Intersectionalities of Embodied Identities and the Black Woman Aesthetic

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The intersectionalities of embodied identities—often characterised as deviant embodiments—emerge as a central theme in the writings this essay will discuss. With reference to three essays, I will explore the specific ways in which black women experience the intersectionalities of their embodied identity through hair, skin shade and body size. I will grapple with how the shared nature of these embodied identities have gendered, racialised, and classed implications.

In “A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender,” Paulette Caldwell explores the politics of black female hair. Sharing personal anecdotes as well as legal cases regarding discriminations surrounding black female hairstyles, she provides a social and legal perspective on intersections of black hair. Using the case of Rogers v. American Airlines, Caldwell explains the how the “right of employers to prohibit the wearing of braided hairstyles in the workplace” (Caldwell 198) became precedential. She argues that cases such as these “demonstrate the failure of courts to account for the race-sex intersection and are premised on the assumption that
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discrimination is based on either race or gender, but never both” (301). The court’s refusal to see the interlocking nature of the race-sex intersection chooses instead to treat the claims to racial and gendered discrimination as separate.

Throughout her piece, Caldwell presents several examples of the court’s separated approach to decision-making. An example of this addresses the different cultural implications braided hairstyles have for black women in comparison to their white female counterparts. Caldwell states: “…the court pointed to American’s assertion that the plaintiff had adopted the prohibited hairstyle only after it had been ‘popularized’ by Bo Derek, a white actress, in the film 10” (303). In making this point, the court is asserting that white women and black women share the same connection to and reason for wearing braided hairstyles (303). Claiming that the plaintiff’s choice to adopt a braided hairstyle resulted from a white actress’ cinematic publicisation of the braided hairstyle, as Caldwell makes clear, is to “subordinate and make invisible all the black women who for centuries have worn braids” (303). Furthermore, and not explicitly stated in her article, the court’s reference to Bo Derek’s popularisation of braided hairstyles is to erase the cultural entrenchment as well as political implications braid hairstyles have had within black communities across transnational diasporas.

Not simply for aesthetic purposes, black women have for centuries worn braided hairstyles to maintain healthy hair.
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Caldwell expresses this most effectively: “School is out, my exams are graded, and I have unbraided my hair a few days before my appointment at the beauty parlor to have it braided again. After a year in braids, my hair is healthy again: long and thick and cottony soft” (300). Keeping coiled and curly hair—such as the hair of many black women—in braided hairstyles, also often referred to as protective hairstyles, helps the hair grow, thicken and stay healthy. Moreover, braided hairstyles are also less time consuming hairstyles that are less high maintenance, requiring less attention than perms or afros would.

Furthermore, singling out Bo Derek as the source of braided hairstyles’ popularisation is failing to see the longstanding connection braided hair has had with black culture and American black culture, prior to Derek’s adoption: “Wherever they exist in the world, black women braid their hair. They have done so in the United States for more than four centuries. African in origin, the practice of braiding is as American—black American—as sweet potato pie” (303). Without explicitly stating it, Caldwell is alluding to the slave history and its entrenchment within American history. Thus, slavery and remnants of slavery—in this case, braided hairstyles—are described as central to American identity.

Additionally, the politics implicit within choices to adopt braided hairstyles are also neglected by the court’s method of decision-making: “A braided hairstyle was first worn in a nationally televised media event in the United States—and in
that sense “popularized”—by black actress Cicely Tyson, nearly a
decade before the movie *10* (303). Caldwell continues, “More
important, Cicely Tyson’s choice to popularize (i.e. to “go public”
with) braids... was a political act made on her own behalf and on
behalf of all black women” (303). Hence, it is clear that braided
hairstyles have greater cultural and political implications for
black women than for white women. Not only an aesthetic
choice, they are time-efficient, healthy ways of styling hair, have
historical traditions within African/African-American cultures
and act as political statements for many black women, and thus
exemplify the racialised and gendered intersection of embodied
hair identities.

In the piece, “Prison of Color,” Virginia Harris discusses
colorism—which I refer to as shadeism—and its effects on
darker-skinned black women. Harris describes her position,
making the reader aware that she is a darker-skinned woman.
Throughout the article, she grapples with the issues around
shadeism in her family and relationships—and with internalised
hatred and its gendered implications. Through her analysis, it
becomes clear that shadeism has had a longstanding presence in
the black community. Most clearly through her discussions on
the term, “black,” Harris shows how the contentious nature of
the term illustrates the aversion to black materiality: “When I
was growing up, calling someone black was worse than calling
them nigger. We sat on the porch steps, and in a terrible game of
degradation, compared our colors. Who was the darkest? Who
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was “it”? I was, more times than not. I fought my sister and brother because they called me black” (Harris 2). Thus, we see how black—the term and the shade—are rejected as identities and aesthetics. However, shadeism, she notes, similar to the issue of hair, was not only racialised, but also gendered. “If the person was dark,” she states, “the description was negative, especially if the person was female” (3). On the topic of choosing marital partners, she remarks that “all the men on both sides of the family in my parents’ generation married light-skinned women” (3); further stating that, “all my male first cousins married white women” (3). The connection to lighter skin and increased marital desirability is a clear example of the ways in which shadeism is gendered. Thus, noting the effects of shade/skin tone and shadeism within the black community, as expressed through this piece, effectively show how shadeism is intersectional.

In “The Black Beauty Myth,” Sirena Riley explains the misconceptions present within racialised conceptions of body and body size. As a black woman, Riley shares her personal struggles with weight. She discusses the gendered, racialised and classed intersections of body image. Addressing the dichotomised valorisation of both bodies with “extra meat on their bones” (Riley 358) and slimmer, more slender figures, she notes that class has a great effect on the dichotomised valorisation: “...in a neighbourhood of successful, often bourgeois black families, it was obvious that the “perfect woman” was
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smart, pretty and certainly not overweight” (358). She pushes this argument by referencing a sitcom entitled *The Parkers*. The main character, Nikki, is described as being “a full figured woman” (366). The plot of the sitcom casts Nikki as possessing “a crush on a black, upwardly mobile college professor who lives in her apartment building”—but, “through his eyes she’s seen as uncouth and out of control” (366). Riley characterises the professor’s aversion to Nikki as synonymous with a middle-class view of overweight people: “The professor in *The Parkers* views Nikki the same way that many middle-class people view overweight people, greedy and out of control” (366). However, Riley takes the notion a step further by gendering and racialising it. Unlike women of other races, for example, black overweight women are further degraded: their weight coupled with their race is seen as “ghetto.” Riley notes: “we get to see [the sitcom] through a black lens—ghetto women with no class, talking loud, wearing bright colors and tight clothes” (366). Thus, black women are pathologically classified as “ghetto” or “uncouth” when overweight.

However, as Riley explores, overweight classifications within black communities are not as arbitrary as those found in other racial communities. During her second year of high school, Riley explains that her weight loss greatly complicated her understandings of bodies. Although slim and slender bodies are the highest standard of beauty, she notes that within black spaces, black women are often valorised for their voluptuous
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bodies: “Black women [were] being praised on national television...they were telling the whole country that their black men loved the “extra meat on their bones” (366). Curves, for black women, were praised as being a racialised body aesthetic.

As much as we get praised for loving our full bodies, many young white women would rather be dead than wear a size 14. They nod their heads and say how great it is that we black women can embrace our curves, but they don’t want to look like us. White women have even told me how lucky black women are that our men love and accept our bodies the way they are. (368).

However, Riley points out, this misconception is problematic to our understandings of weight and eating disorders and their relation to black women. Often dismissed as a “white woman’s issue,” eating disorders are seldom addressed within black spaces. Similar to the issues surrounding hair and shade, we also see specific racial associations when it comes to “fat,” and the role that these associations play in silencing the voices of black women who are unhappy with their bodies. The societal demonization of fat and “the ease of associating black women with fat exposes yet another opportunity for racism” (369). In that, black women’s experiences with weight, body image and eating disorders are being silenced and the mischaracterisations of black women’s bodies are further being perpetuated and not addressed, preventing us from facing the intersectionalities of embodied identity. It is clear that body aesthetics and aesthetic identity implicitly include cultural, racial, gendered and classed intersections.
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Works Cited

