Abstract

There is very little academic research on the social dynamics within various racialized communities, specifically in regards to how colonialism has effected the way people belonging to a specific race interact with one another. This paper seeks to start the dialogue about intraracial oppression as a result of the post slaver institutionalization of racism. Furthermore, this paper discusses the need for White feminists to become stronger allies with Black feminists in the movement to redefine beauty in Western cultures. This paper argues that while the media plays a negative role in the lives of all women, White women benefit from the media in a way that Black women do not—they are the Western norm.

Much of feminist scholarship about race is focused on the racial dynamics between white women and women of colour. Consequently, feminist discourses about race have failed to include adequate analyses of intraracial oppression—specifically the oppression of lighter complexioned women by darker complexioned women that can be traced back to slavery. The post slavery institutionalization of racism divides Black women of all shades from uniting in the struggle against the systematic oppression they face. It is the opinion of the author of this paper, that it is the responsibility of Black women to first educate other women about their experiences, just like it is the responsibility of women first to educate men about the experiences of women. Without first educating the dominant group in society—men, for example—about the experiences of women, it cannot be expected that men will do anything to change the conditions that women work, live, and exist in. Although there has been some academic scholarship on this subject, there is room for much more. Additional research on intraracial oppression will ensure that this phenomenon is treated as a current issue that is widespread within the community, instead of one that is rather uncommon. At the heart of this problem are the ideologies of beauty in Western society: the whiter the skin; the blonder, straighter, and silkier the hair; the skinnier the body; the younger the woman, the more beautiful she is. Therefore, it is imperative that White Western feminists become more involved in the movement to redefine beauty in Western society and Western feminism cannot progress unless it addresses and attempts to break through the psychological effects of slavery on post-slavery African American women.
The friction between darker complexioned Black Western women, and lighter complexioned Black Western women is a result of the “relationship between skin tone and privilege” which emerged during slavery. During this time, lighter skinned Black slaves were worth more than the darker skinned slaves and were also more “aesthetically appealing to whites” because of the colour of their skin and European features—more slender noses, and smaller lips than the darker skinned woman with African features. Moreover, because these “mulatto” women were more physically attractive according to their White masters, they were allowed special privileges. For example, rarely did a light skinned Black woman work in the fields; she often worked in the White home cleaning the house, looking after the children, and sometimes engaged in sexual activities with White men, usually the master of the house. Women of pure African ancestry, on the other hand, worked in the field where they performed physically demanding tasks, lacked what was considered “socially desirable skills” (i.e., cooking, personal companion, butler, etc), and were less cultured and integrated in society. Lighter skinned slave women were more likely to be taught these “socially desirable skills” as a result from living and working inside of the master’s home. Eventually, skin colour became a way to distinguish between classes (Thompson and Keith 45).

Experience taught slaves that “light skin [is] a desirable asset and symbolic of more humane treatment”. Consequently, slaves started to internalize and accept the negative stereotypes of darker skinned Black women of pure African decent. Years later, there are a large portion of dark skinned Black women who still internalize the idea that European features are better than African features. An example of this internalization is the way some Black women style their hair. Many Black women wear hair extensions and/or use products to chemically alter the texture of their hair. These hair extensions and texture altering chemicals produce one thing: long, straight, silky hair—hair that is often seen on a European woman’s head.

Consequently, this internalization has created what Sandra Bartky explains is “psychic alienation”; the process by which an oppressed group becomes their own oppressors by not only internalizing the

1 Vera M. Keith and Cedric Herring, “Skin Tone and Stratification in the Black Community,” The American Journal of Sociology 97, no. 3 (1991): 761
2 Ibid., 762.
3 Ibid., 762.
4 Ibid., 762.
5 Ibid., 762.
7 Keith and Herring, “Skin Tone,” 763
8 Keith and Herring, “Skin Tone,” 763
negative stereotypes placed on them, but by living up to the low expectations placed on them. According to Thompson and Keith, skin colour is an important predictor of self esteem among African American women. Thus, lighter skinned Black women and biracial women report a higher level of self esteem than darker skinned Black women because their lived experience has taught them to believe that the lighter one’s skin, the more important, and beautiful one is.

More recently, the media has started to address the issue around the treatment of Black women by other Black women. The Tyra Banks talk show is known for its shows on racial prejudice. On one of these shows, there were three women sitting on a stage. All three women have a lighter complexion and have facial features that resemble those of a European woman. When Tyra Banks (the host) asked the audience to guess the racial category to which each woman belongs, the majority of the audience thought that all three women were biracial. Tyra then asks the women to reveal their race; all three women tell the audience that they are African American. The women then discuss some times in their lives when they have experienced racial prejudice by both Black and White women and men. These experiences include the automatic assumption of being White; being called “exotic”; feeling like they disappoint people who try to guess their race when they tell them that they are Black; and dealing with the ignorance and prejudice that comes from White women and Black women.

Subsequently, a darker skinned African American woman from the audience voices her opinion and explains that even though it is difficult to fight through the oppression that Black women face in general, it is even more difficult for darker skinned women because darker skinned women are associated with all of the negative connotations of Black women [i.e., loud, emasculating, hypersexual, unintelligent]. To this, one of the lighter skinned women on stage explain that it is not her problem that society believes that lighter skin is better, it is society’s problem. Moreover, she (and all other light skinned women) should not be looked at by darker skinned women as the enemy who thinks they are better than everyone else.

It appears evident that the group benefiting from this constant struggle of acceptance and beauty is White women. While women in general are bombarded on a daily basis with images from the media that depict how they should look, why they should look that way, and the role they should play, they are still bombarded with images of women who,

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10 Bartky, “On Psychological Oppression,” 51
11 Thompson and Keith, “The Blacker the Berry,” 62
racially, are the norm. Therefore, although women come in all shapes, sizes, and identities, it is the White woman that is considered normal in Western society. Furthermore, it is her non-racialized identity that makes her more desirable to this society than a Black woman. Additionally, it is a common Western ideology that tanned skin is sexy. I consider this a type of racial appropriation since White women are afforded the ability to have darker skin, be praised for it, and not experience any discrimination as a result. As a Black feminist, I believe that White feminists need to be deeply engaged in a political project that fights against the Western ideals that not only maintain the divide between darker skinned and lighter skinned Black women, but also maintains the oppression of darker skinned African American women.

In Under Western Eyes Revisited, Chandra Mohanty gives three pedagogical models of academic classrooms used to globalize the women’s studies curriculum15. She suggests that a “comparative feminist studies”16 model is the most useful model because it focuses on addressing the experiences and histories of women cross culturally without using a colonial approach. This model also moves away from the “add and stir” perspective and towards a perspective that “requires understanding the historical and experiential specificities and differences of women’s lives”17 and the connections between the histories and experiences of women across the globe.

Mohanty’s comparative model is a tremendous step towards truly understanding the ways in which White women have shaped the history and the position of Black women today. The comparative model, as Mohanty describes it, allows for women across the globe to address their experiences and co-responsibilities in shaping the experiences of one another. Instead of identifying one type of identity of “woman”—White women, for example—and their experiences, the comparative model allows for the analysis of the lived experiences of White women in history and how that molded the experiences of racialized women in history, and how that molded the experience of women with disabilities in history, and so on. Therefore, if White women understand how their history has effected the history and lived experience of Black women, it would bring a deeper sense of solidarity among the two identities.

In Audre Lorde’s Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference, she discusses her concept of the “mythical norm”; a norm that is “usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure”18. This “mythical norm”19 has been

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16 Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes Revisited,” 238
17 Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes Revisited,” 242
19 Lorde, “Age, Race, Class and Sex,” 116
tailored in the media for women specifically. Now, this norm is defined as white, thin, female, young, heterosexual, Christian, and dependent. General research on the portrayal of (Western) women in the media usually comes to the same conclusion; that these portrayals are destructive to women because no women can truly attain this ideological beauty.

The only thing that White women have truly benefited from in the media, is their race being associated with power and beauty. However, they have not benefited from the messages that tell them that they are too fat, or that they have too many blemishes, or that their facial features need to be altered. So, why keep a system in tact that does nothing but destroy the self esteem of millions of women. The system should be destroyed and beauty should be redefined by women of all nations to erase the competition between and within races.

African American women need to unite to end their own oppression as women of colour. In order to become more united, White women are needed as allies to help deconstruct the Western beauty ideals that divide light skinned Black women and biracial Black women from darker skinned Black women. Furthermore, there needs to be more feminist scholarship on intraracial oppression so that feminists can come together in a political project to better fight the patriarchal system that maintains racism and divides the races. White Western feminists are imperative to the movement of redefining of beauty in Western society. Hopefully this paper has shown that a global feminist movement cannot progress unless it addresses and attempts to break through the psychological effects of slavery on post-slavery African American women.
Works Cited


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