



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Tate, S (2017) Libidinal economies of Black hair: subverting the governance of strands, subjectivities and politics. *Image and Text*, 29 (1). pp. 95-111. ISSN 1021-1497

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/3765/>

Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Libidinal economies of Black hair: subverting the governance of strands, subjectivities and politics

Shirley Anne Tate

Carnegie School of Education, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, United Kingdom

s.a.tate@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Word count: 6828

Abstract

Beginning with an auto-ethnographic account of my experiences of hair, I draw on newspaper coverage of school exclusions and the banning of Black girls' Afros and boys' cornrows in the United States, the United Kingdom and South Africa. I do so in order to analyse the racialised 'libidinal economy' (Wilderson 2010) of Black natural hair as a transnational surfacing linking the African continent and its diaspora. In the twenty-first century, these hairstyles are objects of commodity capitalism and can adorn heads transracially. However, I contend that they remain troubling for schools when they become forms of surfacings for Black bodies. The symbolic, political, material and affective connections made between hair, "race", and racism – that is, hair's racialised libidinal economy – is the frame through which the analysis of contemporary readings of Black natural hair as "dangerous" and negatively affective in terms of fear, disgust, contempt and shame, is pursued. The examples cited show that Black natural hair is vulnerable to political, aesthetic, psychic, social and affective attack by the ideology, politics and practice of the white/whitened state as it operates through school policies. Thus, I contend that Black natural hair, as it surfaces the Black African descent body, is connected to anti-Black institutional racism. Reading "hair stories" as texts on surfacings illustrates the affective entanglements of an anti-Black world shown through attacks on Black natural hair's "unruly" strands, textures and styles. Hair's affective entanglements, normalising aesthetics and anti-Black institutional racism contained within school "rules of conduct" on "acceptable appearance", drag colonial ideology on "race", respectability and aesthetics into contemporary negro-phobia. However, Black natural hair as surfacing also signifies Black transnational affiliation in its (re)turn to twentieth-century Black anti-racist aesthetics within contemporary Black decolonial hair politics focused on "naturalness". This focus illustrates that there is Black political, social and psychic vulnerability alongside agency, which refuses to be silenced within the relational life of Black natural hair as it comes up against white/whitened power.

Keywords

Hair, libidinal economies, decolonial, anti-Black racism, affect, aesthetics

Introduction

Black natural hair exerts 'sticky associations between signs, figures and objects' (Ahmed 2004:120), by linking the African continent and its diaspora through the politics of hair as surfacings of the body racialised as Black and insurgent. Using hair and school stories in the media from South Africa (SA), the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), I contend that Black natural hair is located as a zone of anti-Black racism's negative affect. Read as "dangerous", Black natural hair is vulnerable to political, aesthetic, psychic, social and affective attack by the ideology, politics and practice of the white/whitened state as it operates through school rules. By reading "hair stories" as texts on surfacings, I point to the affective entanglements of an anti-Black world shown through attacks on Black natural hair's "unruly" textures and stylisations. However, natural hair also signifies Black anti-racist aesthetics. Natural hair participates in a racialised 'libidinal economy' (Wilderson 2010) of white/whitened disgust, contempt and fear located in institutional anti-Black racism alongside Black affiliation, which affects the politics of the everyday and the personal. The symbolic, political, material and affective connections made between hair, "race" and racism – that is, hair's racialised "libidinal economy" – serves as a critical framework for discussing contemporary Black decolonial hair politics focused on "naturalness", vulnerability and the relational life of Black/white/whitened power. Hair's affective relationalities, normalising aesthetics and anti-Black institutional racism contained within "rules of conduct" on "acceptable appearance" drag colonial ideology on "race", respectability and aesthetics into contemporary times. Beginning with an auto-ethnographic account of my experiences of hair, I move on to examine Black hair's challenge to racism (Hiltebeitel & Miller 1998; Cheang 2008) and its decolonising potential as it resists being read from the perspective of the white norm by drawing on ideologies of naturalness from twentieth-century Black anti-racist aesthetics (Taylor 2000).

Hair stories: surfacings and Black politics

Growing up in 1960s-1970s Jamaica, hair rules for a middle-class girl were that it had to be neat, "looked after", plaited, cornrowed, and/or styled. As a teenager, my Afro had to form a perfect halo around my face, and my short Afro that followed was cut weekly. Short and chemically straightened hair with a fringe followed, then chemically curled hair, asymmetrically cut natural hair, braided extensions, and now in my sixties, my hair is a very short and natural. These stylisation changes were as much about fashion as they were about politics, and straightening my hair did not mean that I doubted my Black identity, or was ashamed of my natural hair texture, or that I had fallen prey to

the “straight hair rule” of white supremacy. Retrospectively, I wonder why I have never had dreadlocks (locks) even as an adult. Of course, they were prohibited at school, in workplaces and were negatively regarded by the middle class/elite because of their connection to Rastafarianism and its struggle for Black liberation within Jamaica as a colonial/post-colonial state. Locks demonstrate the value attached to natural Black hair by Rastafarians, and are associated with Marcus Garvey’s Black conscientisation and critique of the economic, political, social and aesthetic oppression of Black people, in Jamaica and elsewhere (Chevannes 1994). Locks signify working class, urban/rural dispossessed insurrection against the respectable appearance regimes of Jamaican colonial and (post)-colonial society where colourism systematically excludes darker-skinned, African descent bodies (Tate & Law 2015). However, marked by class struggle and dissent from the Jamaican pigmentocracy, locks remained marginal in 1930s to 1970s Jamaica until Bob Marley burst onto the international music scene. Currently in Jamaica, there are “roots” and “cultural” Rastas with the former valuing Black bodies and the latter being an appropriation of Black “cool” stylisation.

This begins to illustrate that Black hair’s racialised libidinal economy operates:

variously across scales and [it] is as “objective” as political economy. It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction and the violence of lethal consumption ... it is the whole structure of psychic and emotional life ... something more than but inclusive of or traversed by ... a “structure of feeling”; it is a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, phobias capable of great mobility and tenacious fixation (Wilderson 2010:7).

By “structure of feeling” Raymond Williams (1967) means a common set of perceptions and values shared by a generation within a particular culture, space and time, which, for Wilderson, is either included in libidinal economies, or traverse them. Media stories on ‘Black hair/style politics’ (Mercer 1987) show ‘the structure of feeling’ (Williams 1967) surrounding Black hair that transcends space and time. In other words, these stories show its racialised libidinal economy. This racialising deterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari 1980) disarticulates the cornrow, Afro, locks, and braids from their context of emergence. They are (re)-articulated as transnational, natural surfacings so as to reterritorialise them powerfully as Black diasporic cultural artefacts and signifiers of consciousness. The lived experience of natural hair is central to “race” performativity (Tate 2005) and its construction of Black subjectivities through the surfacing itself. These subjectivities construct a new “structure of feeling” regarding natural hair based on affiliation rather than violence.

Structure of feeling: silencing Black hair/style politics

The US

A 12-year-old girl is being threatened with expulsion from school for refusing to cut her natural afro hair.

Vanessa VanDyke, who is a student at Orlando's Faith Christian Academy in Florida, had been *suffering taunts over her hairstyle* from fellow students.

But her mother, Sabrina Kent, says that when she complained about the issue, *school administrators took similar aim and told Vanessa that her hair violated school dress codes for being a "distraction". Vanessa VanDyke's natural afro had been called a violation of her school's dress code by administrators.*

Vanessa says that she was given one week to *decide if she wanted to cut her hair, and if not, she would have to leave the school.*

She feels that her *hair is part of her identity and for that reason, does not plan to change it.*

"It says that I'm *unique*," Vanessa told Click Orlando. "First of all, it's *puffy and I like it that way. I know people will tease me about it because it's not straight. I don't want to fit in*," she continued.

Ms Kent says that school administrators targeted Vanessa after she approached them about the excessive teasing Vanessa was receiving from fellow students over her hair.

"There have been bullies in the school", she said. "There have been people teasing her about her hair, and it seems to be that they're blaming her".

School officials now say that Vanessa is *violating the institution's official dress code*, which includes clauses about hair care, reports Click Orlando (Florida girl threatened ... 2013, emphasis added).

This is the daily experience of a 12 year-old Black girl in a private school with 11% Black students. It is unclear what the school's dress codes are or whether all girls with hair that is deemed a "distraction" are treated similarly. She likes her hair because she sees it as unique. She does not want to fit in by straightening or cutting it. In order to gain acceptance from peers and school authorities, those are her only two options. Hyper-surveillance of her chosen personal surfacing shows neo-liberal racialisation, where there is "freedom" to express identifications through hair, but only certain styles are accepted. "Freedom" is not realised where there are white/whitened rules on acceptable hair. Fellow students taunt her about her long, "puffy" hair; she is told that her hair "violates school dress codes" and if she does not cut it she would have to leave. What must it be like for your hair to be described as a "violation" when you yourself, your bodily integrity, your racial identity as shown through your hair are being violated by taunts and school rules? How can a child psychically survive the violence of such contempt?

This hair story shows that while *this* school's culture implies that rules relate to everyone, there is hierarchical valuation of surfacings. Black straightened or natural short hair is included but "puffy"

natural hair is excluded. Vanessa's critique of her hair's devaluation suspends judgement about whether or not the violence that is being meted out to her is just. Instead, it offers a new practice of hair values based on self-validation. She does not depend on what Édouard Glissant (1997) calls 'philosophies of the One of the West' to bring her Black hair/style politics into view. Rather, she critiques the school rules by questioning "hair" itself. That is, which personal surfacings are recognised, given aesthetic, affective, political and social value because of racialisation and which are not. She highlights the operation of racialised power/knowledge that structures bodily surfacings and reduces the possibility for what Michel Rolph Truillot (2015) calls 'alter/natives'. She illustrates that rules on "unruly" hair are racialised and dictate that Black hair needs to be domesticated to meet expectations of what it "should" be. White racial power is diffuse as it extends from institutional to everyday interpersonal hair surveillance regimes which dictate that Black hair has no place within aesthetic hierarchies based on aggression and destruction. Drawing from the experience of VanDyke, one can say that the racialised libidinal economy of Black hair in this particular case is based on erasure of Black presence from socio-political and aesthetic life through the dissection of Black bodies (see Yancy 2008; Fanon 1986). Hair is the most visible marker of Blackness next to skin (Mercer 1987) and refusing unruly hair is also about silencing inassimilable Black politics. Silencing is attempted here through disgust and contempt (Tate 2014). Disgust at VanDyke's Black hair emerges in the contempt she experiences through taunts and school rules, which make her know that she is not worthy of attention, her views on hair do not matter and her attachment to her hair is misplaced. Being so precariously located individually must open one to feelings of vulnerability, to feel that one is open to being harmed emotionally and psychically by daily micro-aggressions because one's hair speaks alter/native politics. When there are no plans to change one's hair to fit in, hair becomes a matter for the law, as in the next Black hair story of Black British boy G.

The UK – using the law

A school's decision to bar a pupil because of his hairstyle has come under challenge in a High Court test case.

The boy, G, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was refused entry to St Gregory's Catholic Science College in Kenton, Harrow, north London, at the age of 12 because he wears his hair in "cornrows".

The popular West African style of braiding hair along the scalp is prohibited under the strict uniform and hair policy at St Gregory's.

Today Mr Justice Collins, sitting at London's High Court, was asked by G and his mother to *declare the "no to cornrows" stance of the head teacher and governors unlawful.*

The school was described in court as “a highly successful, hugely oversubscribed” voluntary aided Catholic school which had recently achieved excellent academic results, with black African and African-Caribbean pupils performing well.

G, who is of African-Caribbean origin and now aged 13, was banned on the first day he arrived at St Gregory's in September 2009, and forced to attend another school.

A statement from G's mother said the braids were “of great importance to his cultural and racial identity”.

She said her son had been looking forward to his first day at secondary school and being rejected minutes after arriving “was a major blow to his self-esteem”.

Mr Wolfe argued the braids ban was in breach of race and sex discrimination laws. Girls at the school are allowed to wear cornrows.

Mr Wolfe said G and his mother were 10 minutes late for a school meeting in the summer of 2009, when potential new pupils were told orally that cornrows were not permitted.

The school had expressed concern that it was serving an area where there was gun and knife crime, much of it gang related. Hairstyles could be “badges” of gang identity, it said. The school said it did not regard cornrows as specifically gang-linked, but allowing them in school would make it more difficult to keep out other styles, including the skinhead cut popular with right-wing extremists.

Mr Wolfe submitted the school's argument was legally flawed and the braids ban amounted to “an unlawful and disproportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim”.

G, still wearing the cornrows he has had since infancy, attended court today with his mother. Outside court, his mother said cornrows were very much an African Caribbean hairstyle, but her son was made to feel he had done something wrong by the school “purely because of his hairstyle”.

She said: “There had never been any issue at his feeder primary school”.

“He was left feeling rejected and humiliated on his first day at secondary school”.

Angela Jackman, G's solicitor, of law firm Maxwell Gillott Solicitors, said in a statement that the school had failed to take account of the “disproportionate, adverse impact of its policy on African Caribbean boys” and had applied the ban in “an inflexible manner”.

Ms Jackman said: “The school relies on its view of what constitutes a conventional hairstyle for boys, but disregards the cultural values and norms of the community it serves” (Boy 12 banned ... 2011, emphasis added).

The school relies on its view of what constitutes conventional boys' hairstyles, but disregards the cultural values and norms of the community it serves. “Conventional” is what is generally done; the traditional norms of ordinary life. In being about everyday cultural practices, it is a part of the white/whitened British structure of feeling about what constitutes acceptable masculine styling. However, it is about more than this because of the link being made between hairstyles as badges of gang membership. Although G's cornrows were not explicitly linked to gangs, the school claimed that allowing them would make it difficult to exclude other styles such as the skinhead cuts of right wing extremists. Difficulty in keeping out skinhead haircuts is an interesting turn in the school authorities' argument, as G is being made responsible for dealing with violent right-wing politics within the school, rather than it being the responsibility of the whole school community. His body, through his hair, has been made into the source of racism. The Black community's cultural norms

and values are not being taken account of, nor was this boy's hairstyle preference because it was not conventional. The banning of his cornrows was based on white fear of the possibility of Black gang membership and right wing, violent white supremacy. It is interesting how white fear operates within those two polarities – Black gang violence being visited on the school community and fear that allowing such a style would let in far-right tendencies. Is white supremacy protecting its self-portrayal as tolerant as opposed to being skinhead racists? Whatever the reasoning involved, linking Black gangs and white racist violence is a reminder about where British anti-racist politics is in the twenty-first century. That is, precisely where it was in the 1960s and 1970s, where assimilation to societal rules was necessary and even when rules were followed, racist violence was/is a part of everyday life. Violence and the threat of violence are part of the racialised libidinal economy of Black hair in the UK. The school authorities gave no thought to the fact that the ban itself demonstrated white supremacy as it expected something that the Black boy was unprepared to give. That is, subjection to the rule of 'the conventional' as judged by the dissection of the white gaze (Yancy 2008, 2012; Fanon 1986). Conventional is not neutral; rather, it is racialised as white even though it gives the appearance of neutrality. It is racialised because of the violence done to a 12-year-old boy who carried the weight of rejection and humiliation when he was banned from attending on the first day at his allocated school. Such was the affective burden that his family took recourse to UK anti-discrimination law on gender and "race" to get fair and equal treatment for their son. In other words, hair is also a matter of (in)justice and (in)equality when neo-liberal racialisation means that "the conventional" in white eyes and that of Black culture do not coincide, as is also evident in the 2016 hair protests in South Africa.

South Africa – using protest

A South African school has been accused of racism for *allegedly telling black girls to straighten their hair and not wear afros.*

Pupils at Pretoria high school for girls have said they were forced to chemically straighten their hair and *not have afros that were deemed untidy.* Over the weekend, students donning afro hairstyles and braids held a protest at the school to voice anger against the alleged longstanding rule.

Politicians weighed in on the row, with the *Economic Freedom Fighters party accusing the school of seeking "to directly suppress blackness in its aesthetics and culture".*

On Monday, Panyaza Lesufi, the minister of the education department in Gauteng province, visited the government-run school for talks with senior staff and students. "I really want to arrest the situation before it gets out of control", Lesufi said.

An online petition against the school's alleged policy has gathered more than 10,000 signatures since it was created on Friday. The petition, titled Stop Racism at Pretoria Girls High, calls on authorities to ensure that the "school's code of conduct does not discriminate against black and Muslim girls".

"We are being discriminated against because of our hair. They want us to relax our hair – they want our hair to look a certain way", an anonymous student told the Power FM radio station.

The prestigious school in Pretoria was historically attended by whites only but now admits black children following the end of apartheid in 1994. The school's code of conduct has a detailed list of rules about hair, but does not specifically mention the afro hairstyle, according to the BBC (Racism row ... 2016, emphasis added).

The school's code of conduct on hair reads:

6.4. General appearance – *No dyeing, bleaching, highlighting, colouring, colour washing, colour rinsing, relaxing of hair causing a change in colour, or shaving of hair in any way is allowed.*

Cornrows, natural dreadlocks and singles/braids with or without extensions are allowed, provided they are a maximum of 10 mm in diameter. Singles/braids must be the same length and be the natural colour of the girl's hair. Braids shorter than collar length must be kept off the face with a plain navy or tortoise shell alic band. Longer braids must be tied back. *No beads or decorations in the hair. Cornrows must run parallel from each other from the forehead to the nape of the neck. No patterned cornrows.*

All styles must be conservative, neat and in keeping with a school uniform. No eccentric fashion styles will be allowed (Code of conduct for learners 2015, emphasis added).

In the context of a former traditionally white school, what can be said about school rule objections to natural hair's surfacings of the Black body? Two aspects are of interest here: first, the Economic Freedom Fighter's (EFF) statement and second, the school's desire for all styles to be conservative, neat, not eccentric, not fashionable and in keeping with a school uniform. Here, the Afro is placed as in opposition to the school's view on what is constituted by hair as part of a school uniform even though it is not explicitly named in the code of conduct. The EFF argues that the Afro is a traditional approach to Black hairstylisation and therefore Black aesthetics and cultures are being suppressed by the school's anti-Afro stance. It is interesting to note that the Afro is not explicitly disallowed by the code so it might be considered as an "eccentric fashion style". What does the Afro speak to that causes such fear to a system, which still seeks to inculcate whitened tastes in aesthetics within the school rules? What is so specifically unruly about the un-named Afro that it is ruled as out of order and banned from the school even though other Black hairstyles are allowed so long as they meet the proscriptions of the rules?

As sign of Black radicalism, Black consciousness and insurrection stemming from the 1960s-1970s Black Power Movement, the Afro remains highly politicised when it surfaces the Black African descent head. Maintaining an Afro is time consuming and like other Black hairstyles, means that this surfacing is (re)creating an approach to 'natural styling'. This approach necessitates moisturisation, plaits at night, blowing out, washing and regular hairdresser visits to maintain its shape, size and texture. This hair is not unruly as the school authorities claim, because its texture and shape needs

constant attention on the part of its wearer. What the school authorities are perhaps not paying attention to is that Black hair/style politics have a dynamic relationship to socio-cultural life. Thus, it is that there has been a twenty-first century resurgence of the Afro not as a signifier of Black radicalism *per se*, but as a style which speaks both 1970s “retro-cool” as well as being part of Black transnational traditional styling to show racial consciousness on/through the body. Indeed, to quote Angela Davis (1994:38), the Afro “has survived disconnected from the historical context in which it arose” during Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s and from the 1990s has become part of contexts that nostalgically privilege it as “fashion-revolutionary glamor”.

It may be argued that the Afro’s co-optation by capitalism’s markets in urban “cool” Black stylisation has robbed it of its Black Nationalist radicalism, and as a “pastiche ... the imitation of a particular style ... a neutral practice”, the Afro has lost its critical or political edge (Davis 1994:42). However, it is perhaps still feared in the South African context because it is not politically neutral and carries the potential for insurrection against regimes of respectable styling for Black middle class/elite young women, as outlined in the school rules. The debate is therefore as much about “race” as it is about gender and class. The school authorities’ ban on the Afro is also about trying to shift Black taste, judgements of femininity and beauty as well as identity politics. This can also be said about the proscription on cornrows which must not be elaborate, beaded or otherwise decorated, must be close to the head and in a straight line from forehead to nape. Arguably, the cornrow is robbed of its artistry and aesthetic interest in being reduced to straight lines. Both shaving and cornrows are examples of traditional Black African female hairstyling, so their banning and detailed description of what is acceptable could be a move to make Black middle class/elite young women respectable within continuing social inequality.

The socio-cultural life of Black hair/style politics is dynamised by white/whitened fear inducing difference and distance produced by Black young people’s aesthetic labour in all three contexts. The material, symbolic, discursive and affective realities of potential Black insurrection are created through ‘natural’ Black hairstyles and their difference from the expected norms. Through it links to radical Black ideology and histories of resistance stylisation’s differences always produce distance, which is determined by ‘a social and political history of difference’ (Thomas & Correa 2016). Difference and distance are part of the colonial machinery of disgust, contempt and fear continuing into the twenty-first century, which produces and maintains negro-phobic social and cultural life. Here white/whitened affect reproduces those Black stylisations seen as problematic by schools in the examples above, as dangerous for the social body, unwanted, unruly through producing and

distributing “collective” feelings of disgust, contempt and fear. Through these affects that stick to Black natural hair as surfacings in Black, young, out of control/out of place bodies (Puwar 2004), it becomes clear how “race”, class, gender and ideas of who can occupy the body of the ideal citizen cohere. Thus, it could be said that the suppression of Black natural hairstyles is a trans-national practice, which enables the hegemony of neo-liberalism, white/whitened racial supremacy and hetero-patriarchy. However, the young people’s responses as well as that of their communities, mean that these stylisations also have the affective power of affiliation, of communal *philia*, to contest these domination projects. They refuse to let their hair be acted upon but rather insist on acting in their aesthetic and political self-shaping. *Philia* refuses white fear, disgust and contempt of Black bodies and becomes a productive force in constructing subjectivities and Black socio-cultural-political life. *Philia* refuses the constraints on acceptable/respectable forms of styling so as not to produce a ‘limit attitude’ (Foucault cited by Healy 2001) on what is possible in terms of the making of hair as surfacing but rather to critique existing possibilities. Definitive of [Foucault’s] limit attitude is a problematising, transgressive style of thinking oriented toward challenging existing ways of being and doing, with a view to liberating new possibilities for advancing ‘the undefined work of freedom’ (Healy 2001:1). The Afro and cornrows continue the pursuit of Black freedom in the twenty-first century through natural surfacings. Here the work of decolonising discourses on acceptable and respectable Black stylisation is achieved through producing something other than that which is expected by (neo)colonial discourse as in Homi Bhabha’s (1994) description of anti-colonial mimicry. Such potential for decolonisation must be silenced through shame such as that produced through banning, taunts and descriptions of what hair can be hair; what hair is acceptable or not within school codes.

Decolonising silencing: shame and natural hairstylisations’ limit attitude

Reading the media stories above, it seems difficult to deny the premise that hair stories are deeply affective. Black hair is not just hair; as a sign of identity and uniqueness, Black hair is a location of a politics of the personal which reverberates societally in zones in which white/whitened aesthetics continue to be privileged (Mercer 1987; Banks 2000; Rooks 2000; Craig 2002, 2006). It is this reverberation, the breaking of the silence of the norm which the school authorities’ suppression of natural Black hair-Afros and cornrows attempts to act against. Once the dismay at anti-Black colonial practices masquerading as school rules has subsided, reading these hair stories leads to some questions with which to continue the discussion. What is it to silence hair? How is shame implicated in Black hair’s political silencing? What does anti-Black institutional racism masquerading as school

rules mean for the nations in which these events have occurred and for Black transnational hair politics?

Michel Foucault (1978) provides a way of discussing silencing as a tool of colonial governance that maintains hegemony. In his analysis of the 'repressive hypothesis' in Victorian times, Foucault (1978: 4) discusses the imposition of a socio-cultural 'general and studied silence' around children having sex, even though it was 'common knowledge' that this occurred. Repression differs from the silencing of penal law because 'repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know' (Foucault 1978:4). Drawing from this, it is possible to say that a "general and studied silence" accompanies the hair stories. Therefore, even though it is known that Afros and cornrows are established Black hairstyles, their presence as a part of wider social life is repressed.

This repression operates through "epistemologies of ignorance" produced within the "Racial Contract" (Mills 1997). Within the Racial Contract, the world is constructed to benefit those racialised as white Europeans and their descendants, but can also benefit its signatories that are racialised as non-white (Mills 1997). "Epistemologies of ignorance" do not mean that nothing is known or said about Black hair, but the norm tries to repress the difference that emerges within what is said and by whom to obtain different results. Thus, epistemologies of ignorance are strategies of **silencing** the non-normative to maintain the hegemony of the white/whitened "rule" on Black natural hair that it should disappear without appearing to do so. Silencing the non-normative works through recognition and authorisation which has subalternising (Spivak 1995) effects, because:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say, we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in each case (Foucault 1978:27).

The injunction to silence as a strategy that keeps Black hair style/politics outside of perception is maintained by the shame produced in and through exclusion and calling attention to hair as problematic for the social skin in the first place. For the norm to be invisible only some discourses

will be recognised as they are attached to hegemonic realities such as hair straightening for girls and un-cornrowed hair for boys. Discourses from these hegemonic realities are shaming because it is 'that shame which is both the dishonour with which one can be branded and the feeling that causes one to turn away from it; it is a question of that which is ugly and shameful (*aischron*), in contrast to that which is fine, or both fine and honourable' (Foucault 1984:204). Shame dishonours and produces feelings of aversion, which cause those who feel shame to "turn away" from hair that has been constructed as shameful. However, what the young people's responses to these shaming events demonstrate are new limit attitudes that shame the shamers, because of their decolonisation of power, being, knowledge and affect in terms of Black natural hair.

For a Black girl child in the twenty-first century US to say, "I like my puffy hair" speaks against her interpellation in the Global Northwest/Southwest as having a shameful and shamed body because of the history of conquest, violence, domination and settler colonialism which is shared in these regions (Sharpe 2010). She refuses this shame that produces suffering because:

Shame is a very sticky emotion, when it brushes you it tends to leave a residue to which other emotions are easily attached, namely envy, hate, contempt, apathy, painful self-absorption, humiliation, rage, mortification and disgust ... Shame becomes embodied, and the body begins to speak for itself in specific ways ... The fleshy intransigence of shame means that it can take an unusual grasp of a person's whole organism, in their body, soul and mind, sometimes in eccentric ways (Munt 2007:2).

Hair shame relates to corporeality, to subjectivity, as much as it relates to the psyche, because it is a 'bad feeling' that attaches to what one *is* (Sedgwick 2003). These young people in the examples cited are being asked to inhabit shameful bodies because hair is only recognisable through the norm. The norm becomes visible in the moment of recognition and judgement that the comparator is lacking. The comparator is interpellated as divergent, abject, through negative affective valuation thus attempting to silence contestation of the category "Black natural hair". Shame transforms or intensifies the meanings of body parts including hair and skin, dictates how they are read by others and their interpersonal behaviours as well as how individuals can occupy life-worlds from a position of difference. Much as there is an attempt to silence natural Black hairstylisation and the identity politics attached to natural and traditional styles, challenges to this are evident, as in the hair stories above.

Conclusion

As organic matter produced by physiological processes human hair seems to be a “natural” aspect of the body. Yet hair is never a straightforward biological “fact” because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally “worked upon” by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant “statements” about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don't. In this way hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with “meanings” and “value” (Mercer 1987:34).

Looking back at the hair stories, it seems to me that ‘Black hair/style politics’ (Mercer 1987) is currently as important for Black liberation as it ever was. This is so because ‘within racism's bipolar codification of human value, black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin’ (Mercer 1987:35). Black hair continues to exert symbolic currency as its malleability makes it a potent surfacing for contestation at the levels of subjectivities, affects, aesthetic politics and political economy. Indeed, for Mercer (1987:35), ‘all black hair-styles are political in that they articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both personal and political “meaning” and significance’. What is important to note here is that some styles have been let into representation, have come to represent what Black hair can be/should be through their domestication and cannibalisation which robbed them of their critical potential, as is the case in the list of allowed stylisations at the Pretoria school.

However, the girls’ Afro and boy’s cornrows continue to be ruled out of school. Thus it is that, ‘the counter-hegemonic project inscribed by these hair-styles is not completed or closed and ... this story of struggles over the same symbols continues’ (Mercer 1987:41). The struggle continues because it is not simply about hair as organic matter but about Black liberation in a “post-race” world where anti-Black racism still matters. The struggle continues by recuperating the Afro and cornrows as specifically Black stylisation from their positions as commodified product of capitalism that can appear as a pink wig Afro on Samantha’s head in *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or Kylie Jenner’s cornrows featured in *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2015-2016). What their recuperation has shown is that Black stylisation is still necessary to circumvent the aesthetic valuation codes of dominant culture. Of particular interest here is that the 1960s/1970s Black Power Afro is US originated, while cornrows exist across the continent and are a common approach to transnational Black styling with African continental roots. Whilst being within a critical engagement with dominant culture these styles also reject it as source of recognition by creating creolised forms that communicate across the Black Atlantic’s (Gilroy 1993) aesthetic channels. Formed in opposition to hair norms, Black hair/style politics construct new subjectivities through ‘an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something [they] have already said’

(Glissant 1997:46). Twenty-first century Afros and cornrows (re)-invigorate Black aesthetic politics and identifications by speaking back to anti-Black racism.

References

- Ahmed, S. 2004. Affective economies. *Social Text* 79(22):2, Summer:117-139.
- Ashcroft, B, Griffiths, G & Tiffin, H (eds). 1995. *The post-colonial studies reader*. London: Routledge.
- Banks, I. 2000. *Hair matters: beauty, power and Black women's consciousness*. New York: New York University Press.
- Bhabha, H. 1994. Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse, in *The location of culture*, edited by HK Bhabha. London: Routledge:85-92.
- Bhabha, H. 1994. *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Biddle-Perry, G & S Cheang (eds). 2008. *Hair: style, culture and fashion*. Oxford & New York: Berg.
- Code of conduct for learners. Pretoria High School for Girls. 2015. [O]. Available: http://www.phsg.org.za/uploads/cms/files/code_of_conduct_learners.pdf
Accessed 2 November 2016.
- Cheang, S. 2008. Roots: hair and race, in *Hair: style, culture and fashion*, edited by G Biddle-Perry & S Cheang. Oxford & New York: Berg:27-42.
- Chevannes, B. 1994. *Rastafari: roots and ideology*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- Craig, ML. 2006. Race, beauty and the tangled knot of guilty pleasure. *Feminist Theory* 7(2):159-77.
- Craig, ML. 2002. *Ain't I a beauty queen? Black women, beauty and the politics of race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Florida girl threatened with expulsion over her Afro hair. 2013. *Daily Mail*. [O]. Available: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2513893/Florida-girl-threatened-expulsion-afro-hair.html>
Accessed 1 December 2016.
- Boy 12 banned from school for cornrow hairstyle takes his battle to High Court. 2011. *Daily Mail*. [O]. Available: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1385591/Boy-12-banned-school-cornrow-hairstyle-takes-battle-High-Court.html>
Accessed 2 November 2016.
- Davis, A. 1994. Afro images: politics, fashion and nostalgia. *Critical Inquiry* 21(1), Autumn:37-45.
- Deleuze, G & Guattari, F. 1980. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Translated by B Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fanon, F. 1986. *Black skin, white masks*. London: Pluto Press.

Foucault, M. 1984. *The history of sexuality*, vol 2. *The use of pleasure*. Translated by R Hurley. London: Penguin.

Foucault, M. 1978. *The history of sexuality*, vol 1. *The will to knowledge*. Translated by R Hurley. London: Penguin.

Gilroy, P. 1993. *The black atlantic: modernity and double consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Glissant, E. 1997. *The poetics of relation*. Translated by B Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Healy, P. 2001. A "limit attitude": Foucault, autonomy, critique. *History of the Human Sciences* 4(1): 49-68.

Hiltebeitel, A & Miller, B (eds). 1998. *Hair: its power and meaning in Asian cultures*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Keeping up with the Kardashians. 2015-2016. [Reality television series]. Seasons 11-12

Mercer, K. 1987. Black hair/style politics. *New Formations* 3, Winter:33-54.

Mills, C. 1997. *The racial contract*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Munt, S. 2007. *Queer attachments: the cultural politics of shame*. Aldershot: Ashgat

Puwar, N. 2004. *Space invaders: race, gender and bodies out of place*. London: Bloomsbury.

Racism row over South Africa school's alleged hair policy. 2016. *The Guardian*. [O]. Available: <https://www.theguardian.com/World/SouthAfrica>
Accessed 2 November 2016.

Rooks, N. 2000. *Hair raising: beauty, culture and African American women*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Sedgwick, E. 2003. *Touching feeling: affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Sex and the City. 1998-2004. [Television series]. HBO.

Sharpe, C. 2010. *Monstrous intimacies: making post-slavery subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Spivak, G. 1995. Can the subaltern speak?, in *The post-colonial studies reader*, edited by B Ashcroft, G Griffiths & H Tiffin. London: Routledge:24-28.

Tate, SA. 2014. Racial affective economies: disalienation and "race made ordinary". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37(13):2475-2490.

Tate, SA. 2005. *Black skins, black masks: hybridity, dialogism, performativity*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Tate SA & Law, I. 2015. *Caribbean racisms: connections and complexities in the racialization of the Caribbean region*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Taylor, PC. 2000. Malcolm's conk and Danto's colors: or four logical petitions concerning race, beauty and aesthetics, in *Beauty matters*, edited by PZ Brand. Bloomington: Indiana University Press: 57-64.

Thomas, JM & Correa, JG. 2016. *Affective labour: (dis)assembling distance and difference*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Truillot, M. 2015. *Silencing the past: power and the production of history*. Boston: Beacon Books.

Wilderson, F. 2010. *Red, white and black: cinema and the structure of US antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Williams, R. 1965. *The long revolution*. London: Penguin Books.

Yancy, G. 2012. *Look a white! Philosophical essays on whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Yancy, G. 2008. *Black bodies, white gazes: the continuing significance of race*. Lanham & London: Rowman & Littlefield.