racist advertising firms

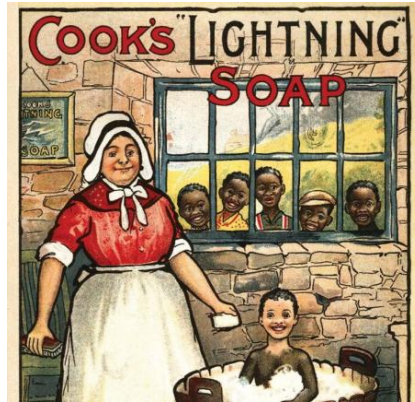


Figure 2. Cook's "Lightning" Soap ad.

reified soap for its cleansing and purifying qualities as if it had the power to wash black skin white (Hall, 2001). Race thinking was further perpetuated with a Cook's "Lightning" soap ad (Figure 2) that exaggerated and dehumanized the shade of African-descended peoples' skin in order to position the product as a solution to "lightening" it.

Since the nineteenth century, skin has been socially constructed as different through the relational interaction with racialized *Others*. This concept of *Other* derived from the *race concept*, in which observable characteristics such as phenotype (skin colour) and hair texture were classified into eighteenth-century typologies of Caucasoid (white), Negroid (black), and Mongoloid (Asian and Oriental) groups "defined as different by virtue of predetermined properties that are seen as fixed and permanent" (Fleras, 2010, p. 31). Scholarly research has shown time and again that lighter-skinned and straighter-haired slaves sold for the best household positions (Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1986).

Judged for their race and difference of skin and hair features, former slaves made conflicted decisions in order to survive daily discrimination. Their chances in life were proportional to how light their skin colour was. A lighter-skinned slave shaved her/his hair to remove evidence of blackness in order to escape for freedom (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Some of the fairest blacks concealed their identity to pass as a white person (Prince, 2009). Therefore, a skin-shade, hair-texture hierarchy designated darker skin and "kinky" hair as less attractive and as belonging to a less intelligent and inferior slave within these communities in the Caribbean and United States. This hierarchy impacted life opportunities, status, and freedom; however, these were not

limited to the immediate post-slavery or civil rights era. A clear link between skin colour, hair texture, and success created reinforced attitudes carried over from slavery and colonialism to present-day judgments of beauty, femininity, and attractiveness in postcolonial countries (Tate, 2007). It may be argued that overt racism shifted to hidden discrimination and it is within this context that the next section examines how female descendants of Caribbean/African and Black Canadians experience racism with respect to beauty today.

### BEAUTY AS IDEOLOGICAL RACISM

Beauty “is about an appeal to the senses and a judgement made based on that appeal” (Tate, 2009, p. 2). By analyzing subjective definitions, one is able to consider whose standards and interests particular notions of beauty are based upon. From the standpoint of feminist theory, women of colour claim that global definitions of beauty are typically defined by whiteness with Western European features associated with civility, modernity, and Christianity (Hunter, 2005). This definition is evidence of ideological racism, the “prevalence of cultural values and communication patterns in advancing dominant interests as natural and normal at the expense of those who are defined as irrelevant and inferior” (Fleras, 2010, p. 78). Furthermore, racism of this sort can be actualized by normative and everyday racism; both types are defined as reinforced racism expressed in daily life and interaction, such as language and images.

According to Fleras & Elliot (2010), beauty ideology borrows a number of concepts from racism including *whiteness*—an accepted centre that presents itself as the unquestioned norm and power—and *race thinking*, which is a structure of thought that divides up the world between deserving and undeserving (Razack, 2008). From a Critical Race Theory perspective, whiteness yields an entitlement to rank-perceived differences in ascending/descending scales of worth (Byrd & Tharps, 2001) and is embedded within social institutions onto individuals in systemic ways. In the context of beauty, the process of *racialization* begins with taking perceived racial differences and evaluating them based on a perceived hierarchy that defines attractive, beautiful, and acceptable as white. The process of racialization continues when the hierarchy transfers negative meanings onto a racialized body on which “differences [are] visible for all to see, and thus provide[s] ‘the incontrovertible evidence’ for a naturalization of racial difference” (Hall, 2001, p. 245). Through this process, the racialized individual is deemed an inferior *Other* because her body does not reflect the characteristics deemed to prevail at the top of the hierarchy.

Okazawa-Rey et al. (1986) argued that beauty carries a message with illusory power transferred from society to institutions and then onto individuals. I argue that the fact that most black women are disproportionately affected by these labels is evidence of normative racism, which perpetuates a Eurocentric ideology privileging white features as superior, natural, and normal. Interviewees in our current study

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unanimously agreed that this ideology exists and one also challenged it: “YES! Light-skinned women are placed on a pedestal. By default, because someone is light skin they are automatically better looking? Absolutely not! There are some ugly, light-skinned people.” Beauty, then, is a manifestation of ideological racism that incorporates hierarchical perceptions inherent to *whiteness*, *race thinking*, and *racialization*. Beauty is therefore an example of Frantz Fanon’s (1967) argument of the problem of hierarchizing culture, a process by which the normalcy of certain values and the use of power are used to impose dominant values over another culture and negate its value.

### **EVERYDAY RACISM OF BLACK HAIR/SKIN AND GROOMING DECISIONS**

Participants reflected on the material aids<sup>2</sup> presented in the interview. Looking at and touching each object triggered past experiences of being referred to as “blackie,” “burnt toast,” and “tar baby.” Such labels represented *everyday racism*, the unconscious daily speech habits that demean minorities (Fleras, 2010). One participant shared:

When I saw the white children in my class have hair that blowed in the wind, I wanted that. I had straightened hair past my shoulders but if my hair got wet, it was a “cotton-ball.” I hated that. I did not want my hair to be natural because I was ashamed of that. My mom said that pressed hair was easier to manage. It came as a convenience. Going natural meant not being “white-enough.”

This narrative spoke of the social construction of white beauty born of racial and gender ideologies that shape what black women think about beauty culture (Banks, 2000). Echoing Shirley Tate (2009), beauty’s scale of worth is racialized and, consequently, no one in the racialized group can ever measure up.

Anne Ducille’s (2003) assertion that black hair has been both culturally and commercially constructed as “ugly,” “nappy,” “wild,” “woolly,” and in constant need of taming, straightening, cropping, and cultivating allows us to examine alteration practices used in daily grooming as a response to ideological racism. Excluding medical and dermatological reasons, black hair and skin alteration is related to everyday and normative racism. The social conditioning to alter the natural state of hair and the belief that lighter skin is more valued is an ingrained reality in the lives of black women. Black women “spend millions each year on a variety of products that promise to straighten, relax or otherwise make more manageable kinky black hair” (Ducille, 2003, p. 343). Additionally, the internet holds hundreds of websites of the “best” skin-lightening products and strategies (Hunter, 2011). For decades now, such grooming practices have been normalized in North America.

For a study about the beauty perceptions of African Canadian and Caribbean populations in Toronto, it is important to consider the influence of U.S. popular

media. Black-beauty product advertisements, black media, celebrities, and music videos show diverse images of black women whose grooming decisions are influenced by the market in order to follow a trend. Not only do media platforms reinforce beauty standards but they also create divergent pressures to navigate a standard of black beauty in the workplace setting, a space where hair may be covertly judged by colleagues. Althea Prince (2009) explained that the Toronto marketplace demands a certain appearance of black women and that black women are sensitive to the societal implications of what is required of them. Indeed, black women in Toronto are subject to potential barriers against them that indicate that their hair requires assessment, attention, and action.

## CONSEQUENCES OF RACIALIZED AESTHETICS

### Internalized racism

In *Race and Well-Being: The Lives, Hopes and Activism of African Canadians* (James et al., 2010), manifestations of racism highlight that some African Canadians accept the negative imagery associated with African-descended peoples and the manner in which it results in the hatred of their physical appearance. When a black woman devalues her racialized aesthetics because of imposed ideological racism, this constitutes *internalized racism*. Internalized racism occurs when “the individual internalizes limits and begins to limit themselves” (James et al., 2010, p. 128). Internalized racism can be expressed through sadness, helplessness, lack of confidence, and anger.

When reviewing YouTube clips of talk show discussions on skin alteration, one can witness black women stating that verbal attacks reinforced their choice to apply hazardous bleach to lighten dark skin. Some black women define themselves by the limits hair alteration can create. In response to this, one interviewee shared the following:

Creamy crack [hair relaxer], a chemical that changes your hair DNA and changes you, eventually. Some women cannot live past their new growth of their natural hair. They don't know how to handle it and that must change because it is society who says that relaxing your hair makes you a better person. You should not let the hair relaxer define you and take over your life.

This type of definition takes place when a woman defines her beauty primarily based on her hair and skin shade and when she uses skin/hair-altering products in order to become what she is not.

Frantz Fanon (1967) analyzed the effects of colonialism from an economic and psychological point of view; he claimed that *inferiority-guilt complexes* as relational experiences defeat and inferiorize a subjugated group of people. The *inferiority complex* is an individual's acceptance of hegemonic views, followed by acts that

indicate taking on the cultural ideal and accepting the normalcy of the oppressor. The *guilt complex* is another manifestation, which Fanon defines as members of a racialized group, gender, or class position who continue to identify with their original culture but who feel guilt for leaving it behind in order to assimilate into the dominant ideal. Applying the inferiority-guilt complex to beauty, socialization, and everyday language descriptors against dark skin and with reference to good and bad hair (e.g. loose and flowing versus hard, tough or coarse) reinforces neo-colonial ideologies that are then embodied by the next generation of the ethnic group in question. The paradox here is that black people use negative language descriptors as everyday racism against one another or on themselves. In the context of this research, the inferiority-guilt complex operates when black women grieve over how they were never taught how to care for, love, and style their hair in its natural state or when they express resentment toward their hair altogether.

Examples of internalized racism involve black mothers authorizing the choice on behalf of their daughters to use chemical relaxers at young ages based on their fears and beliefs. As a participant recalled: “You just had no choice—my siblings and I were doing it.” Here, internalized racism was reinforced by the opinions of others and their own resistance against unaltered measures of beauty. Consequently, family members may resist those who decide to transition to natural hair texture because it challenges the normalized practice of altering hair. One interviewee remembered her mother’s disdain when saying “That is not you at your best.”

Internalized racism is also at play when parents use skin-bleaching creams on their children (Hunter, 2011). Bleaching skin gains popularity, in part, because some women see its use as a solution when they face judgements from some black boys and men, rationalizing that they should seek lighter-skinned females as mates over darker-skinned females. This topic triggered a past judgment an interviewee heard from the opposite sex when she was told, “You’re pretty, for a dark-skinned girl.” Consequently, internalized racism persists throughout generations. An early sign of this inherited notion is witnessing “a little kid who talks about ‘You’re too Black’ or ‘Your hair is too knotty’” (James et al., 2010, p. 128).

### **Colourism and consumerism**

Colourism is a perceived hierarchy formed when lighter-skinned men and women become privileged over darker-skinned people. It is important to keep in mind, however, that women are disproportionately more discriminated against based on their skin tone, since it is considered an important element in defining women’s beauty (Hunter, 2007). Indeed, beauty is a form of *social capital* (Hunter, 2002) and the act of employing skin-bleaching products to achieve social networks is buying *racial capital* (Hunter, 2011), which in turn is associated with phenotype and the forms in which others perceive individuals. The following is a participant’s initial reaction to seeing skin-bleaching cream:

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I used Ambi and she lied! It did not fade any spots on my skin. It is a great “lotion” [sarcastically]. I have problem spots that I am not comfortable with and would love to have a full complexion [even tone], but there is no product that can achieve that so I accept what I have.

The mass-marketing of hegemonic representations of white beauty demonstrates that colonial ideologies continue to have a profound effect on women of colour.

Colourism reinforces the use of skin-bleaching products because it reflects a desire to achieve the ideal of physical attractiveness, external recognition, social capital, and economic advantage that lighter-skinned women have in employment, education, dating, and marriage. Interestingly, skin-bleaching is on the rise beyond North America: communities in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean also aspire to a standard of beauty based on whiteness.

### **Altered and artificial hair as a social norm**

Interviewees shared their peers’ reactions after they proceeded with hair straightening, hair extensions, weaves, or putting on a lace-front wig. According to Thompson (2009), straighter hair has become normative as “the image of Black beauty in popular Black magazines gives the impression that Black hair is only beautiful when it is altered” (Thompson, 2009, p. 847). Habitually women face extremely positive reactions after hair alteration. For example, a change to relaxed hair received the compliment, “You are so beautiful!”; on the other hand, the tone of reactions changes to critical dissension when natural hair texture is “downgraded,” with comments like “You are SO brave.” Although white women and other ethnic groups have concerns with their hair, only black women’s cultural consciousness is questioned (Banks, 2000).

Chris Rock and Jeff Stilson’s documentary *Good Hair* (2009) outlined how South Asian women’s sacrificial ritual of shaving their hair is intended as a means to elevate their relationship to their god. The beauty industry consumes their hair and threads it together to sell to black women globally. An important consequence of using synthetic hair is that the black beauty industry increasingly accepts the pathology of taking hair from another ethnic group and placing it onto black women’s bodies rather than loving the natural hair textures growing from their own scalp.

### **Health concerns**

Chemicals found in hair relaxers not only cause burns and scalp lesions but the toxic ingredients are absorbed by entry from the scalp. There are medical concerns that hair relaxer use is associated with uterine leiomyomata (fibroids), a condition that is two to three times more likely among black women than any other group (Wise, Palmer, Reich, Cozier, & Rosenberg, 2012). This product is not approved by the



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United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) so its chemical properties are unclear. However, it is known that ingredients such as sodium hydroxide, calcium hydroxide, and thioglycolic salts have estrogenic effects. Furthermore, skin-whitening and bleaching creams often contain mercury, topical steroids, and hydroquinone that can lead to skin cancer and that can damage internal organs such as the adrenal glands, liver, and kidney (Hunter, 2011). Frequent use of hair relaxers and braiding with synthetic hair can lead to damaged hair follicles, thinning hair, a receding hairline and hair loss if the chemical solvent is not washed out entirely from the scalp. Aside from the side effects listed, there are some women who are private about health issues such as alopecia or scalp conditions; therefore, it is also important that their space be respected and that they be understood for their choice to wear synthetic hair or wigs.

### **Anti-racist aesthetic strategies**

I incorporated Diana Turk's (2006) methodology of presenting skin-bleaching cream, hair relaxer, a hot comb, an afro pick, lace-front wig and samples of synthetic or human hair as material objects to evoke personal dialogue around hair or skin alteration. Overall, interviewees indicated that hair and skin alteration is not only powerful and systemic but internalized within them as individuals. Interestingly, several interviewees countered ideological and internalized racism by taking an action-oriented, anti-racist approach to change.

Discussions revealed that individual and collective responsibility are required in order to use multiple positionality and differential locations of power, privilege, and social disadvantage to decentre the root cause and destabilize racism (Dei, 2000). Interviewees indicated that today there is wider use of organic products (pure shea butter, black soap, or cocoa butter), adjustments to diets to improve even tone of skin, and reduced use of chemical products. Their informed responses consciously omitted negative language descriptors commonly used to describe black hair. On a regular basis, they self-reflect and promote self-encouragement in order to unpack self-doubt and negative external reactions in their daily lives. They are self-confident about their difference and challenge white beauty by loving their own features. They educate themselves about the historical discourse and natural hair-care techniques so that they are living examples of what they preach. They create or are part of support circles (e.g. natural hair networks and events) and style each other's hair and share natural hair-care strategies that they were never taught as children. Conversations with their mothers heal past grievances and help educate women in their families about accepting natural hair and skin tone in the present. Open dialogue with men is encouraged in order to stop perpetuating the light skin/straight hair preference. A few mothers even sanction themselves to impose hair straightening practices (use of relaxer, hot comb) and introduce natural hairstyles periodically with their children until their child decides her own future hair-grooming practice.

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Personally, I have rejected all forms of hair or skin alteration and I feel liberated to enjoy who I am as well.

### CONCLUSION

Critical Race Theory demonstrates links between ideology, social structures, and racism that promote white aesthetics; it also helps us to interrogate how beauty is a form of ideological racism passed on from colonialism and now internalized within the black community. We learn from Shirley Tate (2007) that racialized aesthetics involve a process of self-discovery that is mediated between the internal and external judgments of one's skin colour and hair. This means that a personal decision of how to negotiate one's beauty is always at hand. Nevertheless, much work in combating racialized aesthetics is yet to be done since young girls continue to be erroneously driven into the trap of hair and skin alteration and now even some black men use skin-bleaching creams in order to better approximate perceived notions of black beauty.

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<sup>1</sup> "Locs" is an abbreviation of "dreadlocks," when tightly coiled afro-textured hair naturally joins together to form a twisted grouping of hair.

<sup>2</sup> Material aids included: an afro pick, synthetic hair, lace front wig, hair relaxer, skin-bleaching soap or cream, and a hot comb.