Reclaiming Our Roots: The Influences of Media Curriculum on the Natural Hair Movement

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This article, theoretically constructed on Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, explores the use of Black female hair as a cultural signifier in two media texts, specifically Adrienne Kennedy’s play, Funnyhouse of a Negro, and Chris Rock’s documentary, Good Hair, in specific media texts. Analysis of the verbal and visual rhetoric regarding a Black female aesthetic revealed associated themes of generational family influences and identity formation.

Introduction

“If your hair is relaxed, White people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy; they’re not happy” (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 11:48). According to comedian Paul Mooney, when interviewed in Chris Rock’s documentary Good Hair, hair ranks high among the many issues African Americans struggle with throughout their negotiations of an aesthetic identity in a White-dominated society. Despite the fact that an increasing number of African Americans are embracing their natural hair, albeit nappy or otherwise, those valuing the natural state of African hair types continue to struggle against a convoluted definition of what is considered beautiful and even acceptable hair. While the philosophies surrounding hair are noted as culturally based and personally conflicting (Jeffries, 2002; Leach, 1976; Obeyesekere, 1984), they certainly have pronounced impact on the identity of African Americans. African American females, in particular, subject themselves and are subject to norm referenced ideals of beauty that for centuries have been grounded upon a European standard. The diametrically opposed continuum of straight versus nappy hair creates not only a radical split between Black and White beauty standards but also enables an intra-cultural tier of evaluative distinction among Black women according to their style preferences and capabilities (Simon, 2000). The racial, economic, and gender implications of these standards suggest an intricate social, historical, and political dynamic and the reality of such is readily displayed and often uncontested via a variety of media texts.

Media texts are multiple forms of commercial and public service communication, including television, radio, and Internet programs, box office films, advertisements, and so on, that intend to indirectly convey representations of the world to the world (Buckingham, 2003; Long & Wall, 2009). This article, theoretically constructed on Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, explores the use of Black female hair as a cultural signifier in two media texts, specifically Adrienne Kennedy’s (1988) play, Funnyhouse of a Negro, and Chris Rock’s (2009) documentary, Good Hair. The critique analyzed verbal and visual rhetoric regarding a Black female aesthetic and revealed associated themes of generational family influences and identity formation. This work expands the body of research on hair and the impact media texts have on the curriculum at large by exploring the connections between the cultural power of hair, media texts, and social justice.

Ideologies Influencing Black Hair

Negative images have been reified within the African American community through various rhetorical means. Over many years this has manifested as cultural hegemony, described by Gramsci (1999) as a phenomenon in which an oppressed group accepts and even embraces, to their detriment, the social norms of a dominant group. Contemporary research indicates generational family influences and identity formation as critical aspects of how Black women develop self-perceptions and represent their hair in American society.

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Multicultural Perspectives, 16(3), 160–165
Copyright © 2014 by the National Association for Multicultural Education
ISSN: 1521-0960 print / 1532-7892
DOI: 10.1080/15210960.2014.926747
Parmer, Arnold, Natt, and Janson (2004) examined African physical characteristics that African American families consciously and subconsciously value. These intra-cultural influences are perpetuated across generations and internalized as a standard that is equally powerful to the cross-cultural media images and related messages that are consumed by African Americans. Internalized oppression was concluded as the factor that facilitated generations of African American’s support of a cultural standard of aesthetics associated with a visual preference of skin color, hair texture and length, and general body size that are negatively correlated with Black African physical features. In seeking this aesthetic, the internalized oppressions manifested from racism, classism, and sexism are evident in the culturally hegemonic behaviors of African Americans and influence group and individual identity.

The female struggle with hair, as with other oppressive identity forming cultural practices, is expressed in relationship to gender and class identity. More importantly, the female hair dilemma in contemporary popular media texts is generally juxtaposed against a White, Eurocentric beauty norm.

Identity formation for humans is intrinsically connected to our relationship with hair, and for girls and women whose hair does not match the beauty standards of the created norm, this formation is particularly powerful (Banks, 2000; Simon, 2000). The female struggle with hair, as with other oppressive identity forming cultural practices, is expressed in relationship to gender and class identity. More importantly, the female hair dilemma in contemporary popular media texts is generally juxtaposed against a White, Eurocentric beauty norm. Social acceptance and conformity to this norm is also highly correlated to personal financial success, gender affirmation, and the societal trends that shape these indicators. According to Harris-Perry (2011), “the internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of black women are inherently political” (p. 5). Further, she asserts that Black women have been burdened with the job of countering disparaging perceptions regarding their character and identity, and these perceptions shape the existence of Black women and the resulting negotiations they encounter to maintain a sense of self and be acknowledged with respect as valuable contributors to society.

Methods

Case study method was employed to understand two thematically related media texts which serve as the data source. The media texts were purposefully selected for their unique quality as data events which explore the criteria outlined in the contextual framework (Lemke, 2012; Merriam, 1998). The framework focusing on family influences and identify formations that impact Black female perceptions of hair are demonstrated in these media texts through the use of rhetoric which “concentrates on specific questions and problems of communication involved in the persuasive action of humans” (Knape, 2012, p. 2). For this study, analysis of verbal and visual rhetoric was conducted. Verbal rhetoric is the written and spoken word in media communication that indicates choice from the writer or speaker that produces affective responses from the receiver (Long & Wall, 2009); while visual rhetoric is the symbolic imagery used to create and perform communication (Foss, 2005).

The media texts were chosen to compare and contrast the authors’ ability to convey messages about Black family influences and Black female identity formation through the use of verbal and visual rhetoric concerning hair. The data was triangulated using secondary documents including scholarly analyses of the media texts. The plan of analysis included thematically categorizing the primary data sources of verbal and visual rhetoric into a matrix according to the framework using secondary data sources to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Background and Overview of the Data Source

The first media text under analysis, Funnyhouse of a Negro, is a stage play written by Adrienne Kennedy and initially produced professionally in 1964 at New York City’s East End Theatre. For this analysis, the 1988 script is used. Kennedy is an African American female playwright whose work initiated the dramatic Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. She is considered unmatched in her use of eclectic language to create imagery that uniquely explores identity formation in regards to race, class, and gender. Her plays challenge the reader to destroy patterns of thinking that reinforce the dominant American norm through the development of her characters’ behavior. Furthermore, her surrealistic style is considered intensely expressive as it diminishes and
redenfines the canon. Kennedy has written over 30 plays and essays with much of her work being autobiographical in nature.

Funnyhouse of a Negro focuses on Sarah (Negro), the protagonist who painfully explores her inability to positively construct an identity as a Black female in America through a plethora of related roles. Hair is the principal theme anchoring Sarah’s identity to her race, gender, and social class. She displays personal conflict and instability through four primary sub-characters, Queen Victoria (Mother), Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus, and Patrice Lumumba (Father), who represent Sarah’s fragmented persona. Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg appear as White and physically identical, complain about their Black father who is responsible for all of their problems related to race, and wish their father was dead. Jesus conspires with the Queen and the Duchess regarding the father and decides to travel to Africa to kill Patrice Lumumba and escape all things Black. Each sub-character’s demise physically manifests as significant hair loss and symbolizes Sarah’s disintegration from their identity. The play concludes with Sarah committing suicide.

The second media text under analysis, Good Hair, is a 2009 documentary-style film produced by Chris Rock with Jeff Stilson directing and Rock starring in and narrating the film. Chris Rock is a multi-talented, African American male entertainer with a dominant background in stand-up comedic performance. He has acted in character roles for over 20 years and has television and screenplay writing, as well as directing credits, on his resume. The overarching theme of his work critically examines the human experience from an African American male lens. His role as a father of two African American daughters who began to display negative perceptions of Black female hair prompted his exploration of the African American female hair dilemma as a human experience. He is an outlier for African American men who have critically addressed Black female hair.

The primary motivation of Good Hair is to explore the issue of how African American women perceive their hair and how these perceptions have predisposed Black women to present their hair in specific ways. This documentary examines multiple aspects of the beauty and hair industry that accommodates Black women and attempts to dissect the various influences that determine what is deemed attractive and acceptable for African American women’s hair in the United States. The film specifically examines hair salons, manufacturing plants that produce hair-altering chemicals, and various outlets that produce and sell alternative hair applications including wigs, weaves, and extensions. A variety of celebrity and non-celebrity participants are interviewed to collect authentic responses to Rock’s investigation and gauge the racial, gender, and economic impact of the African American female hair conundrum.

Findings

Mixed responses to and within these media productions were evident and likely resulted from the audiences’, author’s, and participants’ inability to confront some of the complex issues broached in this work. The exploration of data in this study is presented thematically according to family influences and identity formation. Verbal rhetoric (VR1) and visual rhetoric (VR2) are noted as primary data sources and scholarly analysis (SA) is noted as a secondary data source.

Family Influences

Kennedy uses iconic imagery and verbal exemplifications in her surrealist play via the plot focusing on a Black woman, Sarah (Negro), who is a student living on the Upper West side of Manhattan. She broods on her troubled ancestry. Her mother, a light skinned Black woman with European features and beautiful straight hair, married a dark skinned Black man. After some time together in their marriage and amid their travels to Africa, Sarah’s mother emotionally withdrew from her husband. One night while drunk, the father raped the mother, and Sarah was conceived the night of the rape. The marriage eventually disintegrates and Sarah and her mother return to the States. While the background story is not actually performed as part of the play, it is the central motivation and what haunts Sarah throughout the events enacted on stage.

The icons of Funnyhouse include all of the intertwined, familial characters that are Sarah’s versions of herself. The play opens with a woman emerging on stage as if in a trance carrying a bald head and mumbling inaudibly. Her hair is wild, straight, black, and falls to her waist (VR2). Scanlan wrote, “She represents the mother, insane from the sexual abuse she has suffered [attempting to] walk away from her tormented psyche” (1992, p. 96–97; SA). This foreshadows what Sarah describes throughout the play via her nearly-White alter ego, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, as her struggle to come to terms with her racial identity. The Queen and the Duchess are wearing royal gowns and headpieces with veils covering their faces. Underneath the veil is wild, frizzy, kinky hair (VR2). This sets the tone of the play which focuses on the African-type hair inherited from her Black father who is the ultimate threat to Sarah’s existence. The Duchess remarks:

How dare he enter the castle, he who is the darkest of them all, the darkest one? My mother looked like a white
She cannot seem to forgive her father and love that which makes her Black. Sarah celebrates her mother and the White figures of royalty she aspires to be but has no love for herself. This first scene is an “enactment of the impossible wish to leave oneself behind” (Scanlan, 1992, p. 98; SA). Sarah seeks sanctuary from her Blackness through annihilation of physical or psychological contact with her father. Kennedy expands the rhetorical device by repetitive use of hair imagery as the source of Sarah’s problems related to her relationship with the Black father. The hair from the crown of her head and temples has fallen out and is lying on her pillow when she wakes up from a nightmare about her African father who torments her (VR2).

Sarah’s identity struggles linked to oppression appear in her distaste for her physical characteristics and the stage directions in the script describe the appearance of Sarah with exaggerated focus on her hair. . . .

Ultimately, Sarah’s family relationships are diametrically opposed because Patrice/Father destroyed the mother and Sarah with his Blackness. This manifests constantly through problems with their hair.

Patrice: Black man, black man, my mother says, I should have never let a black man put his hands on me. She comes to me, her bald skull shining. Black diseases, Sarah, she says. Black diseases. I run. She follows me, her bald skull shining. (Kennedy, 1988, p. 12; VR1)

Like Kennedy, Rock uses symbolic language and iconic depictions in his comedic documentary to explore familial influences shaping African American female perceptions of hair. The documentary opens with images of Rock’s two young daughters and his voice over introducing them as the most beautiful girls in the world. No matter how many times he tells them they are beautiful, it is just not good enough. One day his daughter asked him why she didn’t have good hair. Rock replies to his audience, “I wonder how she came up with that idea?” (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 1:45; VR1/VR2)

The documentary’s investigation primarily uses a jocular style to address what is essentially a difficult question. Sypher (1956) considered the social significance of comedy as “hatred and revel, rebellion and defense, attack and escape. It is revolutionary and conservative. Socially, it is both sympathy and persecution” (p. 51, SA). Rock’s documentary highlights the oppositional reactions of a range of individuals to the Black hair struggle. Carr (2013) noted that the film exposes widespread adverse patterns of thought among all racial groups interviewed in the documentary toward African-type hair (SA). This pattern of negative thinking and its influence on the African American family begins early as Rock points out that many mothers take their preschool-aged daughters to beauty salons to have their hair relaxed.

The film suggests that relaxers can potentially cause lung and brain damage. Yet the risk is deemed acceptable to create a less time consuming grooming ritual, but more importantly, to look less ethnic. Melyssa Ford, video model, admitted to harboring a preference for her White mother’s features:

I consider anybody’s hair but mine good hair. Like, my mom is White. I’m half Russian and Norwegian on my mother’s side, so my mom’s hair is silky and blonde and I was like, why, why didn’t I get your genetics? That is what I looked at as good hair; White hair. (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 2:27; VR1)

Maya Angelou, poet laureate, crafted a critical response to the importance of hair within the family structure:

Well, I would say that hair is a woman’s glory and that you share that glory with your family. They get to see you breeding it, and they get to see you washing it. It is the glory, but it is not a bad thing or a good thing. It’s hair. If you have it on your head it’s good. If you have it growing between your toes, it probably isn’t so good. (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 3:39; VR1)

While a minority of participants in the documentary challenged the beauty status quo or positively positioned Black hair, negative connections between family behaviors and ideals that impact hair prevailed.

Identify Formation

Kennedy explores the reasons why identity formation for African Americans remains in a state of unrest, with stereotypes being a major contributor to this constant state of flux. August Wilson suggested the term Black or African American indicates race and condition as it carries the historical weight of institutionalized disenfranchisement (Harrison, 2002; SA). African Americans are subject to their pasts and...
their everyday experiences are shadowed by all of their previous subjugations. Sarah’s identity struggles linked to oppression appear in her distaste for her physical characteristics and the stage directions in the script describe the appearance of Sarah with exaggerated focus on her hair: The most noticeable aspect of her looks is her wild kinky hair. It is a ragged head with a patch of hair missing from the crown which the Negro carries in her hand (VR2). Sarah reifies this notion with her monologue offering hair as the primary problematic aspect of her identity:

In appearance, I am good-looking in a boring way; no glaring Negroid features, medium nose, medium mouth, and pale yellow skin. My one defect is that I have a head of frizzy hair, unmistakably Negro kinky hair; and it is indistinguishable. (Kennedy, 1988, p. 6; VR1)

Ultimately, her monologue relegates the hair problem to its foundational connection to being Black—and therefore, nappy—which is the antithesis of anything good: “... black is evil and has been from the beginning. Even before my mother’s hair started to fall out” (Kennedy, 1988, p. 5; VR1).

The preliminary images for Rock’s documentary include a variety of Black women with a plethora of straight hairstyles (VR2). Rock interacted with several participants who possessed varying perceptions that impact the identity formation of Black women and influence their hair care practices. Nia Long, actress, expressed in her interview, “There’s always this sort of pressure within the Black community that if you have good hair, you’re prettier or better than the brown skin girl that wears the Afro or the dreads or the natural hairstyle (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 2:00; VR1).”

During her explanation, 1950s White models are shown and interviewees lament over contemporary media images from magazines showcasing Black models with silky, straight hair (VR2).

Weaver (2011) suggested potential reification of global racism aimed at people of African descent through the use of negative descriptors presented in Rock’s film (SA). Regardless, Rock’s exposition revealed the existential distaste for Black hair that is widespread across cultures and the hegemonic behaviors of African Americans appear to baffle Rock as he approaches beauty supply dealers who specialize in the sale of straight hair. He discovers that East Indian-type hair is the prized commodity; however, Asian distributors are the predominant brokers of the favored hair. His interview with an Asian hair seller revealed a broad revulsion for the African-type hair that Rock sarcastically attempted to sell the shop owner, who quickly and unilaterally refused because the hair was not slick, shiny, long, and beautiful (VR1/VR2). One Asian hair seller indicated that it would not be healthy for him to re-sell the African-type hair that Rock attempted to sell him because people might get a disease. A Black female in another Asian beauty supply store reported in response to the Black hair, “The hair is no good. Black people don’t wear that. No one walks around with nappy hair anymore.” She and the shop owner affirmed Rock when he suggested that the nappy hair he attempted to sell them was worth nothing. The Asian shop owner indicated that customers want hair that is “straight and looks more natural” (Rock & Stilson, 2009, 1:04:02; VR1).

Evidently the natural hair to which the shop owner referred is the implied European beauty norm that the majority of African American women find difficult to attain without relaxers or alternative hair. Raven Symoné, former Disney actress, suggested this explanation for why Black women feel such great need to adjust their hair to fit a White norm referenced standard, “I think you’re trying to blend in. I think you’re trying to make everybody comfortable; relaxed so they’re not like, Oh my God, what is that?” (Rock, 2009, 18:31; VR1). Despite these attempted justifications for their opinions, the deeper implications of attitudes and perceptions that impact identity formation are unchallenged.

As the aforementioned Kennedy quote suggests, the abhorrence and rejection of Black hair is a deeply situated problem that impacts the entire race of Black people.

Implications and Conclusion

Landlady: Her mother’s hair fell out, the race’s hair fell out because he left Africa, he said. He had tried to save them. She must embrace him. He said his existence depended on her embrace. I know that he wanted her to return [to Africa] with him and not desert the race . . . save the race, return to Africa, find revelation in the black. (Kennedy, 1988, pp. 17–18)

Funnyhouse of a Negro and Good Hair are media texts that effectively use verbal and visual rhetoric to convey powerful messages to their audiences. As the aforementioned Kennedy quote suggests, the abhorrence and rejection of Black hair is a deeply situated problem that impacts the entire race of Black people. Likewise, Rock’s work is impactful, resulting in a wave of Black females who have embraced their nappy hair since the release of this documentary. More work in this vein in
needed as recent backlash to natural Black hair was noted in the new hair regulations issued by the United States Army suggesting that no multiple braids, twists, or dreadlocks can be worn. Female soldiers of color, who comprise more than 30% of the military, are expected to change hairstyles or wear a wig (Henderson & Butler, 2014).

Media texts such as the two featured in this examination reflect on hair as a vehicle to explore social justice issues by highlighting characters and individuals that are troubled by White oppression and racism. These texts shed light on African-Americans’ generational dismissal of positive family influences through a rejection of Black physical features and identity markers. The rhetorical devises used metaphorically symbolize a form of disrespect and destruction of the Black race but more importantly call for a rebellion against racial classification and a destruction of hierarchical aesthetic norms through persuasive language and images.

The implications of this article have the power to substantiate movements that justify for Black females a chosen departure from the traditional White norms valued and perpetuated in contemporary American society. Verbal and visual rhetoric within these texts offer a reformist manner in which social justice issues can be explored and negotiated through transparent and thoughtful communication (Knape, 2012). The use of media texts which support alternative notions of hair, gender, and power among a disenfranchised community of women can be a catalyst for enlightened discussion in the educational sphere. The validity of hair as a catalyst for political discussions in the classroom has been recognized by scholars in the United States and Canada through the development of an online course entitled, “The Politics of Black Hair.” This course used multiple media texts including video, photographs, radio podcasts, blogs, and discussion forums to interrogate the socio-political impact of hair on a global scale (Kakonge, 2011).

An effective rhetorical analysis of media texts can be a springboard for creating student advocates who no longer digest media messages uncritically. Using media texts to teach metacognition skills encourages analysis and interpretation of messages that enhance students’ grasps of complex concepts introduced in the classroom environment and beyond. These texts possess the ability to assist the reader or audience to consider their roles in sustaining or destroying social injustices that affect the psychological welfare of the greater American community.

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