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Blog

Too dark skinned to win Strictly: Alexandra Burke, race hate and why love still matters

In 2017, I was approached by a fashion editor on a UK broadsheet for comments on why Alexandra Burke was consistently voted against by the great British public watching Strictly Come Dancing. I did not watch Strictly at the time and told her that I could not help her. Being persistent, the journalist shared with me a Guardian newspaper report on research that showed that Alexandra was voted against every week even though the judges gave her great points and comments on her skills as a dancer. Responding to the journalist again in the light of this research I said that Alexandra was too dark-skinned to win Strictly because ballroom dancing is still seen as a white dance form by the public. This meant that only bodies racialized as white or that were 'mixed-race', light skinned and normatively feminine (which accounts for Alesha Dixon's triumph) could ever win Strictly. This was reported in the broadsheet as Alexandra Burke is 'too black to win Strictly' though the rest of the interview was correct and was completed with a picture of me and my designation. The article was reprinted in the Daily Star newspaper.

I received hate emails from readers and watchers of Strictly. I also received a phone call which was considered so serious that the university's police contact was consulted. They said that I could press charges if I wanted to. I decided against that. The phone call and emails basically, told me to go back to what I knew something about, to go back to where I came from, to stop finding racism where there was none and accused me of being racist against the great British public reproduced as only being white.

I want to deal with two things here:

1/ race still matters for whose body is out of place or a welcome addition to the space of beauty and femininity;

2/ dark African descent skin continues to be located at a distance from beauty and femininity.

Both of the above remind us that beauty and femininity are normatively racialized as white. However, this normativity masquerades as being devoid of racialization. It continues this masking until its racialization is mentioned which becomes an unwanted and worrying element of putatively 'post-race' public life. For the person (me) who interrupts white normativity by calling attention to it only lays vilification and being called a 'Black anti-white racist'.

What email race hate writers and the person who made the race hate phone call seem to forget are the foundations of white supremacist anti-Black African descent racism. They have to think about the racist legacies of colonialism, enslavement and indentureship's white supremacy that they continue and contemporary racial structuration in the UK which they maintain. They have to think about these because the racism shown at my comments and the racism shown to Alexandra Burke illustrate white supremacy and that needs to be understood to even begin to get a glimpse of what anti-Black African descent racism means. Once their own history and present of white supremacy is understood then it will be clear that to charge me of racism makes no sense.

Before they engaged in race hate they should have stopped to think about what could possibly explain why Alexandra Burke was consistently voted against by the great British public even in the face of good marks and comments from the judges. Just stopping for a moment might have given them the opportunity to think about the visceral way in which anti-Black African descent racism against dark-skinned women works. It would have also given them pause to think about their own anti-dark skinned 'misogynoir' (Bailey and Trudy, 2018) which rules their psyches to the extent that their negation of Alexandra Burke is not even noticed or recognized as a racist negation.

Dark skin on African descent bodies continues to be placed by white supremacy at a distance from feminine beauty, as ugly, even given Alek Wek, Grace Jones, Naomi Campbell, Lupita Nyong'o and Nyakim Gatwech. Placing African descent dark skinned women outside of feminine beauty drags the coloniality of aesthetics into our 21st century beauty spaces. More than this, it also reminds us that aesthetics is linked very clearly to colonial and contemporary

white supremacist ideas on who is/can be human (Wynter, 2003). Being human still relates to bodies racialized as white wherein beauty also lies. White skin is enough for undisputed beauty and darker Black women who are acknowledged to be beautiful like Beyoncé and Hallé Berry are light-skinned/'mixed-race' exceptions to the white supremacist white beauty only rule.

We might be in the 21st century but some things never change. Racist beauty regimes as they relate to the body and skin of the African descent woman's body is one of them. This shows us that beauty is not neutral, it matters racially, it matters to white supremacy, it matters in ruling the internal racial colony of others perpetually doomed to white supremacy's constructed ugliness. Of course, white supremacist aesthetics has always been and continues to be resisted, subverted and changed, for example through Jamaica's Rastafarianism and the Black Power Movement. Both of these African-centred liberation movements made 'black is beautiful' a central plank of their politics. That need to assert 'black is beautiful' has not waned as we see from Nyakim Gatwech's love for her dark skin

South Sudanese model Nyakim Gatwech, called 'Queen of the Dark', has taken the world by storm simply because she celebrates and loves her darker skin (<http://www.storypick.com/queen-of-dark/> accessed 19/11/2018). 'Nyakim went viral after posting a story of her interaction with an Uber driver on Instagram. When the Uber driver asked if she would bleach her skin for \$10,000, Nyakim laughed it off. "I would never do that. I consider my skin to be a blessing", she told him (<http://www.teenvogue.com/story/model-nyakim-gatwech-challenges-beauty-standards-instagram> accessed 19/11/2018).

It is so very interesting how love of oneself, of one's dark skin has again become important in the 21st century at a time when the only Black women's bodies which seem to have acquired cross over value is light-skinned/ 'mixed race' ones, for example, Alesha Dixon, Jessica Ennis-Hill, Thandi Newton and Meghan Markle. What does this love of dark skin do politically? In its proclamation, love of dark skin decolonizes the white/light skin normativity that still rules our

beauty lives because it disalienates (Césaire, 2000) from it. Disalienating from white rule already enables Black anti-racist aesthetics transformation in thinking beauty and embodiment. Love is still an indispensable part of Black anti-racist aesthetics skin politics.

References

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