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Between Society and Self: The Socio-Cultural Construction of the Black Female Body and Beauty in South Africa

Abstract Interested in the socio-cultural construction of the body and beauty, this study investigates the embodied experience of Black African women in South Africa. The Black female body has been problematically positioned in the discourses of beauty. In the dominant, Westernized imagery, the physical markers of blackness such as dark skin and kinky hair have been aesthetically devalued. In the African traditionalist discourses, these body features have been celebrated as beautiful and invoked as the signifiers of cultural pride. This, however, has also been considered as a form of cultural imperative that holds women accountable for how they embody their relationship with their race and ethnicity. Most recently, cultural critics notice the aesthetic revaluation of Black female beauty and ascribe it to the global popularity of the African-American hip-hop culture. In this study, we explore how the socio-cultural complexity of Black female beauty affects the ways in which individuals make sense of their bodies.

Keywords Body; Discourse; Gender, Intersectionality; Positioning; Race/Ethnicity; Subjectivity

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Researching the Black Female Body and Beauty

Beauty practices are the universal social preoccupation with the body. Although they predominantly consist in practical undertakings, in this article, we focus on the less manifest, symbolical (discursive) site on which beauty is constructed. Specifically, we seek to understand how young Black African women in South Africa establish their embodied subjectivities amidst contending

discourses of beauty. Following Craig (2006:168), Black women have always been placed “outside of the beauty category.” The most common figures of Black femininity—the corpulent “mammy” and the bosom Jezebel (Simien 2006; Durham 2007)—embody, respectively, the asexual and hypersexual femininity, and neither of them befits the dominant conceptions of beauty. Dark-skinned and full-figured in the culture valuing fair complexion and slimness (Hooks 1995; Byrd and Tharps 2002; Patton 2006), Black women developed ways of refining their bodies (Craig 2002; Bellinger 2007; Spellers and Moffitt 2010). Yet, because the beauty techniques (e.g., skin bleaching and hair relaxation) have *de facto* been aimed at approximating the normative, Aryan physique, they have been defined by African traditionalists as symptomatic of internalized oppression (Taylor 1999). In the African culturalist discourse, the beauty of kinky hair and dark skin has been reinstated and they have been invoked as the signifiers of racial, ethnic, and cultural pride. Most recently, following the increased popularity of the African-American hip-hop culture, the global beauty industry has shifted from favoring the skinny body to the body with curves. Whilst this media imagery has been criticized for the undue sexualization of Black femininity (e.g., Collins 2004), its role in the aesthetic transformation shows that the Black female body has been revalorized as a desirable beauty canon (Durham 2012).

The symbolical complexity has its lived implications for women across the African diaspora (Erasmus 1997; Pinho 2006; Candelario 2007; Gordon 2013; Lara 2010). In our study, we address this issue

with South African women in mind by exploring the ways in which the contending discourses of beauty are reflected in their intersubjective practices of making sense of the body. In the article, analyzing meanings that individuals attach to their bodies on the basis of their subjective experience and socio-culturally available discourses, we demonstrate how through these interpretative engagements with the body the individuals negotiate their embodied subjectivities.

We present findings from a qualitative study in which a group of eight young Black African women of different ethnicities talked about their perceptions and experience of the body and beauty. The research participants were selected through judgmental sampling among students of the local university. Before they signed consent forms, they were informed about the goal and proceedings of the study, and assured that the study had been approved by the university research ethics committee. The women were fluent English speakers, so all interviews were conducted in English. But, for one, all participants were interviewed twice individually. Moreover, three of them took part in a focus group interview, which was expected to give a better picture of the intersubjective dynamics of Black female beauty. The women were selected for the focus group interview due to the richness of the data they had provided. In all of the interviews, the participants were presented with and encouraged to comment on media prompts which featured diverse visual representations of Black beauty. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and took place in participants' residences and on campus.

In her study of Black femininity and beauty, Tate (2005:6) considers Black identities as “texts of social practice,” which she defines as “critical ontologies of the self” produced during everyday interactions. While we believe that this holds relevance to all identities, not solely the Black self, in the article, we find this conception particularly apt for the object of the current study. Due to its intricate history, the definition of Black female beauty is complex and dynamic, for instance, continuously interrogated in intersubjective relationships. Moreover, like Tate (2005:21), we argue that self is “produced through and reflexively embedded in language use” and, consequently, explore the minutiae of the discursive production of meanings that are attached to the body. Vitally, although the discussion is framed around the two identity categories of gender and ethnicity, in the study, we did not presume the salience of either of these, or any other.

The Constructions of the Black Female Body

Yellow Bones

As mentioned, skin bleaching has been one of the beauty practices that the African culturalists pegged as seeking to “look White.” Most of the participants constructed it as a trend which is popular with young people who want to be “yellow bone” (light-toned); some constructed bleaching as an indication of lack of self-acceptance. Yet, with the exception of one participant, in neither of the two cases did they overtly construct bleaching as symptomatic of internalized devaluation

of blackness. The ideologically-laden repertoire¹ was also absent from the participants’ reactions to three pictures of Khanyi Mbau, a South African celebrity, which indicated that she bleached her skin. In their on-the-spot reactions, the women commented on Mbau’s increasing reliance on beauty accessories such as weaves² and outfits; some participants casually linked Mbau’s transformation with her upgraded financial status. Also, all participants with one exception, even those who criticized skin bleaching on any of the grounds mentioned above, expressed a positive disposition to the change in Mbau’s appearance. This is not to argue that the participants are not aware of the ideological implications of bleaching, but to notice that they dismissed them in their own interpretations of the Black female body.

“The African Ass”

Among the body features which we found central for the participants’ notion of beauty are body size and shape. Most of them point to a specific size and shape that are positively valorized in their culture:

Extract 1

Palesa: Mm, I think that one...uhm, people who say it is important to have a specific body size or shape is people who are obsessed with looks, like people who feel like if you don’t have a big bum as an African woman, then you don’t look good.

¹ Potter and Wetherell (1987:203) define interpretative repertoires as “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena.”

² Weaves are human or synthetic hair woven into one’s natural hair—for length and softer texture.

Like all other participants, in Extract 1, Palesa constructs the fetishization of big buttocks as typical of the African culture. In Extract 2, she constructs the fetish as motivating her to work on her body:

Extract 2

Palesa: Uhm, I don’t count, but every time when I go pee, after peeing I do squats. Apparently, they give you like a bigger bum. I don’t have what you can call an “African ass,” but my mom has always been on my case because I am the only one without a big bum in the family.

Through her constructions of the African body, Palesa articulates a non-essentialist understanding of the (African) body. Instead of talking about the body one is born with as an African woman, she refers to the body features which African women are praised for in their culture. By the same token, describing her work on attaining the culturally desirable look, she talks about “the African ass” as something that she has not been naturally given, but she nonetheless decided to attain through a consistent work on the body. The idea that the African body can be intentionally shaped was implicit in the constructions of the other participants who pointed to squats as their main or the only workout routine which all of them constructed as motivated by the power of squats to make buttocks more round and protruding.

The positive appraisal of a full-shaped body was also expressed in the focus group interview, for example, in the acknowledgment of a plus-size model in one of the visual prompts (“properly sized,” “thick is the

new sexy”), and in the negative reaction to a picture of a skinny model:

Extract 3

Nthabiseng: My thought bonier ((everyone laughing)). Are boney. Actually my first was no and then I said too thin. I wrote no, no, no, no.

((Everyone laughing))

Lerato: I said anorexia ((everyone laughing again)) ((Nonzuzo clapping hands)).

Nthabiseng: But, she’s too boney.

Thembeke: She does look sick though.

Lerato: Very sick ((laughs)).

Later in the interview, asked about reactions which the same pictures might arouse in their families, the participants said the full-figured model would be seen as “wealthy” and successful, whilst the other as somebody whose life is in danger:

Extract 4

Interviewer: [...] In your different ethnic groups, what would be your first thoughts about her?

Thembeke: She’s sick.

Interviewer: Sick?

Lerato: Dying.

Nthabiseng: Ya, she’s really sick. Something is happening with her and she and she needs to be helped soon.

Thembeke: *Bam loyile.* ((They have bewitched her.))

Interviewer: So those would be the perceptions within your various ethnic groups?

Nonzuzo: [Yes.]

Thembeke: [Yes.]

Nthabiseng: [Yes.] My, my...the first thing that my mom would say she's, you know, something is wrong and, you know, you must ask after her if she's okay.

Thembeke: I can see my grandmother saying the ancestors are calling her ((everyone laughing)).

Lerato: My mom would be like offer her a breakfast, a proper English breakfast ((chuckles)).

The participants' reactions to the visual prompts show the hybrid nature of their discourse of beauty. In both extracts, the women react to the skinny body mockingly—in neither is life threat constructed literally; it is used to denounce the aesthetic value of the skinny body. The suspicion of anorexia and “a proper English breakfast” on the one hand, and the idea of bewitchment and ancestors calling on the other, show that the women are capable of interpreting the body consistently, but in two culturally distant languages. In their original reactions to the two pictures, the participants revealed what they themselves constructed as the traditionally African perception of the body, yet they articulated it by means of the language typical of the Western culture.

Although the participants clearly shared the idea that Black African culture celebrates voluptuousness, but for two women who were slim, the rest qualified their body satisfaction because of their weight gain. At the same time, they overtly stated that they have not maintained any consistent workout routine, but for on-and-off attempts to sculpt their buttocks. Therefore, they constructed workout as related with the body's aesthetic quality, not its health. Lack of workout routine was in some of the interviews overtly racialized:

Extract 5

Interviewer: [...] do you think it's about being healthy, [...] or latest fashion trends?

Karabo: [...] For White people I would say it's a lifestyle. Us, Black people, I swear to God, we only start... okay not everybody, but some. I would say ninety percent of Black people start...start going to the gym for somebody, for the trend, summer body. For the trend summer, and then after that it's all gone back to soup, *magwina* ((fat cakes)), you know, *vetkoek* ((fat cakes—a traditional Afrikaans food)) and everything.

Extract 6

Interviewer: Many people say White girls are more concerned with size and weight? Would you agree?

Palesa: Ya, uhm, as you can see around campus or as you have noticed you get very few fat White ladies. They work out a lot, like how often do you see a Black girl jogging ((both laugh)).

The interviewees' accounts for their disinclination to fitness are consistent with their reactions to several of the visual prompts. Two of the pictures presented an African-American celebrity Jennifer Hudson—before and after her significant weight loss. The interviewees were unenthusiastic about the weight drop. Asked about possible reasons behind Hudson's change, except for one, the interviewees did not consider that she might have wanted a more healthy and fit body for herself; instead, they explained it as related with stress caused by family loss or ascribed it to Hudson's ambition to keep up with other celebrities. Relatedly, when exposed to the photos of the tennis star, Serena Williams, rather than construct her body

as fit, the participants criticized its overly masculine look which they ascribed to her musculature. Like in the case of Hudson's pictures, the participants' reactions to the pictures imply that the women construe the body mainly in terms of its aesthetic value, which is assessed from the perspective of a heterosexual man. Their indisposition to the athletic female body, whose gender transgressive shape is, at least conventionally, less sexually appealing, corresponds with the interviewees' high valorization of big buttocks and hips, hence the body parts which have traditionally been the objects of the heterosexual male gaze. Interweaving the discourses of gender and race, such interpretations of the body reflect the intersectional complexity of Black female subjectivity.³ In comparison to race, whose salience in the socio-cultural constitution of the body was overtly enunciated by the interviewees, gender was more intricately entangled in it—it was made explicit only through a closer analysis of the data.

Weaves, Dreadlocks, and Short Hair

The most intensely invested aspect of embodied subjectivity was hair. In Extract 7, it is constructed as an ethnic signifier:

Extract 7

Lerato: She is an African woman by the look of the hair, but she, I think she compliments both African and Western, which is my ideal type of beauty, ya.

³ Intersectionality is a concept describing the ways in which identities categories (race, sexuality, gender, class, age, etc.) are interconnected and cannot be analyzed separately from one another. The concept was first used in this sense by a legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989).

Interviewer: Okay, can you tell me what is Western in this picture about her?

Lerato: The make-up and lashes.

Similarly to Palesa's non-essentialist construction of the body in Extract 2, talking about the hair of a model in a visual prompt, Lerato draws on the idea that the body can be more or less African—depending on the extent to which it is “stylized” (Butler 1990). Lerato constructs physical appearance in terms of moving along a continuum whose polar ends are the African and the Western bodies. She locates her “ideal type of beauty” at the middle of it. The non-essentialist logic of body stylization also underlies Thembeke's account:

Extract 8

Thembeke: [...] your African girls are for natural hair, you know. Your short hair, your dreadlocks, your afro, you know, your plaits, your cornrows using your own hair. And then your Western girls they are for your weaves, your extensions, all these things going on, you know.

Talking about hairstyle preferences, Thembeke constructs the African body as culturally fabricated through the social cultivation of physique, in which one can make it “African” or “Western.” Likewise, although Nthabiseng herself did not wear dreadlocks, she attached to the hairstyle the value of ethnic credibility:

Extract 9

Nthabiseng: [...] They're so different for me, that's what I love about dreadlocks. So it's a different, it's an

ethnic and, you know, African believable look, that's what I love about dreadlocks.

As mentioned, in the African traditionalist discourse, the non-cultivated hair has been the signifier of racial, ethnic, and cultural pride, which signification implies for Black women the imperative of keeping hair natural. The sense of accountability related with hairstyle choices underlies Lerato's self-account:

Extract 10

Lerato: Well, there is a saying that *bottle bam mme botloho* ("a woman's beauty is in her hair"), right, but I don't think to me weaves are that important. But, I think a weave defines who you are as an individual. What do you stand for. Because you, with your dreadlocks, it means you are original, African woman, and all of that. But, for someone who would stand between me and you, they will see you as more African than me because I...I am...I don't know. And then there are people who are bold and they are still African with their boldness. Okay as long as someone's head is neat that's all that's important.

Lerato positions herself in relation to the interviewer whose dreadlocks she constructs as superior to weaves for the way they communicate one's relationship with her African identity.

Noting a strong entanglement of hair in the social semiotics of the Black body, Kobena Mercer (1987:36) ascribes it to the malleability of hair: "In the complexity of this social code, hair functions as a key 'ethnic signifier' because, compared with bodily

shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening." The malleability, we found, is not only physical, but also discursive. The performance of race, ethnicity, and culture was not the only signification practice that the interviewees pointed to in their constructions of the symbolic role of hair. For example, talking about relaxing hair as a child, Karabo harnessed its subjectivity-forming capacity to position herself as a woman:

Extract 11

Karabo: My mom, that's why I say as much as my father was there. My mom was there to also be the feminine touch in the relationship because my father didn't think that his...she's young, she can do whatever. [...] I hated pink, I so hated pink because I felt that it was too bright for the blue clothes my brothers wear. So, uhm, when I...the time I realized that it was wrong was when my cousins came into place in my father's side. [...] ...the cousin...we were like same age. She was more feminine than me, so now I started realizing that, hey, I'm behind. And actually do not know half of the things. I never wore nail polish, I never ((giggles)) wanted my hair to be straightened, do anything.

Narrating the epiphanic moment when she discovered that her body is gendered, Karabo constructs femininity as embodied through beauty practices, the knowledge of which she acquired intersubjectively. Pink clothes, nail varnish, and hair straightening are the practices she did not embrace, but felt obliged to follow upon observing young women around her ("I realized that it was wrong," "I started realizing that, hey, I'm behind").

In contrast to Karabo's half-hearted commitment to embodying femininity, Nthabiseng and Palesa used hair practices as the expedient means of positioning themselves as women who have claimed their rights to constitute their bodies on their own terms. Nthabiseng overtly claimed the importance which hair holds for her ("But I do feel strongly about having short hair"). The recurrence of short hair in her narratives shows its role in how Nthabiseng embodies her gender subjectivity. For example, at some point she constructed short hair as an expression of a woman's "rebelliousness":

Extract 12

Nthabiseng: [...] Long hair makes other people feel more like ladies, uhm, long hair makes people feel more like, uhm, beautiful people. With certain girls, short hair makes them feel different and they feel like rebels. So, ya, short hair speaks to certain people about, you know, their look and where they are in their life, and, you know, an expression of who they are. Yes, it does.

Relatedly, during the focus group interview, Nthabiseng talked about the expectations which men in her ethnic culture hold of women's look:

Extract 13

Nthabiseng: In my culture ((Pedi)), short hair is preferred, but there is no law, but I have heard my uncles, my uncles are very old-fashioned. My mom's uncles ((Sotho)) are, well, very old-fashioned men, you know, when children relax their hair, ya, ya, they say, "You look like a girl now." Uhm, you know, when you don't

have your hair combed, "No, girls are not supposed to look like that" [...].

Explaining how gender becomes embodied in her culture through hair, Nthabiseng constructs a hierarchical relationship wherein adult men hold young women accountable for their body practices. Thus, similarly to Karabo (Extract 11), Nthabiseng does not construct relaxing hair, hence the practice of diminishing its African (i.e., kinky) look, as a performance of race, but that of gender. Although at the beginning of Extract 13 Nthabiseng constructs short hair as the culturally preferred hairstyle in her ethnic community, Extract 14 shows that she subsequently conferred on it gender significance:

Extract 14

Nthabiseng: With my aunts, I would have to say, it's, you know, staying natural, being natural. Like my aunts are very confident. They think they are the most gorgeous women in the history of the world. So short hair for them has always been an expression of how beautiful they are. So for me they...they've just taught me that you can be naturally beautiful with short hair.

Given what Nthabiseng said about the role of the male gaze in her family in Extract 13, cutting hair short signifies independence from the aesthetic control of her uncles—this empowering positioning is reinforced when Nthabiseng constructs her choice of this hairstyle as something she has learnt from women in her family, who do not depend on others' opinions to feel beautiful.

Although throughout the interview Palesa constructed short hair along different interpretative repertoires, the main signifying role she ascribed to it was embodying her personal independence from others' opinions:

Extract 15

Palesa: [...] So I was used to people doing whatever they liked with my hair, so I don't have...but I remember when I first cut my hair. I looked into the mirror and I was like, wow, because it was very long. Then I noticed that I actually look prettier with short hair than with long hair, although people tried to convince me otherwise that all hairstyles suits you. They were even persuading me to do dreadlocks, but I am content with short hair. So when I first cut my hair, I noticed that I look more beautiful with short hair than with any other hairstyle.

Interviewer: What would you say made you to decide to want to go natural?

Palesa: I was... ((chuckles)) it's a funny story, uhm, I was mad because my cousin refused to wash my hair. It was very long, it was dirty, and I was going to see...I mean, I was visiting my aunt's place and there was this guy that I like ((giggles)). And I didn't want to go with ugly hair, so, uhm, my cousin refused to do my hair and I wasn't gonna leave like that. So I just...let me cut it off, and it has turned out to be the best thing I ever did.

Palesa's narrative includes two intersubjective relationships. One of them reveals a discrepancy between Palesa's perception of her body ("I noticed that I actually look prettier") and people's opinions on it. By using the epistemic adverb "actually,"

which expresses a high degree of commitment to the truth of the statement, Palesa positions herself as a person speaking with an appropriate degree of conviction, while the persuasion by others is constructed as ineffective ("tried to convince" and the imperfect mood "were even persuading" communicate the incompleteness of the actions). The other relationship shows Palesa's distress ("mad") about lack of control over her body ("It was very long, it was dirty"), on the one hand, and, on the other hand, lack of help from her cousin ("refused to do my hair"). The distress is constructed as reinforced by the presence of the male gaze in the relationship ("there was this guy that I like"), which apparently made the situation a tipping point in which Palesa took control over her body by cutting her hair ("I wasn't gonna leave like that. So I just...let me cut it off").

Clearly, in the three autobiographic accounts, hair was gendered (in different ways). Another identity category which the participants drew into their constructions of hair was class. For instance, some of the participants constructed their positive disposition to short hair as motivated by its affordability. By the same token, weaves were constructed as an excessive investment in looks. To illustrate, in the extract below, Mpho constructs weaves along that line contingently while explaining her notion of the race-based differences in the conceptions of beauty:

Extract 16

Mpho: I think culture also plays a role in beauty, because other racial groups do not believe in this waste thing of putting weaves and what not.

The interviewees often enumerated weaves concurrently or conversely with make-up, to which they were not positively disposed on the grounds of the costs it entails. For example, asked if women share the same beauty practices, Mpho said:

Extract 17

Mpho: I don't think so, because others use make-up and put weaves on, and other stay in their natural beauty without any make-up and weaves and stuff. So we don't do the same way.

A similar line of construction featured Nonzuzo and Palesa's positioning in which they distanced themselves from others' beauty practices:

Extract 18

Nonzuzo: It's, it's, yho ((exclamation)), *mina* ((I)), I dress like a tomboy in most cases. I prefer wearing my pump and sometimes tekkies to campus. I really don't mind, but when I would be on campus, I would see people with heels and some long expensive weave and make-up.

Extract 19

Palesa: [...] So I only noticed, aah, that we have different preferences when I got to varsity, and you would get girls who would have...like, who are so obsessed with weaves because, remember, in high school, man, you just, all you needed was a lip gloss and nothing more. So when I got here, uhm, I notice, okay, you need to have nice long hair, and you need to have this...I don't know, for some odd reason, red lipstick just made it big. And I noticed that mostly more girls

were interested in having nice hair more than anything. Then, when I got here, it really sensed that, okay, people are more interested in hair, more than anything, especially weaves.

In the three extracts above, the participants mark weaves with connotations of excessive consumption. In Mpho's "natural beauty without any make-up and weaves and stuff," the two parallel conjunctions "and" together with the indiscriminate "stuff" work rhetorically to imply an accumulation of beautifying resources. A similar sweeping construction can be found in Nonzuzo's "people with heels and some long expensive weave and make-up." Redundant in the conversation with the interviewer who knows what weaves are like, the pre-modifiers "some long expensive" are also deployed rhetorically. Palesa constructs weaves, together with make-up, as indications of excessive beauty care, to which she related through a negative appraisal "obsessed with weaves." Weaves are also rejected by Nthabiseng, in her positioning as a strong-minded woman:

Extract 20

Nthabiseng: [...] Then I got to varsity and I saw everybody, you know, doing what they want, but what was very consistent was extensions and bondings ((weaves)), and this and that. So I was like, no I don't want this. I don't want people to say I am beautiful because of my hair [...], so I decided to cut my hair.

By evoking the connotations of excess through the hyperbolic, generalizing "this and that" and appending it to the coordinated "extensions and

bondings,” Nthabiseng constructs a relation of contrast between others’ intense investment in looks and her minimalist style.

“Betraying the Ethnic Blah, Blah, Blah”

As discussed, two of the participants expressed their awareness of the political accountability of hair by valorizing dreadlocks over other types of hair (Extracts 9 and 10). Yet, none of the women constructed weaves as a form of betraying one’s African identity, which is the chief argument raised against weaves by African culturalists. Likewise, short hair, which traditionalists value as ethnically authentic, was constructed as the site of articulating gender, not ethnic, identity. Moreover, the political accountability of hair was rejected by the focus group participants when the interviewer elicited the topic to investigate the women’s intersubjective engagement with the culturalist discourse (as one of the hegemonic discourses of beauty).

In the two extracts below, Thembeke, Lerato, and Nthabiseng talk about one of the media prompts they were presented with, namely, an article in a South African daily *Sowetan* (Sept/15/2015), “Hair Today, Fake It All Tomorrow? Celebrities Have Their Say” by Karabo Disetlhe. The article discusses controversies stirred by Hugh Masekela, a South African musician, who asked that bodyguards prevent him from being approached by women with weaves:

Extract 21

Thembeke: I, I, personally, for me, I will always respect, I respect *utat’* ((Mr)) Huge Masekela and...

but I feel like he, uhm, I don’t understand this whole...I feel like he’s trying to dictate the lives of young girls [...]

Nthabiseng: I think that he doesn’t fully try to understand why some girls have, you know, fake hair. She just explained her reasons. I don’t know whether they will be acceptable for him, you know, that you can’t maintain it, but, you know, you reserve the right to have that excuse from having natural hair. So he doesn’t try to fully understand...for a grown man...

Thembeke: His age.

Nthabiseng: That has travelled, he’s well-travelled, I mean, you would think that he would be open-minded to certain things, but he does also maintain the right not want to take pictures for whatever reason, but I don’t think he has the right to discriminate like that and say...what if people didn’t want to take pictures with him because he’s old, because he is old. What if, you know, people started... what if Beyoncé says to him, no I can’t, you too old ((laughs)) you know...

Lerato: You know, you’re gonna ruin my picture. How would he feel?

In the extract, the participants reframe the discursive field within which they have been positioned. Although herself with short hair, it is Nthabiseng who takes on the role of Masekela’s opponent. She talks about “some girls” finding themselves overwhelmed by the trouble of maintaining natural hair, refers back to Thembeke’s explanation why she wears weaves, and next explicitly confirms its validity. Therefore, even though Nthabiseng does not talk about her own experience, by asserting her knowledge of the tedious nitty-gritty of hair maintenance,

in her polemic with Masekela, she positions herself as a person speaking from the reality of lived experience rather than from an abstract, ideological discourse from which Masekela articulates his critique of weaves.

Based on the above, we propose to see Nthabiseng’s positioning as *representin* (Richardson 2007a; 2007b). Following Richardson (2007a), *representin* is

a part of the larger black discourse practice...Consonant with the fictive kinship ideology, black people performed in a manner that protected the humanity of the collective enslaved community. As Signithia Fordham (1996: 75) explains, “in contexts controlled by (an) Other, it was necessary to behave as a collective Black Self while suppressing the desire to promote the individual Self.” [p. 797]

In the specific context, because of the intersectional complexity of the positioning of Black women in the discourse of beauty, the participants position themselves to Masekela (himself a member of their ethnic community) as to the “controlling Other,” in relation to whom they perform a collective subjectivity of Black young women. Originally, the aspect of age is drawn in by Thembeke to claim respect for Masekela, but then it is played around in a humorous way when Nthabiseng and Thembeke cooperatively proceed to deride Masekela. In the cumulative point of the derision, they draw into the discursive field Beyoncé, who—as an iconic representation of the Westernized look disparaged by Masekela and an internationally renowned singer—might have been referred to by the participants strategically.

In the extract below, Masekela’s traditionalist approach is explicitly addressed by the interviewer:

Extract 22

Interviewer: One of his reasons for refusing to take pictures with girls with weaves, he asserts, is because it is a “betrayal of the African identity.”

Thembeke: Betrayal?

Nonzuzo: I disagree *mma* ((I)).

Thembeke: He ((exclamation)) I disagree.

Nonzuzo: Strongly disagree ((everyone laughing)).

Interviewer: Can you give me your reasons for disagreeing with Hugh Masekela?

Nonzuzo: Uhm, it’s about you. I’m very traditional, you heard me, right, but if I decide to put on a weave, I have my own reasons. It doesn’t mean that I am betraying the ethnic blah, blah, blah, you know. For instance, I’ve got a natural hair, but at some point I braid it, I do weaves, but not for a long time because why? He does not understand the reasons. I don’t want to comb, uhm, I’m trying to save time; I’m attending classes, you know. He does not understand the concept of putting a weave at some point. So he will never relate.

Thembeke: And he’s never been faced with having to grow any hair because he is a man.

Nonzuzo: Man, he will never relate to, to this thing.

Nthabiseng: I, first of all, what is his definition of Africanism? What did he say, “African is a betrayal of what”?

Interviewer: According to him, weaves are a “betrayal of the African identity.”

Nthabiseng: So he defines African identity as having natural hair, yes, that’s his full description of African identity. I, I, no, first of all, you cannot say that being

an African has anything to do with the way you look. I don't think so, that I don't think so. And he, oh my gosh, he has no right to say something like that...

Thembeke: It's so disappointing.

This time it is Nonzuzo, like Nthabiseng with short hair, who defends weaves. Also like Nthabiseng, she does so by means of the repertoires of hair maintenance and of one's right to independently decide on her body. This devaluation of an egoistic presentation of self, to which both Nonzuzo and Nthabiseng could have turned because of their natural hairstyles, implies the ethos of representin. The communal character of the women's diatribe against Masekela is enacted not only on the level of (a shared disposition to) body practice, but also in discourse structures. The repetition of the key word "disagree" when all three of them voice their opinions each in her own way, as well as the repetition and elaboration of the words from the previous speaker's turn ("never," "man") indicate high mutuality of the speakers' disposition.

The interviewees' talk in the focus group reveals a significant amount of affect. For instance, Extract 22 features exclamations, unanimous laughter, as well as vocalization of irritation ("the ethnic blah, blah, blah") through which Nonzuzo expressed distance from the traditionalist discourse. These discursive cues, we argue, demonstrate the *affective economy* of Black femininity. Following Ahmed (2004:117), emotions are not a private property that resides in individuals, but affectively consequential practices of meaning-making. Circulating between bodies and signs, emotions become part and parcel of the flowing signifiers and as such enter intersubjective

relations (Ahmed 2004:119). While Ahmed focuses on the relationship between the non-Aryan body and the Aryan society, in this article, we observe the affective economy within ethnic and racial communities. Ahmed (2004:120) considers that "movement between signs converts into affect," that is, the more signs circulate between subjects, the more affective power they garner. As the "key ethnic signifier" (Mercer 1987:36), specific Black hairstyles are a case in point. In this study, the affective load of weaves came to the surface of discourse in the focus group. The affective cues enumerated above reveal affect attached to hair when the participants, interpellated as politically accountable for how they embody race, reject the accountability. This reinforces Ahmed's argument that emotions emerge from the circulation of signs within the social space and shows its applicability to how Black women experience their bodies.

Discussion

In the study, we consider that the interviewees do not solely describe the lived reality of Black female body. Following Brah (2001),

experience does not transparently reflect a pre-given reality, but rather is itself a cultural construction. Indeed, experience is a process of signification...Contrary to the idea of an already fully constituted "experiencing subject" to whom "experiences happen," experience is the site of subject formation...Attention to this reveals experience as a site of contestation: a discursive space where different and differential subject positions and subjectivities are inscribed, reiterated, or repudiated. [p. 466]

Subject formation, we argue, does not happen in its own right—it takes place when individuals make sense of the experience drawing on the socio-culturally available meaning-making resources. In the discussion, we consistently talked about the Black female body as constructed to emphasize the focus of the study—not the subjective experience of the body itself, but what individuals do with it to constitute themselves as subjects (to construct their identities).

The data presented in the article make evident that the body is a semi-raw material people are born with, it is malleable and contingent on the culturally-specific practices and meaning-making resources, as well as on individuals' idiosyncratic deployment thereof. By semi-raw, we mean that the bodies are always lodged with meanings. The bodies are made meaningful in the intersubjective encounters even when individuals are not aware of it, and in ways they may not necessarily know of. As Ali (2003:13) notes in her accounts of embodying a mixed-race identity, it is possible "that others may pass me without my knowledge." Yet, the data presented in the article show that although bodies are always already meaningful in one way or another, individuals' scope of meaning-making is significant and hence bodies can be used as sites of articulating one's subjectivity. As Black women, the participants in our study have been interpellated by numerous discourses, which construct the Black female body in a number of ways. In the data presented in the article, the women demonstrate their reflexivity of the discourses (though not all and not all of the time), and draw on them in their constructions of the body and beauty. Crucially,

the participants' deployment of the discourses is selective and in addition to the socio-culturally available interpretations of the Black female body, the women vest their bodies with meanings fabricated by means of their autobiographic experience.

Stripped of essentialist properties, race in the participants' constructions is a meaning-making and subject-forming resource which they mobilize on their own terms in the interpretations of the Black female body. For example, body shape and hair are constructed as ethnic markers, but no symbolic links are forged between racial or ethnic identity and skin bleaching. Talking about hair, the participants deploy meanings that have been ascribed to hair by hegemonic discourses, but also readily defy the discourses when they find the discourses to infringe their sovereign subjectivity. Moreover, speaking about hair practices that have been commonly constructed as the denial or affirmation of blackness (hence race signification), the participants construct them as signifiers of gender and class. In this way, we argue, the data show the dynamic nature of Black femininity and reflexivity with which it is interpreted and embodied.

In her research on Black female beauty, Tate (2005:5-6) finds Black women reflexively positioned in discursive space which she calls the "third space" (Bhabha 1990). She regards Black femininity as a continuous process of *translation* (Tate 2007:18) in which identifications emergent from the renegotiation of meanings and positionings, "although different, still bear the traces of identification discourses in order to be meaningful (Tate 2007:8)." Following this logic of interpretation, we consider that in our

study, the participants establish their embodied subjectivities by translating the cultural meanings of their bodies (e.g., skin, hair, and body shape). In doing so, the women reassess the images of the Black body, as well as subvert simplistic equations between race and body. Hence, they organize the discursive space set up in the research context in ways that allow them to enunciate their own interpretations of Black female beauty.

Apart from translation, another empowering discourse practice found in the data is collective positioning. Comparing women's beauty practices to negotiations in "unstable fields of power shaped by inequalities," Craig (2006:166) notes that any negotiator in such a relationship "is stronger if she is part of collectivity." In the data from the focus group interview, the interviewees draw power from the collective subjectivity of young Black women by enunciating each of its constituent identity categories (race, gender, and age) as shared and hence anchoring their arguments in the reality of lived experience that is accessible only to the members of this collective identity. Constructing this as the prerequisite to claim the right to decide on their bodies, the participants vindicate their prerogative to do so. Consequently, they take it away from the subjects such as Masekela, who have claimed this right solely on the grounds of race.

As could also be seen in the discussion, bestowed with meanings and values, as the object of reflection and talk, the body generates affect. Data presented in the article illustrate the affective value attached to hair as a subject-forming sign and show how emotions flowed in the interactive exchange between the

interviewees. Vitaly, the data imply the subject-empowering potential of affect. In the focus group, rather than be carried away by the heightened affective valence of the interactive moment, the interviewees effectively resist the hegemonic discourse of the Black body and beauty. The women's collective resistance consists in emptying the Black female body of political accountability, and hence, disavowing the logic of Black stylization espoused by Black culturalists. Mercer (1987) finds this logic of stylization

only a tactical inversion of the chain of equivalences that structured the Eurocentric system of white bias. We saw how the biological determinism of classical racist ideology first "politicized" our hair: its logic of devalorization of blackness radically devalued our hair, debarring it from access to dominant regimes of the "truth of beauty." The aesthetic de-negation "logically" depended on prior relations of equivalence which posited the categories of "Africa" and "nature" as equally other to Europe's deluded self-image which sought to monopolize claims to beauty. [p. 40]

In the study, we found participants to reject the understanding of living the African self by simply celebrating nature—no matter how creatively it can be played around. Explaining the symbolical investment made by the Black pride discourse in the natural hair stylizations, Mercer (1987:41) considers it based on the appropriation of "a particularly romanticist version of 'nature' as a means of empowering the black subject." The data show that the women choose different ways of empowering themselves through depoliticizing Black hair. The self-empowered subject is free to choose artifice over nature, and to lodge her body with other (e.g., class, gender) significances.

Briefly, in the discussion, we demonstrated a richness and complexity of meanings that Black female body has accrued. We proposed that because Black women are positioned in multiple discourses, and because their bodies are inexorably entangled with the discourses, they engage themselves in the symbolical struggle over the meanings. That is, they negotiate their embodied subjectivities in interactions with other subjects with whom they can, for example, (re)assign, (re)construct, and (in)validate certain meanings that are attached to the Black female

body by fiat. In the data discussed, moving within the "third space," the interviewees draw from the pool of meanings, freely attach them to their bodies hence positioning as embodied subjects. The women use intersectionality of their embodied subjectivities as their symbolical resource by juggling its constituent identity categories. On the whole, in the ongoing negotiation over the ownership and meanings of their bodies between the individual and society, the women were found to aptly draw on the existing discourses of beauty.

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Appendix: Transcription notes.

,	short pause in the flow of talk
.	full stop, stopping fall in tone, not necessarily end of sentence
...	longer silence
!	animated and emphatic tone
?	rising intonation, not necessarily a question
[..]	material omitted by the author
(())	transcriber's comments, not transcription
[talk]	overlapping utterances

Adapted from Hutchby and Wooffitt (1998).

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