

**HOW WE SEE OURSELVES: THE BEAUTY MAKEUP OF THE BLACK  
CANADIAN WOMAN**

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## **ABSTRACT**

How We See Ourselves: The Beauty Makeup of the Black Canadian Woman

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The concept of beauty is a prime value in North American culture yet the feminine beauty ideal has conventionally been associated with the White population, causing a dichotomy of norms between Whites and non-Whites. This thesis reviews the historical and contextual nature of beauty amongst women of African descent and the Diaspora in the works of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Malcolm X, W.E.B DuBois and many others on such topics as skin color, hair texture, health, body image and racism. To determine the continuing salience of these issues in the lives of Black women, I interviewed and surveyed ten second generation African (Black) Canadians. The qualitative data is rich but the most striking finding is that the women do not express the dichotomy between Black and White aesthetics as strongly as the American and British data would suggest. The intersubjective nature of the Black Canadian female experience highlighted a fragmented awareness of interracial and intraracial discrimination that shaped their self-identity and position in society, additionally their definition of beauty, valuing internal qualities such as intelligence and undervaluing qualities related to physical appearance. The interview data indicated that there was minimal racialization of attitudes on health and body aesthetics, and minimal emphasis on Afrocentric traits. Discussions on phenotypes like hair texture and skin color demonstrated the confusion that exists in rationalizing the use of racialized terminology. The majority of respondents indicated mild concerns over their body based on the Body Shape Questionnaire and healthy self-esteem on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

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## INTRODUCTION

For several centuries, standards of physical beauty in North America as well as parts of Europe have been conditioned by the norms of the majority population. Its effect on various populations and cultures through global marketing and capitalism has been substantial. Many people around the world are aware of what is considered beautiful for White Europeans and Americans as a whole. However, those people that do not fit these norms by virtue of their racial, ethnic or cultural heritage may be recognized as being oppositional to these standards of beauty.

To illustrate, Black<sup>1</sup> women or women of African ancestry have had their physical traits used as a reference point as to what beauty is not, from the onset of colonialism and slavery. As a result, women from this cultural background have had to redefine and reaffirm their beauty standards while being influenced by the dominant Eurocentric norms established. Beauty then becomes a complex discourse on identity, resistance and acceptance. Specifically, this struggle has exposed itself in the discourse that surrounds the politics of body, skin and hair.

The following thesis will provide an insight into the complexity of the discourse of beauty with Black women. It will highlight the historical and cultural issues of Black femininity as a literature review in Chapter one. A theoretical argument on the preservation of these socio-historical issues is discussed in Chapter two. Then the research design and analysis is outlined in Chapter three. Finally, the findings from the study are examined in Chapter four.

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<sup>1</sup> The term Black will be used as means of human representation for any person who is identified or identifies herself a descendant of Africa (Omi and Winant 1994). Black and African American or Canadian will be used interchangeably.



CHAPTER ONE:  
BODY, SKIN AND HAIR: CONCEPTUALIZING BLACK FEMININITY

*The Body and its Discontents: Symbolism, resistance and risk*

Within the history of the Americas and parts of Europe, there lies a need to represent the Caucasian population as distinct from the other groups that the period of exploration, colonialism and slavery had introduced into their political and societal life. Moreover, the need for distinction also implied a need for superiority towards the other people groups (Lowe 2005). Due to the differences in physical features like color, body shape, facial features and hair texture besides habits, behaviours and language, the Europeans reinforced their dominance over these groups economically, intellectually and spiritually (Lowe 2005). As a result, it caused a polarization of body types, an otherness that positioned these women as deviant morally, sexually and physically.

For instance, women of African descent were viewed as the polar opposite of the White European femininity (Young 1999). The more pronounced facial and bodily features made the Black woman to be perceived as having an excessive sexuality and/or ugliness in contrast to the puritanical attitudes of the Victorian period which has and continues to cause distress for women in view of their physical self-concept i.e., their beauty and body image, till this present day. In light of the caricatures displayed portraying the Black woman throughout the Americas and Europe from the exploration period to the present, there has been ambivalence towards her features, an exaggeration of her physicality, sexuality or otherness in her features. A notable example is the exploitation of the Hottentot Venus (Sarah Baartmann) whose body was put on display throughout Europe and her genitalia dissected and placed in a museum after her death (Fausto-Sterling 2000).

From this distinction, notions of sexuality and intelligence caused many to objectify and degrade their bodies, justifying many cases of sexual assault and sexual curiosity/exploration (Collins 2004; Fausto-Sterling 2000), as well as the neglect of representing Black women without discrediting the stereotypes. The concept of body image therefore, provides a history of Black women being used as a reference point of what White femininity is not.

According to Patricia Hill Collins (2004), North American society's concept of beauty has been defined based on dichotomies. She states:

“Historically, in the American context, young women with milky white skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful and therefore the most feminine women. Within this interpretive context, skin color, body type, hair texture, and facial features become important dimensions of femininity. This reliance on these standards of beauty automatically renders the majority of African American women at best as less beautiful, and at worst, ugly” (Collins 2004, 194).

The social alienation from the dominant norms as well as its irrelevance (since most Blacks could never change their looks to fit the White standard), provoked many Black women to resist the dominant standards and accept beauty that entails aspects of one's skills, personality and intelligence, as well as embrace the phenotypic features that are generally linked with those of African descent. An example of this type of re-evaluation of beauty can be noted in the famous speech delivered by abolitionist Sojourner Truth entitled “Ain't I a Woman?”(see Appendix II) usually utilized in feminist discourses to demonstrate the exclusionary practices within the feminist movement. In this speech she discusses her strength and intelligence in spite of her status as an ex-slave. Another example can be found in the poem “Phenomenal Woman” by Maya Angelou (see Appendix II) which outlines her physical features in such a way that universalizes her traits as well as displays her charm and high self-esteem. The Black woman then took the

stance of that of an observer, taking a critical standpoint on the dominant cultural standards of beauty (Duncan and Robinson 2004). As a consequence, these realistic standards have been perceived in parallel to the Eurocentric standard of beauty and been intermingled with it, creating a diverse discourse on what is deemed beautiful for the Black population. The discourse around beauty dealt with specific issues around the structure of body parts.

The symbolism of the Black body has transcended the history and popular culture of both Blacks and Whites, causing many to continue to objectify their bodies and body parts, either by revering in the supposed deviance/sexuality or revering them as part of their heritage. Sometimes the lines that distinguish both are blurred. For instance, Black music throughout the Diaspora has illustrated the admiration of having a fuller figure with larger attributes. The following lyrics<sup>2</sup> emphasize the admiration of the buttocks:

“But Tina got a big ole butt/ so I’m leaving you” ---LL Cool J, “Big Ole Butt”.

“Shake that healthy butt/ Baby got back! [...] Cosmo says you’re fat/ I ain’t down with that/ Cause your waist is small and your curves are kicking” --- Sir Mix-A-Lot, “Baby Got Back”.

“It’s a big bam bam party so flaunt it [...] The middle section of your gorgeous body/When you’re moving it you must look sexy” ---Denise Belfon, “Ka Ka Lay Lay”

“Let me see that tootsee roll” --- 69 Boyz

“I don’t think you’re ready for this jelly/ [...] /Cause my body is too bootylicious for you babe” ---Destiny’s Child

Within North American culture specifically, African American women are perceived as having a satisfactory body image that resists the need for excessive dieting and exercising

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<sup>2</sup> These lyrics are taken from various genres of music like rap, R&B, and soca/calypso. It should be noted that Denise Belfon’s popular calypso song was never officially recorded and has an incomplete reference.

that has affected many Caucasian women for several decades (Duncan and Robinson 2004; Akan and Grilo 1995; Story et al. 1995). The resistance to these standards has placed many women in the category of overweight or obese due to several interrelated variables like access to proper health resources, socio-economic status, stress levels and poor diet choices (Mastin and Campo 2006; Kayrooz et al 1998; Story et al. 1995). African American women with a healthy body image may be concealing psychological issues and stressors through compulsive overeating and obesity (Lovejoy 2001; hooks 1993). Consequently, many women are at risk of acquiring diseases linked to their excess weight like diabetes, hypertension, heart failure, cancer, sleep apnoea and other related problems (Ebony 2004).

It should be noted that the prevalence of weight gain in the American population is attributed to the advancements in technology since post industrialization. Sedentary-oriented technology has reduced the overall cost of food and the amount of energy exerted after food consumption (Philipson and Posner 2003). Therefore, it is cheaper to consume food but more expensive to expend the calories produced from them due to the lack of physical stimulus that actually drives physical appetite (Peters, et al. 2002).

However, the cultural ideals of beauty within the Black population remain an expression of social values and beliefs that consider African culture as more accepting of larger women, especially characteristics like a large buttocks and hips (Ebony 2004; Reischer and Koo 2004; Falconer and Neville 2000). 'Being thick' or accepting being a weight that may be deemed overweight or obese, demonstrates in one sense the resistance to present mainstream ideals. Moreover, food addiction and weight gain were not perceived as serious, stigmatic issues until recently (hooks 1993; Ebony 2004). This

notion has justified the continued consumption of fatty foods and traditional dishes that may be high in fat, sodium and cholesterol (Ebony 2004). Also, it has opened the door for repercussions such as the promotion of unhealthy foods within Black communities and Black media (Mastin and Campo 2006).

Within public view, the understanding and knowledge of better body acceptance amongst Black women has racialized the issue of body image, undermining the underlying issues about weight. Hence, the issue of beauty within the parameters of body image does not encapsulate the internal disputes on hair and skin color among women of African descent.

*Skin: Divisions Below the Surface*

“black boy could get along, but a black girl would never know anything but sorrow and disappointment” --- *The Blacker the Berry* (Thurman 1970 [1929], 4)

If you white, you right  
If you yellow, you mellow  
If you brown, stick around  
If you black, get back  
Way back!  
(Banks 2000, 39)

A yellow gal rides in a limousine  
A brown-skin rides a Ford  
A black gal rides an old jackass  
But she gets there, yes my Lord  
(Thurman 1970 [1929], 179)

Angela: Do any of you know what it is like...not being thought of as attractive?

Drew: I can't believe you believe that!

Angela: It's the kind of shit you buy into....I was always the darkest one in my class. I know you know what I'm talking about. All the guys ran after the light-skinned girls with long, straight hair. That left me out. It's that same kind of thinkin' that leaves us out when it comes to white women. Back in the day, brothers would get sisters that looked like you. But now, light skin ain't even good enough. Today, brothers are going for the gusto...”

---*Jungle Fever*

In Spike Lee's film *Jungle Fever*, a story about an interracial affair, the protagonist's wife consults her girlfriends to discuss the root of the protagonist's infidelity and concludes it is due to self-hatred and colorism that influenced his desire to lust after a White woman. During this "women's council" meeting scene, the women also express their views on interracial dating and the intraracial discrimination they experienced with men.

From the other preceding excerpts of rhymes, book quotations and script dialogue, one can observe the theme of shade distinction and prejudice. Although racism and discrimination based on one's skin color is presently viewed as intolerable, especially when it is one group of people with a particular shade against another, what remains rarely discussed or strangely taboo is discrimination within one's group. For instance, members who comprise of the African Diaspora make up several different shades of brown, yet these pigmentations have been collapsed into three distinct categories: light, brown and black. These categories have spurned the nature of how members of the African Diaspora perceive themselves and why colorism or intraracial discrimination still pervades current attitudes on beauty.

Colorism illuminates one of the complex problems within the Black population amidst its continuous efforts to be politically and socially viewed and accepted, as a unit in an ever diversifying multicultural society. Throughout history, colorism has implicitly divided families, communities and political activism within the Black population while remaining a taboo. The following quote from Malcolm X highlights the contradictory nature of colorism in his life:

"I actually believe that as anti-white as my father was, he was subconsciously so afflicted with the white man's brainwashing of Negroes that he inclined to favor the light ones and I was his lightest

child. Most Negro parents in those days would almost instinctively treat any lighter children better than they did the darker ones [...] My mother gave me more hell for the same reason. She was very light herself but she favored the ones who were darker [...] She went out of her way never to let me become afflicted with a sense of color-superiority” (Malcolm X 1964, 4, 8).

Colorism has been documented in literary works such as *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *The Blacker the Berry* by Wallace Thurman<sup>3</sup>, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison<sup>4</sup>, and *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. The controversy over colorism resurfaced during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the films *School Daze* and *Jungle Fever* by American director Spike Lee.

The miscegenation or sexual contact between Africans, Europeans and Natives during the period of slavery produced varying shades within the population. The offspring of slavemasters and slaves had a greater access to better work prospects, education and freedom due to their parental background. For instance, women of mixed ancestry were more likely to work as domestics in the home or become concubines or mistresses for the slave owners (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). Since biracial individuals were generally both White and Black, their lineage, usually paternal, was viewed with more sympathy because their whiteness made them less Black. As a result, people of mixed heritage became the social elite within the Black community and a

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<sup>3</sup> Wallace Thurman’s (1970 [1929]) *Blacker the Berry*, is a satirical novel set in America in the 1920s. The title alludes to the ‘saying’, “the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice” which for African Americans is a type of flattery that refers to skin tone. The novel is about a young woman who becomes obsessed and hypersensitive about her skin color. Due to her family and social upbringing, she is taught that being lighter-skinned is more acceptable, more appealing and more intelligent from her light skinned family members even though she is dark skinned. In spite of her efforts to find her place amongst her African American peers during and after her scholastic career, her elitist attitude about skin color makes her discriminate against the internal attributes that make her dark skinned and gravitate towards the life of a lighter skinned person, even though her pigmentation does not allow for it. Her peers and her society discriminate against her to the point that she can only focus on colorism, not realizing that there are other ways of self-perception.

<sup>4</sup> In Toni Morrison’s (1970) *The Bluest Eye*, the protagonist desires to have blue eyes because she believes that blue eyes signify an escape from the ugliness she perceives physically and experiences socially: she is a member of a poor, dysfunctional family where her parents are abusive and resent her existence.

buffer class between the races (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). In the Caribbean, their complexion became the indicators of the middle or upper middle class status (Weekes 1997). In order to maintain their privilege, mixed race groups isolated themselves, forming their own associations such as The Blue Vein Society, social clubs and churches. They were more likely to attend university and pursue professional fields, whereas those with darker complexions were limited to technical and teaching degrees (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). So, skin tone stratification and complexion affected future generations to the extent it could be considered a predictor of education attainment, income and occupation (Keith and Herring 1991).

Specifically in the United States, the law of the “one drop rule” classified many biracial individuals as Black, and terms like quadroon (one grandparent was Black out of three White grandparents) and octoroon (one eighth Black or one great grandparent was Black out of seven) emerged. It caused many to attempt to ‘pass’ as White in order to attain a better life with less discrimination but it was burdensome to maintain the secret. Films such as *Imitation of Life* depicted this conflict and fed the stereotype of the ‘tragic mulatto’, a person that is rejected by both races and suffers from inner turmoil about his/her identity (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). In short, this population of mixed race people was by their phenotypic and ancestral status, a new object of desire and scorn.

The onset of varying shades re-emphasized the European standard of beauty and intelligence. Victorian femininity glorified fair skin and was associated with high standards of purity and morality. Fairer skinned Black women were considered more attractive because of their closer proximity to Eurocentric features that embodied both White femininity and perceived Black immodesty (Collins 1990; Tate 2007). Therefore,



White men perceived them as exoticized females that were relatable due to their whiteness and exoticized due to their blackness, meaning that “whiteness tames her image” (hooks 1992: 72). Black men internalised this Eurocentric standard and also perceived lighter skinned women as attractive, creating tension within the community. In some parts of the Diaspora, it was viewed as an advantage to continue to marry individuals who were fairer in complexion or Caucasian in order to improve the aesthetic and status of the family (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992; Weekes 1997; Fanon 1967; Tate 2007).

Consequently, skin color has become a marker of attractiveness alongside other phenotypic attributes like eye color, nose and lips. These other phenotypes can provoke ridicule or admiration if they are too Afrocentric or Eurocentric. To illustrate, the beauty of a Black woman may be rationalized in such a way that the phenotypes closest to Eurocentric ideals weigh more than the Afrocentric ones, hence bettering her chances of being perceived as beautiful. This means her beauty resides in an ambiguous position where her skin color is not considered representative of her other phenotypic features. On the other hand, a dark skinned woman may be perceived as beautiful due to her hair texture or facial features but her skin color is a shortcoming and conversely, a light skinned woman may be considered attractive due to her complexion but her other features that are more Afrocentric are perceived as disadvantageous (Tate 2007).

Still, light-skinned persons, especially women, are more likely to experience the “halo effect” which means their skin color as a signifier of beauty will represent not only attractiveness but likeability, honesty and competence, compounded with the findings that correlate light skin with the likelihood of attaining a higher income, education, and a

well educated man as a spouse (Hill 2002; Seltzer and Smith 1991; Hunter 2002; Rocquemore 2002; Thompson and Keith 2001). Cynthia Frisby (2006) discovered in her study of advertising and skin color that light brown females were the most popular choice among participants. The results reflect the impact of lighter skinned female models and celebrities in the media and the asymmetries in mate preference with lighter skin wives favored by men (Keenan 1996; Loury 2006). Moreover, the continued creation of skin bleaching products ranging from rudimentary home recipes to black market products and medically approved creams satisfy those Black women who desire to lighten their skin tone regardless of the physical risk (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992; Mire 2001; Glenn 2009). The impact of skin color stratification may still, therefore, cause a period of inner conflict during a woman's development of self acceptance or burden a woman's self-esteem (Neal and Wilson 1989).

#### *Hair: Conditioning the Roots*

Closely linked to the issue of skin color stratification, among many Black women is the subject of hair and hairstyling. As with color, hair has been and continues to be a site of acceptance or rejection of one's identity. According to psychologist and author Kenneth Clark (1965), this preoccupation of many Black people with hair straighteners and skin bleachers partly illustrates this tragic aspect of American racial prejudice, such that they begin to suffer from an inferiority complex (Carmichael and Hamilton 1966). And bell hooks states that "hair is really not an aspect of our being that most of us see as related to bodily pleasure [...] to enjoy black hair, such negative thinking has to be unlearned" (hooks 1993, 86).

During the time of slavery and colonialism in Africa and the Americas, the distinction between the concepts of beauty was made clearer; European thinkers made the dichotomous conclusion of classifying Caucasian features as better than Negroid ones, especially hair texture. It was during this period that new adjectives emerged to describe this type of hair as kinky or ‘nappy’. Hair became the phenotype to distinguish a slave and a slave owner in the Americas (Rooks 2001).

From this point onward, ‘nappy’ became a term of derision and degradation<sup>5</sup> (Jacobs-Huey 2006). Natural hair is perceived and internalized as frightening due to its stark contrast to conventional Caucasian hair texture (hooks 2007 [1988]). With the onset of interracial encounters, this phenotype became more complex as Afrocentric hair became classified as either good or bad (Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992). The more Afrocentric features one’s hair texture had (i.e., the hair strand is shaped like a tight coil), the greater propensity for it to be considered ‘bad’ or its other descriptors: short, matted, kinky, coarse, brittle and wooly (Lester 2000). ‘Good’ (and its other adjectives like long, silky, bouncy, manageable, healthy and shiny) was closer to more conventional Eurocentric features: the hair strand was more of a curl, wave or even straight (hooks 1993; Hunter 2002; Russell, Wilson and Hall 1992; Lester 2000). As a result, this phenotype like skin color was a marker of privilege amongst African Americans as those with lighter skin and curly hair were set apart, had better opportunities for education and employment in the dominant society (Banks 2000). According to Orlando Patterson

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<sup>5</sup> Many have attempted to re-appropriate it as a term of endearment but with little success. For instance, in 1998, Carolivia Herron’s children’s book entitled *Nappy Hair* caused controversy when Ruth Sherman, an Elementary school teacher decided to include it as part of her curriculum as a celebration of diversity in a predominantly African American and Hispanic school. African American parents whose children attended the school protested against the use of the book as being racist and insensitive which caused her to leave her position (Leyden 1998).

(1982), hair texture was the true symbolic emblem of slavery that was masked through the terminology of color.

Consequently, many women endured not only the political and socioeconomic oppression due to their skin color, but were forced to internalize these negative messages from a cosmetic perspective. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, White cosmetic companies marketed skin bleaching products as well as hair straighteners to Black women. Madame CJ Walker, known for being the first Black businesswoman and millionaire, invented a hair stimulant and pressing comb that promoted hair growth and greater independence for women. She was aware of the racial implications of her product being perceived as a solution to a problem (like her White predecessors) however, she argued that her products and business emphasized female empowerment<sup>6</sup>. Women were now encouraged to feel confident about their appearance and their outward beauty because they were capable of controlling it (Rooks 1996). Straightening one's hair was to be perceived as being practical, increasing manageability and essentially correlating it to higher productivity and efficiency at home and at work (Rooks 1996; Banks 2000).

From the hot comb, other straightening techniques were developed, mainly the chemical relaxer, also known as a permanent or a perm, whereby chemicals such as sodium hydroxide (lye) reconstruct and straighten the hair follicle. Besides these semi-permanent hairstyles, women also sported straighter hairpieces like wigs.

These straight hair trends fuelled the ongoing debate on Black pride, Black unity, and pan-Africanism throughout the Diaspora. The cosmetic alterations represented an

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<sup>6</sup> Walker wanted African American women to gain upward mobility in order to become proper breadwinners for their homes. As opposed to the common, menial, homecare jobs available, Black (especially dark skinned) women could learn how to be saleswomen and cosmeticians, establishing their own fortune in beauty salons or selling Walker's goods (Rooks 1996).

internalization of Eurocentric standards and self-hatred. For instance, in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, he retrospectively reflects upon his hair straightening experience:

“This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh with lye, in order to cook my natural hair until it was limp, to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are ‘inferior’—and white people ‘superior’—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards [...] if they gave the brains in their heads just half as much attention as they do their hair, they would be a thousand times better off” (Malcolm X 1964, 55-6).

During the 1960s and 1970s, the slogan ‘Black is beautiful’ was coined and became synonymous with the Black Power Movement and part of the discourse on race relations, group solidarity and self-identification. Its symbolic hairstyle was the *Afro*, representing the need to wear one’s hair in its natural state without shame. Similarly, the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica also encouraged wearing a natural hairstyle called dreadlocks (Weekes 1997; Kuumba and Ajanaku 1998). Unfortunately, once the radical movement did not reach its ideals, the natural alternative was perceived as simply a trend and many women reverted to straightening their hair (hooks 2007 [1988]). According to the research conducted by Hill (2002), the Baby Boom generation who came of age during the period of activism in the 1960s and 1970s, appeared to have as much skin color bias as previous generations, which possibly indicates that Eurocentric standards of beauty and color preferences are difficult to dismiss. Hair remained a “territory to be conquered” (hooks 2007 [1988]; hooks 1993).

The Black cosmetic industry has expanded beyond the business of Walker to supply not only African American women with new formulas for stimulating hair growth, straightening and reconstructing hair, but also promotes synthetic or human hair with hairpieces and wigs. Synthetic hair has provided new hairstyles such as weaves and

extensions whereby hair is braided, sewn or glued onto one's hair. Black women are now consumers of mass produced variations of hairstyles, hair lengths, hair textures and hair colors. In the United States alone, the Black hair industry generates nine billion dollars annually (Monk 2009).

Presently, Black women are given a variety of options in terms of the expression of their identity. However, this expression still may come with a price. Recall that the introduction of natural hairstyles was associated with radical political movements and a rejection of White womanhood (Weekes 1997). In recent years, natural hair can signify militancy, unorthodoxy, lesbianism, afrocentricity, and intimidation (White 2005). It is commonly accepted for Black women to straighten their hair for a certain professional look<sup>7</sup> (hooks 2007 [1988]; Banks 2000). Although it is generally not explicitly stated, many women prefer straighter hairstyles to maintain the status quo of the workplace environment. The result is a new affirmation of hair in that what is unnatural is now seen as natural and vice versa (Banks 2000).

What remains to be discussed is whether the acceptance or rejection of hairstyles is still an issue both in the public and private sphere. Since the representation of hair has been symbolically linked to certain lifestyles, choices and attitudes about society, if they are labelled inappropriate, a woman's look can limit her opportunities to work in certain companies and organizations.

Within the underlying historical, social and psychological issues surrounding hair, there is an emotional bond of womanhood. In spite of the discourse on Eurocentric

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<sup>7</sup> Recently Glamour magazine came under fire for a workshop one of their editors conducted on appropriate dress code at a law firm. The unnamed speaker underlined that the Afro and dreadlocks were inappropriate, out of date and political in the office. The African American lawyers who attended the presentation were appalled (Chen 2007).

standards on Black women aesthetics, hair grooming provides a bond between women that is formed from an early age whether they are family members, friends or salon professionals. Hair is a site of bonding as well as strife, as many women may undergo their first straightening experience with a hot comb or relaxer; they may also undergo intricate braiding styles or hair extensions under the supervision, guidance and aid of another person. The time spent on hairstyling provides women a social ritual to share wisdom and intimacy with each other while initiating their daughters into a rite of passage (hooks 2007 [1988]).

Overall, hair has been rationalized not only as a symbol of one's identity but as a site of control. The issue of manageability is the dilemma faced by many women of African descent who consider altering the look of their hair in order for it to be perceived as presentable or easier to handle. Like skin color, hair has caused strife, tension and low self-esteem among women who desired to be accepted in the wider society as well as desired by Black men. If a woman chooses to wear her hair in a certain way (whether naturally or treated), then political or symbolic signifiers may potentially be associated with the look and the individual. Trends may change but there remains underlying attitudes about the 'natural' reality of Black women as bodies to be scrutinized, either within themselves or in public spheres through various codes or markers of reference.

### *Summary*

“Black women now can get hair weaves, insert blue contact lenses, dye their hair blond, get silicone implants to have bigger breasts and have ribs removed to achieve smaller waists all for the purpose of appearing ‘beautiful’” (Collins 2004, 130).

The literature featured has outlined the historical and cultural constructs surrounding the notion of beauty for Black women. The acceptance of one's body is complex, multi-dimensional and is not limited to height and weight. As bell hooks states: "the extent to which we are comfortable with our hair reflects on our overall feelings about our bodies" (hooks 2007 [1988]). Although many Black women may statistically have higher self-esteem in regards to their physique, other phenotypes such as hair, skin color, nose, and lip shape may impact their psychological wellbeing, especially when the standard of beauty is even more unattainable than their White counterparts. This combination of phenotypes may impact the livelihood of many women if attractiveness does influence employment, income, social networking and relationships. The undercurrent of colorism subtly manifests itself within society's acceptance of who they perceive as beautiful, intelligent and successful. Women of African descent who are in the public eye seemingly still have a perceived advantage over their contemporaries based solely on their skin pigmentation. Women are left to create spaces where their definition of beauty is accepted and not placed on the periphery. For instance, in the documentary *Black Bold and Beautiful* (National Film Board of Canada 1998), one of the interviewees confesses to that need for a space that is not necessarily a site of rebellion but a place of acceptance without conformity, a notion that parallels the critiques made by Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks in justifying the need for Black Feminist Thought. One must also note the significance of the risk in resisting or conforming to the conventional beauty norms in place. For instance, the cultural acceptance of larger frames within the Black community, may impact the risk of weight related diseases and



conditions. The desire for a fairer complexion or straighter hair may eventually be detrimental to one's skin.

This discussion has illustrated the ongoing contention that affects and has affected Black women for the past centuries. Although many strides have been made to dispel racist ideologies and stereotypes, the discourse surrounding the body, skin and hair remains salient. The choices a young woman makes about her beautification will mark her identity in relation to the norms of society.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### THEORIZING THE BLACK FEMALE AESTHETIC IN NORTH AMERICA

In order to explore the beauty complexities of body, skin color and hair, this study draws from several sources but encompasses concepts such as double consciousness and socialization, governmentality, Black Feminist Thought and their imagery of womanhood. These concepts provide greater understanding of the effects of pluralism and diversity in contemporary society which consequently, present the malleability within the definitions of beauty and identity. These subtle societal shifts in understanding present day corporal aesthetics will highlight the intersubjective nature of the Black woman experience. In addition, the following theoretical literature will demonstrate the ongoing tension in societal representation when encountering perceptions of race and gender collapse outside the conventional paradigm of beauty.

#### *Double Consciousness and Socialization*

Although the overall historical lives and experiences of women who are part of the African Diaspora may be different from the African American experience, they generally share a two-fold identity as explained by W.E.B DuBois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903):

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness –an American, a Negro; two thoughts, two souls, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (DuBois 1903, 2).

Double consciousness demonstrates that African Americans had a troubled self-awareness in context with how they were perceived by the dominant society and how to manoeuvre and negotiate these perceptions. Blacks had to recognize that their identity was labelled negatively within the political, economical and social framework of

American society, which ultimately placed Blacks on the periphery of society because they were not considered fully American. They also had to recognize that their uprooted and alienated African and disadvantageous American heritage, had to be negotiated because it was always in conflict. Therefore, the tension between inclusion and exclusion has its social parameters around the political constructs of color and culture. For Africans of the Diaspora, this can potentially lead to tension between members as to what is deemed authentic or has been essentialized to represent 'Black' culture versus what is non-Black or non-Afrocentric, specifically, what is perceived as Eurocentric or White. From this perspective, it is assumed that Black individuals encounter two forms of socialization that have to be rationalised and integrated into their lives.

Bear in mind that acculturation takes place through social interaction. Individuals inevitably adopt internal and external behaviour patterns similar to the broader society in varying degrees. Consequently, ethnic identity retention<sup>8</sup> differs from generation to generation. As each generation develops in the broader community, the significance of ethnic constructs familiar in the past might lessen. In the case of the second generation who are the offspring of immigrant parents, this group undergoes a process of double socialization (Isajiw 1999). Meaning that, individuals of that generation must encounter the norms of their parents' culture and the dominant culture.

The concept of double consciousness and socialization has been refashioned and exemplified in our present understandings of hyphenated identities<sup>9</sup>, and double socialization as well as how women of the African Diaspora have presented themselves

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<sup>8</sup> Ethnic identity retention: "the extent to which attributes which can be identified as characteristic of the specific ethnic group are present among second or subsequent generations" (Isajiw 1981, 1).

<sup>9</sup> Hyphenated identity refers to terminology and affinity towards being labeled or labeling oneself as two or nation, ethnic or cultural groups. Common examples include Jamaican-Canadian, Jewish-American, and what will be used throughout the work, Black (African) Canadian.

during the last century: a need to reconcile one's 'otherness' and to be truly accepted for her African heritage and corporeality. The exclusion she perceives may influence her to conform to the norms of the dominant society as well as critique them in order to define and connect the cultural elements of her identity.

*Governmentality: Self, Discipline and Docility*

How this form of precarious socialization can manifest in understanding one's identity and physical representation can be elucidated through the practices that maintain the complex norms of the Black identity. Governmentality as expressed by Michel Foucault (2000 [1994]), dictates the present nature of modern society whereby the state's role in its members is implicit and distant to the point that its members govern themselves. Meaning that society has established within its structures, a framework where individuals practice the art of conducting themselves singularly or collectively, that is shaped, guided and modified by how they act accordingly (Burchell 1996; Foucault 1980). The derivative elements of governmentality are technologies of power or domination and technologies of the self that are at work, especially in the context of body aesthetics. These notions are discussed in Foucault's (1995[1975]) *Discipline and Punish*, where he theorises that individuals are subjected to techniques of domination. Individuals become regulated by the norms of cultural life and therefore train themselves to fit these norms voluntarily, without the direct input of the state. This self-imposed discipline of self-surveillance demonstrates how power is exercised with specific thoroughly tested tactics (Foucault 1995[1975]). According to him, the docility of an individual is a product of techniques and methods that have constantly subjected, coerced and imposed on the body.

“it was a question not of treating the body en masse ‘wholesale’ as if it were an indissociable unity, but of working it ‘retail’, individually; of exercising upon it a subtle coercion, of obtaining holds upon it at the level of mechanism itself—movements, gestures, attitudes, rapidity: an infinitesimal power over the active body” (Foucault 1995 [1975], 137).

The body becomes a site of discipline where mechanics of power are able to explore, break and rearrange (Foucault 1995[1975]). He also describes the characteristics of discipline and its aim to create more efficient, meticulous, analytical, transformative and improvable sites and bodies. Locations of discipline exhibit an enclosure that promotes monotony, a partition of persons, functionality and individuality that can be part of a network of relations (Foucault 1995 [1975]). The other concept, the technologies of the self, is based in the development of knowledge. Like technologies of domination, these demonstrate the techniques humans have used to understand themselves. According to Foucault, the technology of the self: “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18). In sum, these elements of governmentality permit a form of individuality that promotes a form of self-consciousness in relation to others. Foucault states: “Governing people, in the broad meaning of the word, governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself” (Foucault and Blasius 1993, 203-204). This awareness influences the decisions, the limitations of these choices and the gravity of the self-discipline that is exerted by virtue of these decisions. Thus, one is subjected to the implicit coercion that has permeated societal standards of holistic happiness.

To illustrate, natural Afrocentric hair can be understood as a project of docility. It was a site that needed to be ‘tamed’ through braids, haircuts and straightening devices which ultimately became a profitable industry and a part of the discourse of Black femininity. For many Black women, straightening one’s hair became a solution to the problem of manageability and not a tactic of self-hatred of one’s race. From the time African Americans began inventing straightening devices, the representation and symbolism of hair was reduced to a site of manipulation and imitation. Straightening became a technique of control. For the straightening process to be successful, the woman must control herself in order to achieve and proceed with gestures that correlate to the outcome of discipline (Foucault 1995[1975]). The woman should remain still, not scratch or interfere with the procedure. She should not concentrate on other tasks while the process is taking place. She must remain alert and must not ‘treat’ already ‘treated’ hair. Hairstyling becomes a meticulous manipulation where one is not only subjected to the devices that alter the hair, but possibly those that demonstrate an expertise in hair care which subtly convince women that the experience is worth a sizeable amount of money as well as a sizeable amount of time.

What results is an affirmation of hair in an unnatural, chemically enhanced state as normative and acceptable to those who produce and reproduce it. Presently, Black hair cosmetic companies sell relaxers suitable for children, potentially promoting a dependency on straight styles from a young age, and minimizing opportunities for the child to connect with her actual hair (Lester 2000). Similarly, the cosmetic industry still produces and profits from skin bleaching creams, soaps and ointments that are promoted

to 'even-out' skin tone from blemishes and dark marks rather than lighten one's complexion (Mire 2001; Glenn 2009).

Susan Bordo (1993) also notices the link between beauty and Foucault's understanding of power diffused throughout society, specifically with women in general. She concludes that beauty becomes a normalising discipline based on the self-perception of inadequacy and lack. Women voluntarily subject themselves to the norms of fashion trends and unattainable standards of beauty.

From the onset of a more polyvalent understanding of beauty, the fashion industry permitted not only more visible minorities the opportunities to work as fashion models, but presented models with a diverse means of presenting themselves. For instance, the use of wigs and synthetic hair extensions were used in photo shoots and on the fashion runways for many Black models. Moreover, the models were encouraged to sport colored contacts. This new representation of the female body encouraged many other women to emulate this trend, deciding to experiment with their eye color, hair color and hair texture. The trend exemplified the new sense of beauty empowerment. Moreover, this trend reinforced the myth of the autonomous, self-possessed woman in control of her career, finances, and body (Soley-Beltran 2004). What remains unquestioned however, are the boundaries of beautification which refer to the hegemonic beauty norms the fashion industry is claiming to diversify. Ultimately, the political implications of an individual's choice in altering her looks or 'beautifying' herself in order to be more desirable, intelligent and acceptable are within discourses that have limitations.

From this context, beautification for Black women has been bound by norms that still uphold an embedded ideal. These standards place Black women both inside and

outside these standards because phenotypically, they could never meet these standards in spite of their efforts. In the end, these norms have contributed to how Black women perceive their hair, skin color and physical frame. Moreover, it has also outlined how they and others perceive their attractiveness. In addition, it has contributed to either the approval or resistance of contemporary beautification; efforts to change one's physical appearance are rationalized not only as following trends but as an expression of self-empowerment, autonomy and freedom. The politics that surround the discourse of body image, hair texture and skin color have been retranslated, rationalized and reformed according to how the standards of beauty have been upheld. The techniques of power and self-discipline have reshaped how many Black women perceive and approach their natural hair, skin color and body type which is always in reference to the dominant norms of society which are primarily the White feminine ideal. From this standpoint, one can further understand how women of the African Diaspora are represented socio-historically and in terms of beauty norms.

#### *Black Feminist Thought & Images of Black Womanhood*

The discourse surrounding the subject of beauty deepens with the context of Black Feminist Thought. This standpoint allows the many voices and perspectives of women's lives in the Diaspora and links the works in the arts and academia and other spheres of expression. As seen in the literature review in the previous chapter, the social construction of beauty can be reflected through diverse means of narratives. This demonstrates that there is a possible group social consciousness amongst Black women.

As a critical social theory, it provides a dialogical relationship between the heterogeneous collectivity and group knowledge of Black women. It encompasses



general knowledge that helps women survive, cope and resist differential treatment (Collins 2000). It encourages the need for continued self-definition that influences Black women's lives as "outsider-within", a critical perspective that is produced due to the negotiations they make based on their race, gender, class and other attributes (Collins 2000). Moreover, this standpoint aims to reconcile and assess the contradictions within the images of self that are reproduced by racist ideologies and those accepted within the Black population. One is left questioning the truth in these images and inevitably making a choice to resist or internalize them.

According to Patricia Hill Collins (1990) in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, femininity for African American women has been typified through a series of negotiations based on a self-defined identity and one of objectification from the dominant society. There are four interrelated socially constructed images of Black womanhood that enable the maintenance of Black women's subordination: the Mammy, the Matriarch, the Welfare Mother and the Jezebel.

First, the Mammy describes one who is faithful, obedient, and domesticated like a servant from America's antebellum past. She represents an asexual woman and surrogate mother whose devotion is towards the development of the White family. This image represented today would illustrate the rationale behind the lack of upward mobility amongst Black women due to jobs that are exploitative and use them for cheap labour. Secondly, the Matriarch represents the strong, assertive, aggressive mother figure in Black homes. She is portrayed as a failed Mammy since her personality violates submissiveness and hard-work. Moreover, she is known to emasculate men and neglect her children. As a result, she is abandoned by men; her children perform poorly in school

and lack a proper role model. This image prejudicially justifies the persistence of Black poverty in society. Then, the image of the Welfare Mother depicts the Black woman as (in slave terms) a breeder who is capable of producing more property for the slave owners. The present-day image translates this type of woman as unnecessary and contradictory to societal values, exemplifying a poor work ethic, passivity and laziness to her offspring. Finally, the image of the Jezebel depicts a sexually aggressive woman with an insatiable sexual appetite, which justified and targeted her for sexual assaults (Collins 1990).

These typologies or controlling images have affected the lives and experiences of African American women in such a way that have provoked the need for self-definition. Resistance to these typologies have been seen and read through artistic and literary works reflecting elements of the realities that these women share. However, these same negative typologies can be internalized and manifested in many women's lives as well. Upward mobility within the Black population has intensified these images to include the dimension of class and its new repercussions. Consequently, these stereotypical images can be examined by aesthetics, behaviours and attitudes.

For example, the Mammy role as depicted in films of the antebellum south is a large, heavy-set woman who is generally darker in complexion. Due to the historical and socioeconomic situation that the Black population in the United States had to undergo, the Mammy has been replaced by the 'superwoman' role in which the woman cares more about those around her than herself. This potentially leads to the internalization of stress causing her health to deteriorate (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003). Besides her size, her complexion may reinforce her asexuality since she may not be considered attractive by

conventional standards. The asexuality and loyalty found in the Mammy role has been modernized and relates to the middle class Black woman whose professionalism, appropriate subordination to authority and selfless aggression are at the forefront of her identity (Collins 2004).

The resistance to the traditional Mammy role as well as the other negative stereotypes, have created other images such as the Black Lady who is generally middle class, modest in public and her sexuality is confined to conservative family values (despite the fact that she must work to maintain middle class status). As well, the Educated Bitch represents a woman who is attractive, well educated and desires wealth and power, which can be perceived by men as intimidating and ruthless (Collins 2004).

Next, the Matriarch and the welfare mother have been translated into “the bitch” and “the Bad Black Mother” interchangeably. They represent the poor and working class women who have been both revered and loathed in popular culture. She can be characterized as the type that gets what she wants but her overly ambitious and audacious attitude can be perceived as a threat to those she interacts with, especially men. Her life then becomes a vicious cycle of contesting her femininity where her attractiveness is reduced due to her aggressive attitude, and she is left to undergo broken relationships with men, her offspring (as a single mother) and the government. As there are many single mothers within the population, this typology expresses a dismal future for women as well as a poor stereotype that Black women are irresponsible sexually (Collins 2004).

Finally, the Jezebel has become another version of the “poor working class bitch”. She is presently exemplified as the woman commonly seen in Hip Hop and urban music videos. These women are objectified as accessories for the male artists to display their

status. The women's bodies are on display through fashion and choreography. Like the Bad Mother, this sexualized aesthetic also represents women who use their sexuality in order to receive material gain, commonly labelled "gold diggers" or "skeezers" (Collins 2004). Previously, the Jezebel was exoticized through the fashion industry, profiting from portraying models like Grace Jones and Naomi Campbell as predatory creatures.

Similarly, the objectification of Black women as other, specifically as the sexual primitive or Jezebel is presented in the works of bell hooks. In *Black Looks*, hooks (1992), discussed the aim in representing the Black female model in magazines as a need to satisfy the spectator's longings promoted by racial and sexual stereotypes:

"Re-inscribed as spectacle, once again on display, the bodies of black women appearing in these magazines are not there to document the beauty of black skin, of black bodies, but rather to call attention to other concerns [...] They are represented so readers will notice that the magazine is racially inclusive even though their features are often distorted, their bodies contorted into strange and bizarre postures that make the images appear monstrous or grotesque. They seem to represent an anti-aesthetic, one that mocks the very notion of beauty." (hooks 1992, 71)

The representations she observed are further distorted within the context of the model's skin color and hair texture. The cause for intraracial discrimination amongst Blacks is due to the interlinked phenotypes of hair and skin complexion. One must keep in mind that the preference for lighter skinned Black women with Eurocentric features over darker skinned women with Afrocentric features has been the cause of much division within the community in terms of desirability, social acceptance and upward mobility (Russell, Hall, Wilson 1992). hooks emphasized this problem by illustrating that portrayal of darker skinned fashion models in magazine is generally distorted in contrast to the sexualised portrayal of lighter skinned models (hooks 1992). Moreover, she observed that the Black models that are acceptable for the fashion industry tend to resemble their Caucasian counterparts in terms of facial structure, that is, the shape of the nose, lips and eyes and physique. This reinforces notions of White as symbolising virtue and purity and that

Black women would remain external to the defined standards of beauty and therefore the portrayal as ‘Other’ will always persist (Collins 1990).

*Underlying Issue: The Boundaries of Color*

What remains consistent throughout the discussion on beauty and identity is the perceived limitation by the politics of race. The dichotomous relationship between Blacks and Whites in the United States and other nations, has influenced the perception of class, status and gender. From the works of DuBois, Foucault and Collins one can understand the tension and dilemma that influence the decisions of Black women and the expression of their identity. For many Black women, various alterations to the body reflect a reference to White beauty ideals and for some, self-hatred by virtue of how they decide to present themselves. This discourse permits the notion of “acting white”, a form of deviance that renounces one’s ethnic or racial identity based on the social and political construction of ‘blackness’ (i.e. what it means to be Black) and its authenticity (Ogbu 2004; Weekes 1997) which is the product of resisting and reinforcing stereotypes from the collective conscience and the dominant society.

According to Ogbu (2004), in the United States blacks who lived after the Emancipation period had certain coping strategies where they assimilated, accommodated, resisted or encapsulated their situation with Whites. During this time period, Afrocentric beauty aesthetics were rejected as well as behavioural patterns in order to gain social capital. However, after the Civil rights movement, the resistance coping strategy increased in popularity and caused many to interpret and reduce Blacks in predominantly White institutions as assimilators. Hence, success was associated with self-hatred, disloyalty and isolation from the black collective identity (Ogbu 2004). His

work illuminated the issue of academic achievement and progress amongst students. Within this context (that can go beyond the school setting), “acting white” refers to speaking Standard English, preference in fashions commonly associated with Whites and a desire for intellectual pursuits and good grades (Bergin and Cooks 2002; Ogbu 2004; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). Similarly, Collins (2004) points out that those notions of authentic Black culture have been reified as a result of increased ghettoization, incomplete racial desegregation and the minimization of the social welfare state.

Historically, this rejection of blackness was reinforced in other areas of the African Diaspora. Some colonized countries utilized methods to classify Blacks by how much they voluntarily Europeanized themselves and created inferiority complexes (Clark 1965; Carmichael and Hamilton 1966; Fanon 1967).

From this context, colorism takes on another dimension that discriminates based on what used to be associated with certain complexions, language patterns, behaviour, tastes, knowledge and exposure to White people. This type of discrimination can be interpreted as an internalized imaginary paradigm in the collective conscience of Blacks throughout the Diaspora. For instance, eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia have been labelled and traditionally linked to White middle class women (Striegel-Moore et al 2003; Lovejoy 2001). If a Black woman potentially has issues with her body image in terms of thinness, then it is deemed even more deviant within the Black community and considered as “acting white”. Moreover, participating in physical activity outside of commonly accepted norms within the community is seen in a similar fashion. In Duncan and Robinson’s (2004) interviews with female African American college students, revealed that the discouragement by members of their community associated their desire

to exercise and diet as wanting to be Caucasian, which makes their health concerns to remain secret or unresolved.

Therefore, the deviance that African American women encounter is two fold: if being overweight, having naturally kinky hair, Afrocentric features and exhibiting certain behaviours and attitudes are understood as acting outside the norms of mainstream society's ideals of health and beauty, then they are labelled deviant; but their compliance to changing these labels may also be perceived as deviant, according to the accepted standards of health and beauty within their community and culture. This exposes the polarizing strength of the collective conscience and the dominant society's affect on women.

What is left to be addressed is that these notions of blackness and whiteness are constructs that can change. However, the issue with these social constructs is that they essentialize and limit the possibility of development. The collective conscience unites the African Diaspora and makes members accountable due to their kinship with each other. These definitions must expand to be receptive to the actual diversity that exists.

### *Summary*

In brief, women of African descent undergo a complex understanding of themselves through beauty. Its limitations are constructed from the politics of race, ethnicity, culture and identity. How one perceives her identity is linked to past Afrocentric cultural norms that have transcended generations and population groups, as well as the present cultural norms established in present society. Due to its fluidity and malleability, the identity of a Black woman is in constant re-positioning and re-definition.

It thrives in seemingly static, inculturated spaces where stereotypes have been affirmed both implicitly and explicitly about what it means to be Black and female in the dominant society. These social constructs influence the decisions that dictate one's acceptance within the dominant society, whether physically or behaviourally.

Consequently, the manifestation of one's identity can be understood through beauty ideals. For instance, the representation of women with Eurocentric features in fashion media provides what is acceptable beauty and what type of beauty exudes power, influence and success. It transcends the mass population by which they are both subjected to critique these norms and persuaded to accept them under the guise of 'self-empowerment' and personal choice, through aesthetic preferences and their self conduct. Thus, it places Black women's self-perception of beauty standards in an ongoing flux that continuously becomes more subtle as more reconstructed Eurocentric ideals remain the norm. Simultaneously, a peripheral stance is maintained for African American women. As the stereotypical/derogatory norms remain, the need for new self-definitions remains apparent as well, causing an ever diversifying critique of the Black female identity and aesthetic.



## CHAPTER THREE:

### METHODOLOGY

The greater bulk of primary sources concerning the cultural, racial and beauty identity amongst Black women generally refers to the African American experience. Although this reference point should not essentialize the experiences of the African Diaspora, it does illustrate issues that link Black women internationally in interpreting aesthetic dynamics within families, communities and society at large. As pointed out by Paul Gilroy (1993) in *The Black Atlantic*, the double consciousness that one faces is not as distinct or mutually exclusive to simply skin color but to the political discourse of racism, ethnicity and nationality that entangles the notion of identity. He also expresses the double socialization, governmentality and social constructs that cause an ongoing tension as to the authenticity and pluralism of what constitutes being Black. He states:

“These siblings dimensions of black sensibility, the politics of fulfilment and the politics of transfiguration are not co-extensive. They are significant tensions between them but they are closely associated in the vernacular cultures of the black Atlantic diaspora. They can also be used to reflect the idea of doubleness with which this chapter began and which is often angered to be the constitutive force giving rise to black experience in the modern world” (Gilroy 1993, 38).

For instance, African Canadian women who have been born and raised in Canada to immigrant parents potentially deal with an identity found in two social worlds. In one social world, African Canadian women might have been raised to learn the beliefs and customs of their heritage connected outside of Canada. But, within the other social world, these customs, values and beliefs might not be fully accepted or understood by the mainstream culture. Consequently, an internal conflict within the individual might emerge, forcing one to indirectly or directly change their perceptions in order to find some form of belonging by keeping the two social worlds apart, choosing one social world over another or, rejecting anything related to both worlds.

As mentioned, African Canadians have cultural links that are common to all of the African Diaspora but are distinct in their cultural upbringing in Canadian society. This means that the Black Atlantic experience is similar for all yet, the Black Canadian identity cannot be viewed as a duplicate of Black American or the Black Caribbean or Black African life (Sealy 2000). African Canadians remain privy to select from a flux of appropriated, incorporated, European ideologies, culture and institutions, as well as what they have chosen to glean from their African heritage (Sealy 2000). Gilroy (1993) and Collins (2004) would agree that the Diaspora at this point in time is even more exposed to the diversity of Black culture through mass communication and the media, reinforcing both old and new dimensions of Black female representation. Collins states:

“What seems different today under the new racism is the changing influence of Black pop culture and mass media as sites where ideas concerning Black sexuality are reformulated and contested [...] pop culture has increased in importance as a source of information and ideas. African American youth can no longer depend on a deeply textured web of families, churches, fraternity organizations, school clubs, sports teams and other community organizations to help them negotiate the challenges of social inequality.” (Collins 2004, 121-2).

Hence, the construction of the African Canadian identity is in constant contestable process, allowing for tensions to emerge that are common to the Black Atlantic experience and those that are specific to Canadian culture. It may provide African Canadians with a greater critical eye in defining what makes them distinguishable from their non-Black peers in Canada as well as their African counterparts in the Diaspora. And, this critical perceptiveness may reflect how African Canadian women understand and define various norms of beauty. For instance, the accessibility of health and food resources may be generally perceived as advantageous and acceptable in comparison to other Black communities in the United States. Also, the nature of intraracial discrimination and hair politics may be non-existent or a severe taboo within Canadian Black communities and families.

Very limited information has been gathered concerning the links between ethnicity, beauty, body image, health, media, and self-perception in Canadian studies. The main consideration is that within Canada's socio-cultural framework, the links between ethnicity and self-perception may differ in comparison to the tendencies found within the United States. For instance, second generation Black Canadian women are exposed to the perspectives associated with their parental heritage, their peers and North American media which influence their conceptualisation of their identity, specifically, their identity as defined through the lens of beauty. Therefore, the purpose of my research is to examine whether African (Black) Canadian women have incorporated the dominant culture's ideals on beauty and health. Subjects such as media, beauty, skin color, hair, and body image satisfaction will be highlighted in order to understand their connection with ethnic and cultural identity amongst the Black Canadian population.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION

My research will attempt to demonstrate *how socio-cultural concepts<sup>10</sup> impact beauty and body image satisfaction<sup>11</sup> amongst African Canadian women.*

This question is broken down into the following sub-questions:

- ◆ What individual social constructs of a 'Black' identity have been acquired and integrated?
  - What concepts of the hyphenated Canadian identity (e.g., Black Canadian, African Canadian, and Jamaican Canadian) have been constructed to *critique* North American society?

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<sup>10</sup> Socio-cultural concepts will be defined as the notion of an African self consciousness which refers to a psychological awareness or connection to the history, traditions, spirituality and philosophy of the African Diaspora. (Baldwin, Duncan and Bell 1987)

<sup>11</sup> Body image satisfaction will be defined as the complete acceptance of one's physical features, which do not hinder the psychological well being of one's self-worth.

- ◆ What concepts of beauty and health have been integrated and utilized amongst African Canadian women?
- ◆ Which concepts of body image satisfaction have been racialized? Which ones are perceived as normative?
- ◆ What impact does self-esteem have on body image satisfaction amongst African Canadian women?

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Through the use of qualitative analysis, I will attempt to understand how significant ethnic or cultural (identity) retention and double socialization influence second generation<sup>12</sup> African Canadian women in their self-perception in terms of beauty and health.

### Sample Recruitment and Procedure

Through the use of the Snowball and Convenience sampling, ten Montreal-born African Canadian females over the age of 18 were selected as participants. Overall, these women represent the offspring of ‘visible minorities’ who emigrated from the Caribbean, Central and South America, and Africa from the 1960s onward<sup>13</sup> which account for 19% of the Black population in Canada (Milan and Tran 2004). The Snowball and Convenience Sampling method was used because of its efficiency in finding potential participants in a limited amount of time. It also provided a deeper understanding of the

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<sup>12</sup> Often confused or debated, the term ‘second generation’ will be used to indicate the offspring of foreign-born parents who immigrated to Canada (Isajiw 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Although there are other immigration traditions within the history of Canada that included the influx of newcomers of African descent (e.g., Black Loyalists, the offspring of escaped slaves from the U.S., the introduction of porters and domestic workers), the time period starting from mid twentieth century represents the most uniform stream of newcomers and the largest Black population.

African Canadian population in Montreal demographically since the city has the second largest Black population in Canada (Milan and Tran 2004).

The sample recruitment and interviews began in August 2007 and ended April 2008. The participants were recruited through e-mails and phone calls to friends and family who knew women that met the criteria. In addition, some women were made aware of the study through academic and non-academic events at various school campuses (Concordia University and Université de Montréal) or at other social events such as church services, dinner parties and concerts. Each person was encouraged to extend the message to those that met the criteria and were given my contact information.

Once contacted, the interview session took place at the participant's convenience and availability in a neutral, quiet setting. The majority (seven out of ten) of the sessions took place in the private study room at a public library or at Concordia University. If those locations were unavailable, then the session was held at a local café.

### Study Format

#### 1) Questionnaire

A self-administered survey provided demographic information on variables such as age, education level, and household income. The height and weight of the participants was also included in the survey to determine their Body Mass Index. Furthermore, the survey revealed the social networks that the participants encountered at school, at work and within their neighbourhood as well as their close friendships. The ethnic makeup of the participant's peers helped in understanding what influenced their body image ideals.

Next, the Body Shape Questionnaire (Cooper et al., 1987) indicated the self-consciousness of the participant's body image. The questionnaire was modified and

shortened to focus on questions that specifically indicate insecurities or dissatisfaction the participants might have developed concerning their body image. In its original format the questionnaire is used to indicate body satisfaction in order to determine behaviours and attitudes common for women with eating disorders or body dysmorphia. The following scale, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg 1965) indicated the overall impression of the participants' attitude towards themselves.

Those questions prepared the participants for the topics that were expounded through the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews.

## 2) In-depth Interviews

The participants were asked a series of open-ended questions on health, media, family, race, ethnicity, identity, hair, skin color and beauty. This type of interview session allowed the participants to freely express their opinions on the subject matter. Overall, this method provided extensive information on their personal experiences and attitudes towards their ethnicity and perception of beauty and health.

The actual interview session ranged from 75 to 180 minutes in length. This outcome was not only due to the number and specificity of questions asked but the overall interest of the participant. Most participants found the questions challenging which caused them to think critically about their responses. Others had very extensive, tangential responses that answered other questions. All sessions were recorded with a digital voice recorder.

## Analysis

Open-ended questions were used to explicitly discuss their perception of health, beauty, media portrayals of Black women, their ethnic or cultural identity, their bodies,

their hair and their skin color. The health practices and knowledge of the participants were questioned to determine whether they had distinguishable or acquired personal ideals from popularized health ideals. Following the questions on health, media influences were examined. The participants' observation of media portrayals of Black women in television programs and magazines determined if they identified with specific images or critiqued them. Next, the participants were questioned on their relationship with their ethnic or cultural identity and its connection to their concept of beauty, body image, hair and skin color. They were asked to recount stories about growing up with their family and peers who were either Black or non-Black. These narratives demonstrated the ethnic or cultural behaviour of people who are of African ancestry, their shared lived experiences and their self-awareness within these narratives, as well as how participants have internalized positive or negative impressions of their identity. Overall, the open-ended questions provided exposure to the acceptance or rejection of ideals and how concepts around beauty and identity have been defined.

Furthermore, these responses were then coded for variables that seemed particularly salient from the interviews. Finally, these responses were analysed in reference to the Body Shape Questionnaire and Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

### Limitations

The nature of this study is complex given the many variables that will be analysed. Moreover, the length of time to conduct this study is limited. As a result, the data collected from the sample size should not be taken to represent the attitudes or beliefs of all African Canadian women. However, it may indicate some areas for future

research. The statistical results from the questionnaire therefore are indicative, not conclusive; but the qualitative data is certainly fascinating.

Although the survey and interviews were completed anonymously, as with all surveys, there are no guarantees that the respondents answered truthfully. For example, a respondent may underestimate or overestimate her responses, especially if she found some of the questions uncomfortable or self-incriminating in some way.

During the interviews, the participants may have perceived that my ethnicity would permit a rapport that may foster implicit concepts and language that I may not be familiar with. Conversely, the nature of the subject matter may have fostered tensions between me and the respondent due to their perception of me. Since I am of African descent, I may have been subjected to hostility or animosity, should the participant perceive my physical features with contention, her responses may have been limited<sup>14</sup>.

In actuality, I did observe that as an African Canadian woman, I did develop a mutual rapport in discussing issues that were interesting and important to all of the women. Furthermore, I detected little hostility or reticence during our interviews. All respondents had been informed that they could terminate the interview at any time. So I do have great confidence in the validity and reliability of the informants and their responses. The interviews were in general both interesting, enjoyable and even amusing at times and most of the respondents thanked me in the end.

The challenges encountered during the study were very few but significant. For instance, the scheduling to meet with the participants was more difficult than expected. Many women wanted to schedule meeting with me on my schedule rather than their own,

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, my hairstyle might insinuate that I advocate a certain belief about my identity that if not shared, the participant may provide shorter or vague responses.



which lent itself to delays. Also, recruitment proved to be difficult due to the schedule conflicts of the potential participants.

Overall, most women were good natured and comfortable expressing their viewpoints on the complex subject matter. There were many stories and many laughs shared as the respondents' narratives ranged from shocking to humorous.

On the other hand, given that I am an African Canadian with certain physical features, I was in an unusual position, where my hairstyle, body type, skin color and other features could pose discomfort to the respondent, especially if she had strong values on certain aesthetics like hair. For the most part, there was no aversion towards my appearance; however, for some respondents there was an acknowledgement of my features as a reference point of comparison or as an example. Only once I detected that my appearance caused an awkward moment between myself and the respondent. When discussing a physical feature she diverted her eyes from me as though I would take offence to her opinion.

### *Respondent Profile*

The ten participants provided a significant amount of information about what could possibly be the general attitudes of African Canadian women in Montreal. Within the preliminary questionnaire of demographic information, six out of the ten women were considered either overweight or obese, according to their Body Mass Index and the standards provided by the Dieticians of Canada. The ages ranged from 21 to 36 years, with an average age of 28. All respondents had at least a post secondary diploma as their highest level of education, with the majority (six out of ten) completing an undergraduate degree. The household income ranged from \$20,000 to over \$100,000. Out of the eight

who responded validly to the question on the majority of people in their neighbourhood, they indicated either that their neighbourhood was predominantly White or a mixture of ethnic groups without a distinct majority. For eight of the ten respondents, their closest friends were of African descent, the other two respondents indicated either European descent (White) or a “variety of backgrounds”. Nine participants were employed and eight indicated that their co-workers were predominantly European descent. Five participants still attended school and four indicated that their classmates were predominantly European descent.

Within the Body Shape Questionnaire, the participants indicated an overall satisfaction with their bodies which reflected an acknowledgement of perceived imperfections, yet this did not bother them. Eight out of the nine participants who completed the questionnaire indicated a ‘mild’ concern with their body shape, and one respondent indicated a ‘moderate’ concern. This scale’s total sum ranged from 16 to 80, where a sum of 16-32 indicated no concern, 33-49 mild concern, 50-66 moderate concern and 67-80 marked concern. Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the responses to the questionnaire indicated that seven out of the ten women had normal self-esteem and three had very high self-esteem. The scale’s calculations indicated that a sum of 0 – 14 indicated low self-esteem, 15-25 normal self-esteem and, 26 or higher was high self-esteem.

The following table summarizes the psychological and body shape results of the questionnaire:

TABLE 1

Respondent Profile: Self-Esteem and Body Shape Results

<b>Respondent's Name*</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Body Mass Index Results</b>	<b>Self Esteem Results</b>	<b>Body Shape Results</b>
Georgia	28	OB (32.96)	NSE	MILD CONCERN
Lisa	23	NW (22.79)	NSE	MILD CONCERN
Tanya	27	NW (20.12)	NSE	MILD CONCERN
Beth	34	OB (41.24)	HSE	MILD CONCERN
Queenie	21	OW (29.04)	HSE	MILD CONCERN
Tara	28	NW (20.01)	NSE	MILD CONCERN
Irene	27	OB (39.96)	HSE	MILD CONCERN
Ophelia	24	OW (25.07)	NSE	MODERATE CONCERN
Genevieve	31	OW (32.68)	NSE	n/a**
Karen	36	NW (19.53)	NSE	MILD CONCERN

\*Actual names have been changed to respect confidentiality

\*\*Incomplete questionnaire

NW = normal weight; BMI range 18.5-24.9

OW = overweight; BMI range from 25-29.9

OB = obese; BMI from 30 and over

NSE= normal self-esteem

HSE= high self-esteem

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### BEAUTY DISCUSSION ON BODY, SKIN AND HAIR

Among the respondents of the questionnaire and interview, the subject of beauty in relation to their familial upbringing was a challenging question. The majority of these women did not have memories of their parents explicitly telling them that they were beautiful. Discussions of beauty was within the criticism of the respondents' choice of clothing and hairstyle, especially when the parents' expectation was for their daughters to feminize their appearance by wearing skirts and dresses or when they did not approve of their daughters changing the texture of their hair. For some respondents, their parents' approval and pride came from the reactions and commentary from people outside their immediate family. Otherwise, the majority of the respondents recalled their parents focusing only on the inner values and their academic progress. It can be interpreted that overall, beauty was not a subject particularly stressed in the lives of the women interviewed.

#### SELF-REFERENCING BEAUTY -- DEGREES OF ACCEPTANCE

On the subject matter of beauty, the responses displayed a range of attitudes towards style trends and femininity. All the women perceived that the ideals that exist in society did not seem to include their type of beauty, either because of their size or skin color. Their understanding of their own beauty was limited because it was considered a non-issue. Growing up, some of the respondents did not receive compliments from their parents concerning their beauty. Others received critiques on what is beautiful and what would be complimentary to them. Others received positive reinforcement from extended family members and family acquaintances. Only two respondents knew confidently that

their parents told them they were beautiful. Another received it only in reaction to an incident at school where she was teased because of her features.

The issue that remains is that these women were not given positive reinforcement in this regard and it may have had an effect on their priorities and present choices in presenting the self. If beauty was replaced by hard work and academic achievement, then their perspective would be considered by scholars as excellent. However, if their physical desirability comes into question, the beauty question would not be answered.

Given the complexity of the subject, the respondents have been classified under certain typologies that may aid in comprehending the range of perspectives on beauty and the self. The women are represented as four types: the sceptic wallflower, the isolate, the chameleon and the tessera. These categories are not mutually exclusive and in most cases are transitory phases because the women display characteristics that may eventually place them in other typologies; however, the most dominant traits exposed in the interviews place them into a particular typology. For instance, it should be noted that the perceived ideal, the tessera, would be the likeliest type of the respondents if they were to choose for themselves. This is due to the immediate persona and attitude which all the women presented throughout the interviews. What eluded them from that specific typology, however, were the actual narratives of their past and the extent they affected their present aesthetic choices.

#### *THE SCEPTIC WALLFLOWER*

*I'm not chic. I'm not particularly into fashion. I mean I just try to wear what looks okay and I'm just not in vogue I'm not just with it. And that's to say I don't fit the mould and I don't want to. (Why) It's just not me. I get stuff for myself that makes me feel comfortable and sometimes I try to get stylish things and then either my mom or Chuck will tell me 'oh you're just wearing this because you think it's stylish' but it's not really practical and it's*

*true I can't. I'm not comfortable in three-inch heels so I don't want to be that way. ---  
Lisa*

This typology exemplifies the farthest distance from beauty with regards to one's self referencing. This individual has subjective tastes and has impressions of beauty that are common to most of the women. However, her perspective excludes herself. For example, she may be viewed as a tomboy but her lifestyle is not stereotypically that of tomboy, that is, one whose gendered behaviour is more masculine than feminine. She would be more asexual or gender neutral in her style of dress and behaviour. However, her desire or admiration of feminine beauty is apparent when she reveals interest in beauty and narratives on beauty. Her awareness is also apparent in her taste in fashion magazines, which affirms an awareness of style trends and the present female aesthetic. She may even admire women who exemplify a certain style. She has a desire to try to meet the ideals but her occasional attempts lead to either criticism, unwarranted attention or doubt that they would be respected like the women she quietly admires. Therefore, this desire in practice leads to a perceived failure and a rationale for certain aesthetics not to be applied to her individuality. She does not think it suits her identity and there are no compromises that can be made to reconsider this construct.

One of the respondents represented this typology as a result of her resistance to her mother and female family members' fascination with makeup and hairstyles. However, her interview revealed that she has an awareness of fashion and the female aesthetic because she watches television avidly and specifically watches beauty makeover programs. With these programs she compares the clothing featured to her own body type and wonders if she could try wearing it as well. However, her history demonstrates that the idea of 'dressing up' is too foreign and a rarity that may remain that way. She has a

desire to experiment with her features but resists due to fear, self-doubt and perceiving it in extremes:

*Maybe my mom would be like pressure, not pressure but she's like nagging, nagging like things like 'ah you should dress up more! You should wear makeup more! Ah you should...I dunno - flat iron or straighten your hair more [...] I guess some ways cosmetically, dress or something...wearing skirts or something. Yeah they're just kidding. Like in summer or something I visited my aunt and wore a skirt, a jean skirt and my aunt was like 'I like jean skirts! You should wear them more often' you know? But I'm not gonna (laughs). If I feel like it yeah but I'm not like it's going to be like on a regular basis. ---Tara*

*[...] my mom is always like 'if I were to wear makeup and went out of the house', my mom would just have a heart attack! She'd be like, 'hallelujah! ----- reached your ears!' that's how plain I am you know (why are you plain) I dunno! It's so time consuming! I don't know I just find it time consuming. Maybe 'cause I don't do it very often - actually I don't at all. Well the eyeliner I gotta stand there and I gotta trace my eyelid and it's just so time consuming [...] I've always kind of liked the idea of natural beauty. You don't have to wear a lot of stuff to be beautiful so maybe just like lipgloss or whatever or lip balm or whatever you have [...] ---Tara*

Women who fit this typology have a common narrative of at least one parent encouraging them to wear more feminine clothing like skirts and dresses in order to display their aesthetic and for other parents, their sensuality. These narratives were expressed when asked about whether they felt pressure to change their appearance or when they discussed what their parents taught them about beauty.

*Well it's more subtle the way I look at it. It's kind of like not to change the way I look [...] maybe change the way I dress which comes down to the way I look. Like maybe to dress in a more sexy way because I see the style is more sexy. So I think I should be putting it out there before it's too late. (laugh) But that's a passing thought you know. I've been told I dress a little too covered up [...] well my boyfriend and my mom find that I dress a little too covered up [...] she said wouldn't it be nice if you could wear a dress or a nice summer dress or a nice skirt show off your body a bit. But also another influence is seeing girls. The style that's in is more of a sexier style and there's an extreme. ---Tanya*

In essence, the Sceptic Wallflower cycles from admiration of style to conformity to resistance and rejection. Her perceived aesthetic self-identity suffers from long periods of stagnancy, then abrupt change.

### *THE BLACK ISOLATE*

*[...] it made me self-conscious in a way to how I dress so that I dress not to look too big you know? ---Ophelia*

This typology refers to the respondents who like the Sceptic Wallflowers, admire trendsetters and the feminine aesthetic but continue to consume clothing without the sense of criticism and the sense of failure, perceived from friends and family. The distinction is found within the narratives. Although all the women recognize their racial difference in society, this type of woman has a race conscious narrative that has not been completely modified in the context of the greater society. It means that the woman has experienced a certain type of racial self-consciousness that has affected her self-concept of beauty. She is generally accepting of her physical features; however, she acknowledges that she has experienced critical information from loved ones. She then proceeds through life having the knowledge of being different from mainstream standards of beauty, and undergoes a process of distancing and integrating the norms found in the two worlds. She is the most subjected to the double consciousness paradigm in that she feels she is living in two worlds where she is not fully accepted in any. This type of woman deals with the mainstream ideals integrated in her private or home life and the perception of feeling excluded from public life. In other words, unlike the other women, the Isolate recognizes aesthetics and race and seemingly, it is in the forefront of her



perception of mainstream society. It is as though the more she tries to integrate, her identity remains the variable that sets her apart and excludes her from others.

For instance, one respondent Ophelia, explained that her family has encouraged her to do something about her weight gain though she considers the pressure to change her appearance as more of an internal issue that she already acknowledges. She also admitted to being self-conscious about her body though the conversation dealt with childhood memories of being teased. She exercised in order to stay in shape and to fit into clothes, unlike other respondents who were more motivated by health reasons. She was conscious of how to wear clothing in order to avoid perceived unwanted attention.

Another respondent acknowledged that despite liking how she looked and being complimented for her attractiveness, she still perceived being outside the standard of beauty in mainstream society, given her perception of courtship and relations with men. Similarly, another respondent perceived the exclusivity of desirability in public spaces and where she fits in. In short, the isolate perceives and interacts with the construct of double consciousness in such a way that leaves her with a selective confidence in her beauty.

*You know there's this model Alex Wek and we used to or usually often watch Fashion File with all the models would come down the runway and they have some designer's outfits on and there's always like twelve White models and like one Black model and it's usually her. And my mom would always say "Whenever they put Black people on TV they always tend to choose the least attractive person. They misrepresent us". She's really really dark, short short hair. The way they would put her makeup she would have flashy pink lipstick something like that and usually what I would get from that is 'ok it's not...even though we're African, it's not good to be too dark um that would further imply the whole colorism light skin thing and in terms of hair you don't want to look you don't want to have no hair no hair nappy the whole thing [...] ---Queenie*

The respondent's parent expressed an integrated perspective that also discouraged weight gain besides rejecting mainstream's society's attempts at broadening the standards of

beauty to include dark skinned women with natural hair as seen in the quote above. In some ways, Queenie recognizes how her choices may reflect how some preferences concerning her beauty, is more from her parent's advice as to what not to do as well as her concept of femininity that oscillates from a Black Feminist perspective to what norms from Canadian society have been integrated in her self-concept:

*I feel beautiful myself or like when I'm on my own you know I like my body but I become self-conscious when I'm in a group like that because I feel like they don't like they would never consider me as beautiful you know?---Queenie*

It should be mentioned that Queenie is the woman who won a beauty pageant and defied the conventional ideals of beauty and was accepted in a more Afrocentric space.

These respondents encountered negative instances concerning their aesthetic and/or desirability in relation to people outside of their family and friends. In short, the present aesthetic and behavioural choices of the Isolate are affected by the instances in her past which cause her to be more cautious when she attempts femininity.

### *THE CHAMELEON*

The Chameleon typology represents a woman who has accepted past rejections and criticisms and who presents a type of self-confidence that is healthy. However, her self-identity is not completely overt due to apprehension of rejection in society. Like the Isolate, she experiences a notion of double consciousness that is more strategic than emotionally driven. It means that she has accepted her feminine aesthetic and applied it in a reasonable accordance to her own concept of beauty, but is conscientious of the possibility of resistance from society at large. So, her identity in essence is masked part

of the time by an attempt to blend in and gain acceptance. For example, one respondent discussed her issues with her current hairstyle in relation to her past look:

*Honestly, I felt like if there were more ethnic people, not even just Black people, ethnic people at work I would feel more comfortable maintaining a more natural hairstyle but because I am one of the ten. Black people in the company it's like so I really...I already stand out because I'm Black do I want to stand out even more because I have a natural hairstyle? I think that was kind of the reason why I decided 'ok let me go back to relaxing'...my hair fit in more within the culture of this particular company. I wish I hadn't done that now because I don't think it's worth it. Unfortunately relaxers is one of those decisions you can't change your mind about. ---Georgia*

This individual perceives that the norms in place concerning proper attire in certain spaces, subject her to conform reluctantly knowing that if the circumstances or the space were permissible to accept her natural hair, she would be more of her true self.

#### *THE TESSERA*

The tessera is a piece of stone or glass that is part of a mosaic. As a typology, it represents an individual who expresses the most confidence and understanding of herself. Her past history and the narratives expressed were utilized in such a way that was the most constructive. In addition, their ideals on the nature of the Canadian female aesthetic were the most inclusive of themselves. They appear to have a concept of their feminine aesthetic as acceptable even in its perceived societal dismissal. Perhaps it is the idealism of knowing that eventually their beauty will be accepted in the larger society as it is in their current social space. It is an acceptance of self that rejects beauty ideals, yet believes that this type of acceptance has a place in the discourse of beauty to change the current ideals.

*I don't really fall so much into the pressure I don't find so at all. I dress how ever I feel like. If I feel like this on Monday, maybe I'll feel different on Tuesday. Like I always said*

*sexy—being sexy is sometimes an attitude. I used to be a bartender at one point where you know I would work with other girls who felt the need to show a lot of cleavage and wear short skirts and I would go in there with a long dress ya and still a little bit covered up with nice makeup and a nice smile and still make the same amount of tips so that's when I realised [...] I didn't have to sit there and degrade myself and go that extra mile of showing parts of my body [...] ---Karen*

*If you're happy people will gravitate towards you. I get offers all the time to go out for coffee from men or go for dinner but...maybe they like big women maybe it's their fetish...but I think it's positivity, self-worth, people like to be around people that are positive, are happy it's very...not addictive but it's attracting. It's an attractive character. If someone is always boo-hooing and negative, nobody wants to be around them. I try to reinforce that, but in their [her co-workers and friends] mind it's like if I'm a size zero I'll have lots of men want to date me. They do everything for external glorification and I'm like I'm living my life the way I want to live it, and if I want to lose weight I'm losing it for myself not because I want some man or I want to have looks. I get looks no matter what. ---Beth*

*Like there's time when ok you know I wish I had smaller breasts then I could buy that jacket I want cause it's too—but not as in 'Oh look at all these girls with smaller bodies. I want a smaller body too'. I don't think I feel like that. --- Irene*

*I wouldn't ever think that I open magazines and see these girls you know size whatever I think 'Oh I need to be size whatever too'. I think it would be more like telling myself 'Ok you know you're X weight. It's not healthy for you for you to be this weight. It's medically hard on your heart. It's hard on your whatever. You need to lose weight. I think that would be more of the angle than me saying like 'Oh look all these girls are skinny. I should be skinny too.' Cause just 'cause someone's thin doesn't necessarily mean they're healthy at the same time. So I think the pressure comes more from myself than from someone else. --- Irene*

These quotes illustrate the situation of women who acknowledge their imperfections but choose not to perceive them as burdensome. Their representation does not mask their identity in order to conform to the outside world nor do they perceive themselves as outsiders who fear rejection or ridicule. In other words, double consciousness is not at the forefront of their discourse. It is rather an awareness that has been positively incorporated in their lives.

## Summary

These typologies have demonstrated how the respondents have referenced themselves in the discourse of beauty. Their history and beauty narratives were a reflection of how the representation of Black women in society has indirectly impacted their personal lives. The majority of these quotes were located in the responses about beauty and their identity in relation to their personal stories on beauty.

Although all the respondents perceived that their self-confidence was evident in their daily life, the internalization of that confidence and their actual self-consciousness were in varying degrees. In other words, their self-consciousness was located in the representation of the self through choice and rationale of clothing, hairstyle and body type. For instance, two out of the three respondents that typified the Tesserars were identified as at least overweight, had the highest levels of self-esteem, and were the most open to fashion and style.

### IDENTIFYING THE CONTEXTS OF CULTURE AND IDEALS

*I don't know what a perfect woman would be I guess you just have all your stuff handled. You have it all together whether it's the family life, the work life, the job life, I guess [...] I had a friend, passed away now but I had been married at the time and I had my two children, we owned a house the whole nine yards and she came by one day, we were chit-chatting. She's like 'You guys are so perfect! You got a perfect life!' 'What do you mean by perfect? It's not!' She's 'But yeah you have a house, you're married, you did everything in the 'right steps'' and it's like 'Yes but we still – you know- we still fight. Raising kids is not easy. It's not an easy task to deal with either and I was going to school at the same time and working' so those balances – there is no balance! If anything you're psychotic after a while. You're called Superwoman – that was my nickname for a very long time. I was called Superwoman because I did everything and then some. --- Genevieve*

The subject of the perfect woman reflected an emphasis on aspirations perceived as attainable for the majority of the women. As illustrated in the above quote, many of the

respondents expressed desires of accomplishing certain personal goals as the ideal woman. Genevieve, who was one of the older respondents, expressed the disillusionment of the ideal that she tried to attain. In essence, all the responses appeared to be derived from internal traits within themselves that they hoped would be improved in the future. Many respondents discussed intangible traits that dealt with having a satisfactory life in terms of personal relationships, employment and self-worth. External traits were ambiguous within the responses and were de-emphasised.

In narrowing the discussion by specifying the perfect Canadian woman, some respondents claimed no distinction between their initial answer and the Canadian addition. Others perceived a race or cultural distinction and discussed the idealized standards as being White, tall, and slender. When the perception of race and culture was a distinguishing factor, they perceived themselves outside of the ideal image. Similarly, beauty was defined like the perfect woman responses: a dialogue of internal and external elements that de-emphasized external with the exception of what they understood as the mainstream/majority viewpoint. From that perspective, their racial identity was not fully a part of the conventional ideal in Canadian society.

Very few respondents rejected the idea of defining the perfect woman. Only one respondent referred to a Black Canadian woman, specifically Governor General Michaëlle Jean as the example of the ideal woman.

Moreover, the respondents' understanding of their race and culture was not completely connected to their appearance. So, the notion of changing one's appearance in any shape or form was not to be conceived as a desire to diminish or remove an aspect of one's identity. The answers indicated that there was fluidity in what is considered

Afrocentric and what is not linked to the respondents' African heritage. It means that there were exceptions to what was culturally bound. Many stated that they believed in individual choice and would not judge an individual's personal choices. Others had issues with specific physical alterations like skin bleaching. Very few admitted that chemically changing one's hair texture was considered objectionable behaviour. Only one of the women explicitly perceived weight loss as an issue related to their culture. Most rejected the notion of weight loss as rejecting one's race or culture, indicating that for these respondents having a healthy lifestyle was more important than seeking to conform to the perceived standards of one culture or group.

One respondent, Beth, recounted an incident where her sister had been losing weight and her church community had been supportive to an extent. This respondent indicated that limitations existed within her personal experience of acceptable weight. Although her sister's weight loss was not drastic, those within her community perceived her quick weight loss as an indication of a graver issue like an eating disorder which was far from the truth.

In other words, the respondents were generally more tolerant of a healthy body weight and self-image but were not concerned with being thin. Their exercise and eating habits were not predicated on fitting into a societal ideal but more an internal body type ideal that they perceived acceptable. It should be noted that those who referred to famous women as admirable or inspirational (e.g. Oprah Winfrey, Halle Berry and Beyoncé Knowles, Michaëlle Jean) were generally more curvaceous or heavier in weight than their Caucasian contemporaries. Given that these perceived role models as well as the Black

women in their lives may implicitly express the acceptance of a heavier body type, these examples may reinforce their personal ideals.

Their perception of their health and their awareness of their bodies, appeared to reflect a realistic self-image that was observed in both the survey and the interview sessions. Overall, the participants discussed a notion of balance in maintaining one's health through exercise and eating nutritious foods. Others stressed the need to have proper intangible elements in defining health, which meant minimizing stress in daily life through personal hobbies or more spiritual means. The majority claimed to make an attempt at following their definition of a healthy lifestyle but were not committed to it. For instance, many women joined or had membership at a gym but failed to be fully committed to attending regularly. A number of respondents exercised or tried to exercise but it is unknown if this activity was done regularly. However, some preferred walking to taking public transportation or driving. When asked about the conventional definition of health, the respondents stated notions of physical aesthetics like a thin body or an idealised lifestyle. Their opinions on the actual practice of the conventional norms which they perceived in society were divided: some believed they followed it, others did not.

When asked about eating in reaction to an emotion, at least half of the women said yes, but it was due to anger, frustration, boredom or anxiety. One respondent pointed out that food was eaten for celebratory purposes as well as out of family obligation. Meaning that, she perceived that when a family member prepared food, she was obliged to eat it. No respondent indicated that they ate out of sadness or depression.

There was an overall impression that pressure to change their physical features or their looks was not a variable that affected their lives. Some women stated that the



pressure they felt was internally motivated, a psychological concern based on their family's health background or when women evaluated themselves by looking in the mirror and perceived being larger than desired for themselves. Most reactions to this question were not from comparing themselves to other people. The evidence of another person encouraging them either negatively or positively to change their appearance was not apparent. However, some women did note that they experienced a sense of pressure in specific, implicit circumstances that ranged from childhood memories to participating in beauty pageants.

As mentioned earlier, only one respondent was moderately concerned about her body shape. The understanding of their personal health ideals and societal health ideals differed slightly for the majority of respondents. Many critiqued the difficulty of a balanced lifestyle that permitted proper nutrition and exercise, as well as the ideal of slenderness linked to good health. Others noticed how society failed in attempting to achieve these ideals due to the increase in obesity rates and stress factors.

Once again, the desire to maintain a healthy lifestyle was influenced by family history and self-consciousness about their weight or the desire to 'feel' and 'be' healthy. No one referenced perceiving pressure from peers in any form. They understood their desire as a choice independent of societal norms.

*Because anything about how I look is always based on my perception on what is healthy for me. I've had people in my life who would figure well you know you could probably gain a few pounds or lose a few pounds but I just didn't care. Like, I really don't care. --- Genevieve*

However, two referenced being motivated to achieve fitness due to the strangers they see when they attend the gym. Their admiration for these gym members provides enough aspiration to remain consistent in their workout.

*Yeah. I dunno. It feels good. I like exercising. I dunno. I like the gym atmosphere, you know, there's people who are working out, people look good and you know it motivates you when you see certain people looking a certain way you're like Ok maybe if I work hard enough I could achieve that also. ---Irene*

*Of course I've compared myself to certain sets of women in general. If I am not at the gym working out and depending on what she's doing on a certain apparatus I want to do that. ---Genevieve*

One of the respondents discussed in an ambiguous fashion how she was teased for her size within her family but did not feel self-conscious about it. She did feel self-conscious about her small breast size which she associated with her thinness.

*Everyone's always 'I'm trying to lose weight. I'm trying to lose weight.' And I never had (laugh) that problem of trying to lose weight. But when it comes to me it's like 'you have to gain weight 'cause they find I'm too thin. 'You're too skinny. You're so thin' [...] Well it's just comments that my family would make. I had a cousin well she was a baby she's kind of chubby as a baby and my aunt's like 'man she has more than Tara'---Tara*

Self-consciousness about their body image was more evident for those who considered their weight a health issue. For some of the respondents it not only affected their health but their social lives and lifestyle:

*It started to become a little difficult. Last year I went away on vacation and I'm like the seat belt on the plane was a little snug. I'm like 'uh oh. This is not good. Oh I don't like that.' [...] I would hate to have to now get a special seat buckle on the plane. That's embarrassing. And I go my mom always tell me 'You're a beautiful woman but it's a little too big now'. She's mentioned it--lovingly mentioned it to me 'cause I still think you can be big and beautiful [...] And I think this is one thing Black women can do well. No matter how big you are you still dress well, you still portray yourself in a nice way. ---Beth*

*I have friends who are—most of my friends are smaller than I am and if you go out in a group, you're like skinny, skinny, skinny, skinny—oh! Big Black girl! What she doing in this group? (chuckle) I'm thinking in my head maybe people are thinking that [...] ---Beth*

This respondent continued her concern in describing an incident where she ate sushi with her friends and to her shock, realised her size when she had to squeeze into the booth and saw that her friends had a space between their seat and the table, and she did not.

*Well after I've eaten a lot or eaten somewhere when I shouldn't have, if I go to McDonald's, I'm really tired and I let myself go and Chuck will pinch my side and that may have -- will get me going. Then I would focus on it. Yes I really should go to the gym I really should do this even if it was done jokingly... ---Lisa*

It should be noted that the women who expressed self-consciousness about their size did not perceive themselves as being exceptionally passionate about their physical state. They all considered exercise as a means to being in better health but in such a way that distanced themselves from stereotypes of being “obsessed” about their weight.

### Personalizing beauty: evaluations and experiences

When asked about whether they viewed Black women as beautiful, a pride in their Afrocentric culture was observed. Most of the explanations for their pride were due to their understanding of Black history and cultural contexts that in some ways reemphasised their concept of beauty and the perfect woman. Some respondents discussed the variety of looks aesthetically amongst Black women like skin color; others perceived Black women as exotic.

*They've got this mystery to them and they've got beautiful --like the skin color just -- no matter what time of year I think a Black woman looks beautiful. Black woman I find doesn't need makeup. She wakes up in the morning and she doesn't look pale or dead she doesn't have to put on any concealer or anything like that you know, you have Black women, you never know old they are. Like they say Black doesn't crack you know. You can be 50 looking like you're 40. You have some Black women who've had these hard lives, who've endured all this troubles in their life, raising kids, working all this and yet they still look absolutely stunning. Like their skin is beautiful. They just carry themselves so well I find. I think Black women are beautiful definitely. (Mystery?) Yeah! I just think they they're -- they just come in so much variety whether it be skin color, hair type, just I find the combinations they're just -- I dunno. I just think there's something about them that slightly mysterious. I can't explain. I can't explain it. (Seasons?) I mean like in winter you know you always hear like White people in winter 'I get pale' and things like that. Yes I agree Black people can look paler in winter but I just think that even if Black people are sick whatever, I find they always seem to look good. --- Irene*

*Because for one usually they're usually more confident and like I was saying in terms of beauty it's something that comes from within. In terms of appearance I find that their*

*features in general just is more it looks healthier, it's usually more balanced, exudes this strength just cause they don't look frail and I'm talking from you know like legs, thighs, behind, back like you know it's more a strong woman. I find that's more pretty or beautiful than someone who looks like they're about to break or fall or you have to carry with delicacy. ---Queenie*

*Yes, I do. Damn, why not? I mean...gee (laugh)! I don't think there are specific qualities that make a Black woman beautiful I think it's the same as any other race. Again I think it has a lot to do with the way that you carry yourself and just being confident and all that other stuff so yeah I think they're beautiful.--- Lisa*

Few respondents desired to underline the fact that women from other ethnic and cultural groups were beautiful as well. Perhaps the need to include other women in the discussion was to resist appearing ethnocentric.

In terms of their self-concept of beauty, the majority of responses did not allude to the Afrocentric features linked with people of African ancestry. This section of the interview was challenging because of the confession of their favourite physical traits. As mentioned before, internal qualities were easier to discuss than external. One respondent grew so frustrated with the question that she hesitated to the point where she decided she liked everything about herself.

Only one respondent admired her posterior but the rest referred to their personality traits or more culturally neutral traits like their eyes and smile as their favourite physical attribute. Moreover, their childhood was generally not tainted by antagonism over Afrocentric features with the exception of racist epithets referring to their skin color or race.

Mockery and self-consciousness for some was due to their body frame or stature. Some respondents claimed to be larger than the average student in their class or that they began puberty earlier than other classmates:

*Ever since I was young, I've always been taller than everyone. I've always been bigger. Like I remember when I was in Elementary school kids used to call me Sasquatch [my emphasis]. Kids used to call me I remember I was in Grade 6, I was Dolly Parton Number Two, this other girl was Dolly Parton Number One 'cause we had bigger breasts than everyone else —Irene*

Another respondent was teased by her family about her physical features but she claimed it did not affect her significantly. Similarly, most of the respondents stated that their moments of ridicule did not affect their attitude toward themselves. Many had the encouragement of friends and family who either defended them directly or indirectly. Others rationalised that their intelligence exceeded those who teased them so, the perpetrators were ignored. In short, many women claimed they were not fully affected by the potential insecure moments from their childhood and adolescence.

#### MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS AND CRITICISM

Respondents were generally not avid television viewers. Their impression of television, consequently, might be skewed and outdated. Overall, most respondents did not perceive that there were many Black female actresses on television. If they did watch television, they applauded the few women who they had seen on television programs but specifically in dramas, they found the women were one dimensional and easily forgettable. A few respondents elaborated that the Black female actresses featured on television had either limited character development or their roles were not as engaging as other cast members on the program. Otherwise, if the respondent had access to more cable television channels that included U.S. networks, they were more satisfied with all Black casts, which included female characters. From their perspective, television shows that had this specific model and had elements similar to older sitcoms like *The Cosby*

*Show*, were viewed favourably. In fact, the all Black cast format resounded more with most of the respondents who referred to these television programs of the 1980s and 1990s.

In terms of Canadian programming, very few respondents made mention of seeing Black characters on television. One respondent referred to one of the hosts on a morning program. Another mentioned a female character on a drama that may be of mixed ancestry. Few mentioned a recent Canadian television sitcom *Da Kink in My Hair*, which featured a predominantly all Black female cast. Only one respondent expressed watching the show and found it satisfactory.

The other exceptions were talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Tyra Banks who were generally viewed favourably or with greater admiration because of their autonomous decision-making power in their respective talk shows. They also were perceived as representing themselves positively which related to the values of the respondents.

As for music videos, respondents unanimously perceived Black women as objectionable, one dimensional characters. Women discussed how they were minimized to body parts or shaking/jiggling body parts. The other observation was that Black females in music videos were perceived as sexually promiscuous, self-gratifying characters that were accessories to the artist's entourage or used to affirm his popularity and importance. All the respondents were offended by this portrayal of Black women.

The response towards the portrayal of Black women in magazines was mixed. The respondents had the impression that some magazines were more relatable than others. Like television programs, when the magazine was geared specifically towards the

Black population, specifically Black Americans, they were regarded as exemplary with the exception of urban and Hip Hop magazines which were perceived in the same fashion as music videos in that the women were objectified and featured only if they were models or in the Adult industry.

Conversely, when critiquing mainstream popular magazines, the portrayal of Black females was mixed. Respondents discussed how they could not relate to suggestions on beauty and makeup and some of the topics on courtship or pleasing men.

Overall, magazines were read in a disengaged way, meaning that the few who read magazines read them leisurely or superficially. Some respondents discussed the exotic photography of Black female models and how they appreciated the look. Otherwise, not much commentary or critique was made concerning Black models either in their appearance or frequency in magazines.

#### RACIALIZED BEAUTY, PERFECTION, AND BODY IMAGE

The notion of racialized beauty was highlighted in the discussions surrounding the media portrayals of Black women. In some cases their critique reflected those of Black Feminist thinkers and the specific typological images such as the Jezebel and the Mammy/Superwoman/Black Lady. As mentioned before the perception of women in music videos and urban magazines was in stark contrast with talk show hosts. From the responses, talk show hosts represented a form of idealism of their future potential as women.

Their concern over the lack of dimension in female characters may classify as another form of the Mammy/Black Lady typology which has an even more limited

representation -- she is the associate or the friendly acquaintance that is well respected but her character is underdeveloped:

*[...] 'cause they're present but it's hard to even think of a show where there's --besides shows that are made for African Americans I don't, there's no character that sticks out to me that you know that for a female at least a Black character [...] I watch more dramas and no...and I don't really...there's some second roles guest appearance roles but no like no roles really, I can't off the top of my head think of any right now. ---Queenie*

What is striking about this quotation is that this respondent was one of the few women who did watch much television and was also a student studying media. Her perspective on the lack of Black women on television was further elaborated when she explained that even though the programs she watched did feature Black actresses, they did not leave a lasting impression on her. She perceived that they were more of a nurturing character and never in the role of a character that attracted the audience to the show.

Overall, these images in mainstream media have impacted the reality of the respondents. In short, the respondents have not only observed the contrasts but some have had to deal with the outcome of these images in their personal lives. The following two quotes represent two respondents' perception of how music videos affected certain experiences in their lives locally and abroad:

*The videos? The music videos? Oh Lord. That's just...that's just...not to say...ok. There's nothing wrong with showing sexuality 'cause Black women are sexual just like any other woman and any other culture but I find the music videos have taken it so far. It's not sexy, it's trappy, it's whorish. The women are to be banded around like accessories temporary sexual outlets for these rap artists who are trying to show...I don't know show their manhood I don't know what you want to call it. And, the women do not look empowered. 'Cause when I think of Black women I think of strong, very confident, self-confident women and I don't feel that those videos show us at our best. They just make us look very...trollops. Basically how much are you by the hour? Basically that is what you look like. And it's not one video that you can say well that's one aberrant video -- it's becoming the norm of the rap videos. And these rap videos are getting so much air time. Now the girls wanna dress like them like what do you call them, video hos? They want the clothes the half scandalous shorts that barely cover the butt the heels the blingy jewellery and this and that and has to be a name brand. It is very materialistic as well. I*



*mean I don't think you see that....even in rock videos you may see Aerosmith video or whatever you may see a sexy girl in a sexy outfit but it's not like 20 girls to one guy trying to grope him or he's groping them on a couch. Like there's sexy and there's....tramp. And now it's just showing that. I find in the Black community it's always been a stigma not in our community necessarily but I think outside they view us as highly sexualized, hypersexualized, that we're ever ready sexual bunny I don't know what you want to call it, and some people approach me like that. I've been approached like that. 'Oh you're Black you must be great at sex'. Yeah, I'm like, get away from me you freak! 'You guys are like all sex' [...] And it's also there for women, mind you, they tend to stay more in the community. They don't really date outside the community. I don't find Black girls date outside of the community. So whenever I've talked to girls they say 'My God I was approached by this guy and this is what he said to me'. I'm like 'same thing'. They want to come and get their freak on with you. 'Cause you're the superfreak. I'm like leave me alone I'm not Rick James! (laugh)---Beth*

*And you have these women and they're half naked. They all look a certain way. And it's funny because we know that's not how women everyday in North America look. We know that the average woman does not have a size two waist, big booty, fit body, you know that is not true, long hair, we know that's not true. But it's because when I lived in Japan and people see this, they think that's how we live. They think it's all parties and there's girls everywhere in bikinis and that's how it is. ---Irene*

The Jezebel typology has been paralleled to the portrayal of women in music videos in past literature and still remains a source of criticism from not only academics and writers, but the women interviewed as well. There was a general disdain and negative response from all the discussions:

*They're portrayed really negatively as money grabbing women[...]all those rappers that are flashing money, like throwing money up in the air and stuff and women are like just grabbing it or they're all provocatively dressed or whatever, they're all in short shorts and whatever barely anything and it's just I dunno, kinda degrading.---Tara*

One respondent noted that the issue and effects of colorism were apparent within the issue of Black women's representation in videos:

*[...] they're the random token Black girl on the show who has the random token Black guy as the boyfriend and I'm talking about mainstream television not like television made for the Black community. Usually Black women, if they're going to be a token Black woman, she's going to be light skin, I find, and if not she's—for example in music videos there's this analogy that I've seen in Tyra, the main person, the main Black woman she's going to be light skin, the one the rapper is singing to or pursuing in the video. However if it's a video where there are many Black women and they're all in their underwear*

*dancing on poles at that point you're gonna see darker women. So it's almost like a disrespect for the darker you are you know? ---Queenie*

Similarly, print media like magazines were seen as polarising for many of the respondents. Informative, favourable and extremely sexualized representations existed within magazines marketed to the Black population:

*I had this one magazine – I stopped buying it 'cause I have you know my young guys here and stuff like that and they like the Vibe magazine and XXL and I stopped buying one of those magazines only because one day I was looking through and there was this girl being featured called White Chocolate. She was, you know, mixed, mother White father Black and she was a stripper. And they had a good two pages or three pages on this girl's story and I was just like 'ok so she's a stripper, but does she go to school at night? Is she studying to be a doctor? Is she studying to be a lawyer? So how's this girl getting this whole feature in this magazine you know on herself with nothing else?' I think it was empty content in a way [...] there's so many Black women doing so much, so many other greater things than this girl taking off her clothes and bought herself a house. I was really disgusted because I meet a lot of educated Black women doing their B.A.s, doing their Masters, doing their PhDs and there is nobody writing on us [...] ---Karen*

*It varies on different scales so if you have like Essence or Ebony magazine you have O magazine I think in those particular magazines, it's pretty fair for the most part. There's other magazines like – my brother was reading a magazine so I grabbed it from him to see what it was I think it's XM or one of those. I didn't like it at all. The language is foul, it was very raunchy. I didn't really get it. I didn't really appreciate it at all actually. ---Genevieve.*

Another typology highlighted by only one of the respondents was the Matriarch or Black Bitch. Lisa discussed this image when asked about representations of Black women on television. Her response dealt with the image of Black women, specifically in the U.S., as being loud and obnoxious, overly critical and intimidating.

#### Sexualized images unanswered:

What remains opaque is whether there is an acceptance of the other typologies outlined by Collins. Overall, the disdain towards the Jezebel and general admiration for

the Superwoman/Black Lady typology demonstrates that the perception of the media in North America is polarized as either hypersexual or relatively asexual. However, Black women who are musicians or artists may also represent themselves in music videos. Their representation may not be as sterile as the Black Lady and may not fully embody the hypersexual image. These artists were not discussed within the topic of media representation until I specified the question later in the interview. With the exception of certain singers and hip hop artists, the critique dealt with their general representation as an artist and their skills, implying that their sexual representation was acceptable, sterilized or ignored. Other respondents critiqued their physical appearance by their choice of hairstyle, their skin color or sense of fashion.

*As you were naming them off I was like, "blond, blond, blond." All these people with long blond hair which is so not naturally theirs (laugh). Yeah, a lot of the musicians, but at the same time I'm thinking of other artists like India.Arie who have definitely kept it real, or even Alicia Keys that's naturally her – Her hair is naturally long and curly like that. I find that she hasn't really changed much since she came out and I appreciate that sticking to who she but there's a lot of female musicians that have changed. Not even, it happens a lot with Black musicians, but all female musicians in general when they first came out they're one way and gradually over time they find out that sex sells everything changes and I think it's kinda sad. Somebody can't just come out and make music for who they are as opposed to creating an image of sex so that people buy your album. --- Georgia*

Otherwise, the respondents' critique of women in the media was more associated with how they represented their abilities than their aesthetics (with the exception of one respondent who noticed the colorism in the media). But, four respondents openly admitted that they admired the aesthetic beauty of Black celebrities and were curious to know what it would be like for them to have their body or body parts. Interestingly, these women generally had a BMI in the higher range, which may indicate the possible insecurities that exist despite a high level of self-esteem.

*Probably along the lines of ‘oh I wish I looked like Halle Berry’ or not necessarily look like her but I wished I had her body [...] Actually, I think she has a very nice body! It’s fantastic! ---Georgia*

*There are times though that I will admit you know you see a certain constant images in the media and sometimes you wonder ‘Hmm if I looked like that, would I get more attention?’ Not that I want to look like that but if for one day I could have a body like Beyoncé would that change how people treat me? Sometimes I wonder that. Sometimes I wonder about that. ---Irene*

*I always wanted to have Tina Turner legs man! ---Genevieve*

### Questioning Exoticism

Another point of interest was the respondents’ acceptance of the term exotic. Unlike theorists Collins and hooks, four women perceived and expressed exoticism as a positive quality. It may indicate a general shift in defining the term exotic as an uncomfortable otherness or that exoticism has been acculturated by the respondents and not criticized. Only one respondent expressed criticism concerning racialized connotations of Black beauty:

*In like mainstream magazines usually fashion magazines I find that usually in an ad where there’s an –we kind of discussed this in class as well – where there is a Black person usually her face is either covered or she has some type of tribal or exotic animal-like them revolving around her or she looks clown-like. Rare is the ad with the Black woman where she’s simply just looking at the camera and it’s her face. If that’s so there’s another model in the picture usually um I don’t know what that says. – Queenie*

Another respondent expressed a transition from critiquing to accepting the term in relation to her appearance:

*For me now it doesn’t bother me. If anything I don’t know it seems like it’s switched over now and it’s a—it’s exotic that’s the word I’ve heard over the last couple of years. Yeah. Exotic from different ethnicities and races and stuff like that, yeah. I’m thinking okay that’s interesting choice of words! [...] I don’t think of myself as exotic but it is what it is. ---Genevieve*

*They look exotic you know like that even though I am Black you know there’s something attractive[...] it’s hard to pinpoint for me because it’s like I see a range of beauty[...] I*

*find they're strong, Black women are strong and I think they're very resilient, things like that [...] Black women have a warmth to them you know... ---Tanya*

## BEAUTY PHENOTYPES: FACE, SKIN COLOR AND HAIR

The discussion on hair, skin and facial features illustrated the respondents' distance from the political and social stigmas that have affected the lives of many Black women in the Americas and Europe. Afrocentric features were not scrutinized to the extent of the literature found within African American history. They did, however, display that there was still an awareness of the saliency of the issue. For instance, the life stories on hair provoked the most frank discussion on beauty while skin color was both coded and universalized. The question on self-consciousness and their facial features was another point of confusion as most did not experience that perceived distinction from their peers.

### *FACE: INDISPUTABLE FEATURES*

The discussion on self-consciousness or insecurities surrounding Afrocentric facial features was minimal for nearly all the respondents. No one had issues with being teased during childhood about aspects of their face. One respondent was questioned on the dark color of her gums which irritated her. One respondent was self-conscious about her lips since they were a relatively prominent feature but never encountered mockery as a result of them. Contrastingly, another woman desired fuller lips as a child. Otherwise the insecurities mentioned by the respondents were related to phenotypes that were not specifically classified as Afrocentric. The only exception was Tara who remembered being teased by her mother but never perceived it as hurtful:

*As a kid I remember my mom would always go like pull at my nose 'you need to straighten my [your] nose' but 'you should have a straighter nose'. 'Oh no leave me alone'. It was just like I don't know a joke I suppose. I never really thought anything about it like I need a straighter nose or something that makes me look like more of my dad's side of the family, the nose that I have right now. Yeah it's fine...--Tara*

Overall, the women did not appear affected by any specific mockery about their face or felt insecure about their phenotypes. In some ways, this could be interpreted as either having features that are not exceptionally Afrocentric or that there has been a societal shift in perception of Afrocentric features as being inferior or that, notions of blackness have been homogenized due to the sparseness of the community. As a minority amongst minorities or the only minority in some respects of classroom and neighbourhood settings, being darker than Caucasians might be equated with representing all African Canadians and therefore, specifics regarding phenotypes may be de-emphasized.

#### *SKIN COLOR: DISCOURSE DISCREPANCIES*

The notion of colorism as detailed in the literature review and theoretic framework of this study was not as distinct an issue in the lives of the respondents. None of them claimed blatant discrimination based on the pigment of their skin color. Some were aware of its detrimental impact but at a farther distance. Meaning that, the cases illustrated in literature of colorism affecting their family, friends and peers were less salient and detrimental of an experience. No one claimed to be ridiculed based on their skin tone alone. But there was an overall awareness of the questionable effects of colorism in their lives.

#### Minimal familial influence

The women interviewed were not raised in households that focused on skin color distinction and favouritism. A few had experienced very indirect understandings of it within their family life but they claimed it was not substantial in affecting their general outlook on their identity:

*People you know, when you go on vacation like I went to Trinidad, people made comments 'Oh hey red skin dadada' but has anyone ever made me –no I don't think so, no. ---Irene*

*When I was a bit younger I was on the chubby side and I was darker too than my older sister who happens to be lighter and a bit slimmer so my brothers who are younger than me would tease me about it...I was about ten at the time...ten or eleven...not by school kids or anything. (How did that affect you?) When I was younger, as a result, I was envious of my sister. But I mean I was younger at the time and I was easily hurt by words like that I don't think it stuck with me 'cause we're pretty close now. I don't feel there's any rivalry or that I need to change to be like here and you know I like my skin tone now so it hasn't really affected me. ---Lisa*

#### Right in the middle: color homogenized

Due to the lack of colorism within their households, the respondents had difficulty distinguishing gradients of skin color and pigmentation. As a result, for many women their self-perception of their own skin tone was collapsed as being “in the middle” (or within the brown range of being neither dark nor light in complexion) in reference to their parents and siblings' skin color.

*I guess also because I kinda fall in the in between range. I'm not very light skinned and I'm not very dark skinned [...] My mother is very fair skinned which is funny 'cause everybody else in my family is dark [...] I'm probably the darkest skinned one [...] complexion has never been an issue in my family. It was only really when I got into high school and CEGEP and university that I actually realized it was an issue for some people 'cause to me Black is Black.*

*---Georgia*

*My family is sorta mixed up. My mom is lighter than me, my dad is darker than me so I'm kinda like in the middle so I can't really say that I was teased by my family about my skin tone. ---Lisa*

*I think it happened to other people around. I think I'm lucky. I'm smack dab in the middle: I'm not too dark, I'm not too light so I don't get any repercussions for being too light...---Beth*

*I see myself as middle of the road. Yeah. Like I mean that's the way I see myself there's a range of colors people have darker skin tones than me and people have lighter skin tone than me so I just see myself in the middle.(When did you realize that?)*

*I think I realized it...like particularly like I guess maybe during adolescence like I never considered myself light skinned. I always felt like I was in the middle you know? Because like my father's Black I look like my father and I just feel like a lot of African on his side. My father's father looks very African so you know what I mean? And my mother is sort of light skinned so I feel like I'm in the middle, you know?*

*---Tanya*

*I mean my father you would classify him as light skinned. My mother is a little bit a tad darker than me. I didn't really have any complex about my complexion. I have different family members, some light, some dark. Like I was not really raised to have any insecurities about my skin color. My older sister, she's a little bit lighter you know that did not make me envy her because she was a little bit lighter. My sister also is a little bit darker and I'm kind of like in between both of them. But, no I didn't really have any issues with skin. ---Karen*

It should be noted that many women did not perceive themselves as either very light or dark, but rather in the middle. This was striking in that I, as the interviewer, could distinguish the color range and compare their skin tone and features with the other women I interviewed. It became clear that those who did claim mid range skin tone had used their parents and family members as reference points. For instance, if the respondent stated that one of her parents was fair and the other dark, it meant that they were in the middle. However, this mid range concept differs with each individual, which means that one respondent who may be darker in complexion will claim to be mid range like the respondent who is lighter in complexion.

To illustrate, Tanya was one of the lightest respondents who considered herself medium toned. Georgia was darker than Tanya but lighter than Beth. Lisa was one of the darkest respondents. Beth and Karen might have been the most accurate in their self-



evaluation as being a medium brown tone. Only a few (Genevieve and Irene) were aware of their distinct skin color on the Afrocentric color spectrum and its context:

*Well I'm lighter. There's time you know I've been told that I've been asked if I was mixed. People—there was a time when I was younger, people who didn't see my mom, 'cause my mom worked, they only saw my father. I remember at day camp when I was younger a lot the kids only saw my father. So I had kids ask me 'Is your mom White? Do you and your brother have the same mother?' Because my brother is a lot darker than me. The rest of my family, my mother, my father and my brother they're darker than I am. There were times when I was younger, I used to ask 'Am I adopted?' cause my skin is lighter than them. And my mom explained to me time and time again that her grandmother is half White and her father—there are members in our family who are light even living in Trinidad in the hot sun, working outside they're still light and she told – she even told my father before she had me 'When we have a child, there's a very likely chance that we'll have a light child. So if we have a baby and it's light, don't worry. It's yours!' you know? (laughs) Because it just happens that way. I guess so it tends to skip a generation. But when I was born, same thing, I looked White. Like nurses even thought 'ooh! Is your husband Canadian?' My mom is like 'yeah and he's Black'. A lot of times I looked White. ---Irene*

#### Social interaction and color revelations

It was only when the criticism was from friends and peers that it became a questionable issue. Many respondents experienced some form of favourable or unfavourable situations and comments in regard to their shade. All were surprised by the reaction and expressed an attitude that specific moment was unresolved. However, no one affirmed that these moments affected their perception of self in the world or within the Black community. For example, Tara was one of the fairest respondents but was not able to fathom her complexion as being that light despite receiving comments about the paleness of her skin:

*I kind of questioned it, just in terms of I've had like different people come up to me from far away and they've gone like 'Man! I didn't see you! I thought you were a White person!' And I'm like, what? I was like, how? [...] No I don't find that I'm that light skinned really. ---Tara*

The issue of color preference was an offensive experience for Lisa and Irene:

*Actually the first boyfriend I ever had in high school he's Black right and he introduced me to his mom one day and I thought we were about pretty much the same skin tone and I met the mom and she said hi to me and I said hi and I was 17 years old and then we went home and was talking to him on the phone and I was like, 'so what did she think of me?' and he said that she said I'm too dark! (laugh) YEAH! So! That was uh...I remember that she said I was too dark and from then on we were just so of like uh me and [...] I was just offended. I mean I'm not insulted by it now. --- Lisa*

*I remember when I was in university I made friends with this guy and was Jamaican, he was from Jamaica and you know, ever I needed anything he always helped me, if I needed change, if I needed notes, anything and I remember this one girl, made a comment once, one girl who of a Nigerian heritage. She's like 'You know he's only nice to you 'cause you're light'. She just made a comment like that (was she from Nigeria?) No she wasn't. I think she was 1<sup>st</sup> generation Nigerian I'm not sure. She might have been young there and came here but I think she was Canadian. But she made that comment and I was just like I wondered, you know what I mean, after that I wondered 'is he being nice to me because I'm lighter? Or is he genuinely just my friend?' You know you don't think of these things until someone makes a comment. And that's what happens so...I don't know! I've always been this color so I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. --- Irene*

Other women had dealt with commentary from peers who chided that their lives were less difficult because of their skin color:

*I think there's I think a lot of Black people have complexes at one of those two extremes. Like I have a darker skinned friend who's actually said to me 'oh you don't have it as hard as me because you're not dark skinned' and I was like Black is Black. Why you gonna...? ---Georgia*

*My first boyfriend who's Haitian he was self-conscious about his dark skin: 'Ah I'm dark!' 'No you're the perfect shade. You're great. You could be darker. Go in the sun!' (laugh) And he's like 'No. You have a good color'. I'm like 'whatever'. That's so bizarre. ---Beth*

The memory of these experiences sparked irritation from the respondents but more so because they would never really know the validity of the comments they received. Unlike the discourse found in African American literature and forums, the Canadian respondents never had to deal with intraracial discrimination as being a part of the normative

discourse, which is advantageous in being critical of prejudice but disadvantageous in fully understanding and rectifying it.

The perception of being “in the middle”, caused the respondents with darker brown skin tones to express a tone of perplexity when peers referred to them as ‘dark’. It appeared that if they viewed themselves as medium toned, then dark referred to a very dark perhaps a blue-black skin tone, which misrepresented them.

*Well I mean I don't—like I'm of darker tone but I don't see myself really as dark, really dark skin but I usually get the reference like someone who's -- she'll be like 'yeah she was dark, dark like you' in reference to in referring to me or you know just the pointing out just the whole pointing out I am dark skinned like it has to be said when they're talking about a Black person and I'm always jarred by that 'cause it seems like it has a negative connotation to be darker skinned woman you know? And I feel like people feel they have to remind me that I'm dark skinned you know? And to me and I mean like yeah to me...like to me dark skinned would be really really really really like of a really (blue-black?) yeah but I feel like people -- people refer to me as almost like that and I'm like I don't...---Queenie*

For Lisa, the realization of her actual skin tone has been a slow process that reached its apex once she shopped for makeup:

*Actually I thought that I was medium skin toned 'cause I know there's a classification light skin, brown then medium brown and dark brown and I realized that I was always though of myself in the middle cause I've seen darker than me but as of late I seem to be getting the idea that I'm actually dark which doesn't matter to me anyways [...]Shopping for foundation. There was sand, clay, then there was earth! [my emphasis](*laugh*) Earth was the darkest category. I'm dark I just realized that [...] Just talking to other Black friends who are I guess a bit lighter than me if they were talking about someone who they were not so sure 'oh she's dark like you' so it never affected me but I guess it just sort of made me think yeah I guess I am compared to most others maybe I'm dark. ---Lisa*

Lisa demonstrated a fluctuating impression of her skin tone which made her aware of her skin color in varying degrees but never a complete recognition. As mentioned before, she was teased by her family members for her skin complexion but dismissed their taunts. Then she had a relationship with a young man whose mother perceived her complexion unfavourably and it bothered her at the time. When her friends like Queenie, referenced

her complexion as dark she dismissed it. Finally while purchasing makeup, she realized that the foundation that matched her skin color was classified as a shade she had not anticipated. This realization was a great shock to her.

Lighter is better: unknown source

Many of the women were critical of the issue of colorism. But some confessed to admiring lighter skin tones and could not explain the reason for the preference beyond the perception of transitional phases and trends. This confession provoked in some respondents an awkward sentiment as though they had realized their past conditioned beauty ideals.

*It's still there. It's still alive. Very much alive in 2008 [...] Why is bleaching cream one of the most leading selling products in Africa? Okay I have a friend's sister that died at 34 years old. She couldn't afford the bleaching cream. She was bleaching her skin with Javel that she end up getting skin cancer and died at the age of 34 do you understand what I'm saying? ---Karen*

*I don't know what it was, a phase where people were like, well Black people were into light skinned-- the girls were into light skinned guys and 'oh he's light skinned' (laugh) (what about you?) Maybe I thought like maybe I could be lighter but see for me it's like I accept my complexion you know? And I feel like I'm over that but yeah I'm definitely [...] It was a teenage thing. When I was a teenager. For me it was a phase I noticed 'oh he's light skinned' as being favourable. Yeah. For me maybe I internalized that as light skinned is favourable. ---Tanya*

*I don't know where I learned it but I guess I just thought that lighter skin was better. I think I associated having lighter skin with better hair texture or longer hair so when I was younger I think I had a moment where I wanted to be lighter...yeah. I remember a while ago I heard that celebrities using creams to make themselves lighter and I was interested in but I never did anything to go out and get it. I'd say this was partly influenced by it but I wouldn't say this makes up anything substantial. ---Lisa*

*I haven't really felt self-conscious about my skin complexion. I mean I had to deal with race stuff whatever but nobody has never told – I've never been made fun of being too dark or too light so it never really affected me. But you know as a kid sometimes you have those moments you say oh I wish I was White? But never really something that sticks to me like oh, I wanna be White you know? You know as a kid, every Black kid has had this*

*moment where they say oh I wish I was White 'cause you see the White kids have a lot more resources. –Ophelia*

For Ophelia she associated skin color with access to different social resources other than the ones she had. This attitude is a manifestation of the inferiority complex among Black women which dates back to the time of colonialism and slavery when the White ideal was deemed as superior.

### Lighter is desirable: courtship

*The complexes? Complexion (taps her skin). That was one of them. If you were dark skinned, you weren't paid as much attention as say a light skinned girl, who wasn't as cute either mind you. Some of the other dark skin students that you had in school and stuff. She had the better chance at dating (laugh). Yeah! With a Black guy in school and say someone of my dark complexion or even darker than me so um that's where this whole ----- like 'ok' I'm too dark to be good enough for them and some of them are darker, you know, the guys are darker than me! Yeah it's like the untouchable, you can't –it was really weird, high-school wise for me [...] you could develop some serious complexes. You do actually!...Now it's different for me. Now shoot if I get darker, it doesn't bother, if I'm in the sun and I happen to come back from being at the beach—one time I came back, I was in Miami for a quick trip and a friend saw me 'God! You're in the sun too much! You're getting dark!' I said 'I have no problem with it'. He said 'Yeah but you're getting'—'I don't have a problem with it!' 'Ok!' I said 'Exactly!' ---Genevieve*

This respondent had an understanding of her complexion from childhood but unlike Irene, this occurred mainly from implicit observations. Genevieve lived the experience of being undesired by young boys who preferred courting lighter skinned Black girls or White girls. From the interview, this occurrence spans from adolescence to her adult life when she frequented discotheques. However, her perspective presently, is not as sensitive as it had been in the past. The only other respondent who perceived this color preference in courtship was Queenie:

*Like no I haven't experienced colorism itself but I think I've perceived it or because I'm conscious or because I believe that it exists maybe I feel like I blame it on certain situations [...] Yeah not saying that I have a problem with being approached or I need like to be approached first or whatever but I associate that with the colorism. Generally light skinned people are pretty-er --like I feel that's what people feel so then let's say it's*

*a group of girls and we're in a social situation be it a restaurant or a lounge or a club or something like that you-- I know which friends will be approached first. I feel like that's the general, that's what happens [...] let's say we go to a club that's mainly Black--the crowd is Black um my light skinned friend will attract the guys that want to really um get like 'oh my God I met my future wife. I met like the woman almost like I'm in love with this woman and I want to marry her' type like they generally want to get on beyond just the club. And then she'll say no and then they come to me or what will happen is that she'll say no and the people who come to me are people who really just want to get a quick dance or grind, things that are really disrespectful I find... ---Queenie*

### Summary

During the interviews on skin color, the respondents indicated that the subject was not a sensitive one. No one expressed having painful memories of being teased or rejected by other Black Canadians. Perhaps this was due to the very neutral dimension of their familial upbringing. Sibling rivalry or favouritism based on skin color was not apparent for the majority of the women interviewed. If it did exist, like for the one respondent Lisa, it was short lived.

This same neutrality expressed in the family translated itself into how the women perceived their skin color. With the exception of three respondents, the others did not perceive their skin color as being as light or as dark as what they might be categorized had they lived in a more skin color stratified society. They self-referenced their pigment as being a medium tone in association with their family's color range. From my vantage point, some women were more accurate than others. Perhaps this reflects what Russell, Wilson and Hall (1992) articulated about the medium tone range of African Americans. Those that fall into this pigmentation would not be subjected to the same discrimination as those who are fair skinned or dark skinned. Therefore, the respondents may have acquired a protective strategy that insulates them from being a target of scorn. As much as the respondents are justified in stating that the color range for people of African

descent is vast, the fact that they deny or do not fully recognize their position in relation to other Blacks is questionable.

In this case, the women ranged from light to dark and denied perceiving their actual color, even after interacting with outsiders. In some respects, the neutral medium tone provided a sense of comfort and universalism with other Black people, even though their pigment might not express a true inclusion. Moreover, the Black Canadian population is small, which may have caused parents not to emphasise colorism but racism to their offspring. Meaning that, from the perspective of the outsider or non-Black, Black people would be seen as simply Black people, not light or medium or dark. Therefore, for some of the respondents, discourses around the notion of colorism caused confusion and partial denial, having experiences that seemed inconclusive in the lives of the women. Also, the self-realization of favouring lighter skin as beautiful, caused confusion and shame for some of the women who admitted thinking that way in the past. As one respondent proposed, this favouritism may be due to the trends within the Black population and the popularity of certain celebrities. If that is the case, then it confirms that there is a symbolic discourse of acceptability within mainstream culture that has influenced the choices and opinions of Black women. As another respondent pointed out, the lighter skin women are favoured in Hip Hop videos as the artist's love interest. In effect, there were the women who witnessed this perception of lighter skin as ideal in their relations with men. In short, colorism has played an indirect part in the lives of the women. It is a topic that is explicitly unfamiliar in the family or community ties but implicitly apparent in matters of desirability and courtship.

*HAIR: PREFERENCES AND INSECURITIES*

When discussing the subject of hair, the respondents expressed themselves with the least amount of discomfort. Narratives on hair unified the respondents' aesthetic experiences. All the respondents were connected in their opinions because nearly all of them had done at least two hairstyles over the last twenty years (as was written by Black Feminist theorists). The hair narrative consisted of straightening one's natural hair from an early age and/or choosing hair extensions and then early in their adult life deciding to change their hairstyle once again. Over the last thirty years, the respondents have been exposed to many Black hair trends which has left many of them cognizant of what hairstyle suits them now. For some, their 'present' look is very temporal (in a matter of days or weeks) and for others, it is relatively permanent due to the constraints placed upon them at the workplace or their lifestyle habits. The diversity of hairstyles may have influenced their openness to their concept of beauty. Some women may perceive their hairstyle as an identifier or as an accessory that represents their mood or sense of style at the time. No one expressed a political position as expressed by Black Feminist theorists. Their politicized views were demonstrated in the body/media portions of the interview. Although there were limitations on what were acceptable beauty alterations, few respondents expressed limitations on the authenticity of certain hairstyles.

#### Hairstyles: Transitional Representation

The majority of respondents had so far undergone at least one hairstyle change during their life. Since there are a variety of hair-care and hairstyle options provided by the Black cosmetic industry, young girls are given the option of straightening their hair with a pressing comb or with a gentle relaxer. With the hair trends of the late 1980s to mid 1990s, young women of this generation had the option of braiding their hair with



synthetic or human hair extensions. Then alternative styles such as synthetic or human hair weaves became en vogue more so during the millennium. Other options that many women chose was to maintain their hair in a more or completely natural style, sporting Afros, twists, braids (without synthetic extensions) and dreadlocks. Due to this observation, the issue of hair politics is not as salient or as polarizing to the respondents as it might have been ten or twenty years ago. To consider sporting natural hair in adulthood is presently perceived as a choice due to their previous experiences with hair processing. The reasons for this natural option may not be related to the symbolism of self-hate associated with achieving straight hair. However, they do connect with the notion of natural hair as being a liberating experience. This freedom is derived from the beauty salon dynamic: the need to schedule an appointment with an overbooked hair salon and being prepared to spend several hours waiting, and finally processing the hair with chemicals. This routine may happen every two to six weeks. Therefore, choosing to return to a more natural coif is not really liberating due to the awareness of historical oppression and the feeling of self-hate.

However, some still consider straightened hair as representing a more sophisticated and professional look. One respondent, Georgia (as mentioned previously) had reservation on changing her relaxed hairstyle because of the absence of other ethnic or visible minorities at her workplace. Respondents like Queenie and Beth perceived natural hairstyles as being associated with certain careers and personality traits.

*I find new trends in Black hair there's so much diversity [...] I mean now you just go with what suits you I mean the styles are so varied [...] If you're more bohemian you're going to do more dreads and locks, little twists that will be more for a natural funky style, if you're going to be more corporate, you'd do a sleek bob and whatever [...] I think the standard is still straight hair, perming your hair and having it straight. I think that is considered the more acceptable, professional look [...] Locks is more the musician,*

*young guy, sports something like that. Maybe if you're working at the bank, maybe dreadlocks is not really the look you should have. Like Afro and all that, that's more of something that would be more acceptable in the art world. Even though that shouldn't be right but that's the sort of our norm in our communities. If you want to be taken seriously perm your hair and have a simple traditional [...] even though braids should be our tradition and more accepted, there are people who don't feel that it is corporate America material you know I find I don't feel that pressure at my job [...] I think in Canada, things are a little bit more different than in the States.—Beth*

*[...] on girls I find it looks quirky. Someone who has a quirky personality or who is kind of comical in terms of a female can pull it off. Also girls who are more confident to not fall into the good hair bad hair thing and can pull it off but on myself I couldn't do it at all. (Why) I don't like the way it looks. I find that I don't have I don't perceive myself really as a quirky person so I wouldn't wear dreadlocks cause that's what it says about you and I choose or feel I exude my confidence other than through wearing dreadlocks and other than through my hair in general because I have issues with it.---Queenie*

Karen, who has been sporting dreadlocks, still felt that natural hairstyles were slowly becoming acceptable and were beyond the negative stereotypes. For example, the re-appropriation of the term dreadlocks to a more positive term of *locs* or *Nubian locs*, demonstrate how the perception of dreadlocks as meaning dreadful may be diminishing. Her profession allows her to connect with other dreadlock wearers and to learn first-hand the stigma they perceive, more from their families than the public.

*I think there's been a lot of discrimination when it comes to Black hair in America more than here. I always tell people with their dreads when they go for a job interview and stuff like that it's not what's on your head, it's what's in your head and if you have all the credentials to get the job, especially like I'm saying for higher academics if you've been able to achieve your Bachelor's, your Masters, you know and the company that wants to hire you actually asks you to cut your hair that's discrimination.---Karen*

Natural hair has become more acceptable within the Black community and the greater Canadian society, but the progress of acceptability has been slow. Natural, Afrocentric hair does not imply as much radicalism as it was in the past. But, many Black women may still deal with the resistance of their hairstyle choice within their families and feel pressured to consider other options if they cannot represent themselves.

## Natural versus Affected Hair: hair and maintenance

Very few respondents held a polarizing belief about chemically straightened hair or synthetic hair. All respondents did not want to appear judgemental but they did associate synthetic or straightened hair with pretence. The inauthentic nature of hair whether it was sporting synthetic braids, weaves or wigs, was perceived as an incomplete representation of the self. For example, the following quotes discuss the use of hairpieces:

*I've never worn it personally. It's fake to me. I can't do it. But I mean in my family many women do it [...] and at first it was a little weird when you first see it and one time but after a time when it's not in it's weird. What happened? You're so used to seeing it! Braided, in extensions or a weave or wig. When it's not there it's like what happened [...] it's been a while since I've actually seen them with their natural [...]*—Tara

*I haven't tried or used a wig or anything but for weaves I can't get to my scalp [...] I can't scratch my scalp that's not natural just like relaxed hair it's just not natural. With wigs I wouldn't try it. I don't feel it's for me I consider it more like a hat. That's how I see it. I tried the weave and it's more a burden than anything else [...]* ---Queenie

*I had gotten a wig before I decided to wear my hair as it is now and I had gotten an epiphany moment. I bought one for myself and I bought one for my mom and she was wearing and I had one and it was this moment and was looking in the mirror 'what have I done?' I had gone past that point it was for manageability. It was just sort of like I just felt like kinda fake at that point. So, if you're doing it because you wanna upgrade your look or something then that's fine but I think if you're somehow trying to get away from who you are then it becomes a problem.---*Lisa

These three quotes illustrate that hairpieces and extensions represented a discomfort in one's identity and that was not only in terms of natural Afrocentric hair but for relaxed hair as well. If relaxed or chemically straightened hair is considered an acceptable social norm, then using straight hair that is not one's own is objectionable. The following quotes emphasize the perception of relaxed hair as acceptable on the one hand and an irritant on the other.

*I wish that we could find something other than the chemicals we use in our hair as a means to make it softer or more manageable so to speak as opposed to using those kinds of chemicals. --- Genevieve*

*I think it looks nice I think that it does indicate conformity and a lack of individualism as well just because that's what you should do what mainstream media kind of says that you should do. You should have straight hair. Aesthetically I find it looks nice. However I have tried it and I hate it. I can't. I don't like it at all. I find it makes me look bland with relaxed hair [...] the texture was too soft. I couldn't do anything with my hair. And I was forced to do it every day. I'd have to comb it every day. I have to make sure I went to bed and wrap my head and blahblahblahblah. I cut my hair. I cut off all the relaxed part of my hair. I'm not the type of person who's going to spend hours on her hair everyday once a week or go to the salon all the time or think about what I look like. [...] I find it paralyzes you [...] ---Queenie*

*No no at the time when I permed my hair when I wanted something easy and manageable. Now it's like I appreciate my hair more for I guess being like for being natural that I don't have to wait in a salon for five hours or something or make an appointment to go to the salon and not have anything else planned for the rest of the day. I don't know how long I'd be in the salon and I don't have to shell out fifty bucks every month or every two months or like every twenty-five dollars for every two weeks for treatment and I don't have to go home smelling of the salon after you've – or feeling self-conscious on the bus like once go out the salon they spray you with hairspray and then you go on the bus hoping 'oh my God. I hope no one has an allergic reaction to the scent of the hairspray!' And it's a lot more freeing to go in the rain and I don't care anymore because it's raining and my hair is natural and I don't have to wash it when I get home and dry it or straighten it or anything and I don't know that's how it is.---Tara*

Tara's transition from using chemical products in her hair to returning completely natural, made her more reflective and strengthened her decision to remain natural. She also observed that Black hair industry places natural hair at a lower echelon of desirability and had influenced not only her past perspective but continues to influence the perspective of many other women:

*Don't be afraid of it. It's not all that bad! (you think people are afraid?) Natural hair? Yeah, now...I was. I was afraid of like, 'oh no it's going to be too much work. Oh no what am I going to do' you know? But I mean in retrospect when I look at it I'd come back from the salon and my hair would be like bone straight no bounce no nothing! It'd be straight really straight and I'd just be like, there's no life to it, it would look kind of dead. ---Tara*

Most viewed the use of hair extensions and chemical treatments as a convenient option with much sympathetic undertones. It seemed to imply that prior to their present opinion, they might have had reservations or may have had a disdainful perception of it until they considered the advantages of the option. For example, one respondent confessed she would not criticize the option of the wig as a hairstyle because of her lazy habits when it came to caring for her hair.

*Yes. I'm lazy. This is the first statement I'll make about myself: I am a lazy person. And when my hair is relaxed, generally, when it was longer, when it's relaxed what I have to do in the morning is wake up, run a comb through it, put it in a ponytail, leave the house. That's it. Whereas, if it's natural, I comb, pick, try to figure out what I'm going to do with it, 'cause where I was working I wanted to look more professional so I just couldn't leave it like an Afro it wasn't what I really wanted to do so I had to figure out what I was going to do with it, if I was going to braid it, if I put it in a ponytail, it takes up a whole bunch more time because it's so much thicker and puffier...yes, I'm lazy[...] It's sad (laughs). It's sad that I ruined my hair because I'm lazy because how it's broken and damaged. ---Georgia*

*[...] You can [say] anything because I was wearing wigs for the past two months. I didn't have the time or money to get my hair done. ---Georgia*

It appears that the issue of hair care maintenance was an underlying theme amongst the respondents. Many expressed laziness towards their hair, which was their rationale for considering certain hairstyles, especially those that had synthetic components. It was easier because the amount of hygienic work was significantly reduced and the hairstyle lasted a longer period of time. This implies that natural hair is associated with more work. For some of them, it may be with a tinge of resentment but for most, it is the effort that the hair entails. Although all were against hair politics or the notion of 'good' or 'bad' hair, the effect of this discourse was evident in discussing hair manageability. In a modern sense good hair has become manageable hair or cost efficient

hair, a surety that you are comfortable getting up in the morning and minimizing the amount of effort you devote to your hair.

### Hair Terminology and Associations

The term ‘good’ or ‘bad’ hair was unanimously perceived as problematic for all the respondents. They expressed the need to remove it from their personal vocabulary because of the negative impact on one’s self-esteem and the historical context.

*Oh! We go through that all the time. You go through that since the time you’re a kid when you’re getting your hair combed. Either you have good hair or bad hair do you understand? It depends if it’s your grandmother combing it, your aunt combing it and it’s something that’s been passed down to them they can’t break. The only way we can break this cycle is that when I have children when it’s time for me to comb their hair, I’m not going to sit there and tell them that they have bad hair even if they do have bad hair, it means to say unmanageable. I would find ways of managing it. But this is the reason why it gets in our psyche when we start thinking good hair and bad hair do you understand? - --Karen*

Only one respondent admittedly re-appropriated the commonly pejorative term ‘nappy’ that is associated with ‘bad’ hair. She perceived that her use of the adjective nappy was more a term of endearment than derogation.

*Nappy yes. I’ve used it but not in terms of bad. Like in terms of “oh my hair is nappy today! Oh look at my naps! What am I going to do with my naps?” But not in terms of bad or feeling bad or using it as an insulting terms like Don Imus or anything. It’s in a fun way. I remember I had a friend and I think [she] called her naps or nigga naps. I think uh it’s okay. It’s just a fun term. It was different. At one time you had the term kinky and ugh! That’s kind of bad. But now it’s okay. --Tara*

Good hair is therefore psychologically cost efficient hair, a style that a woman is at ease with and deems as not in the way of other priorities. As with the argument used by Rooks (1996), beauty is relatively important but ease with beauty is of greater importance because it allows one to concentrate on other subjects of importance. In the context of the respondents, variety is not defined as precisely as one may think. Beauty preoccupation is

not a daily task that is enjoyable. It may be a necessary evil, a chore to represent oneself well but it is not the complete definition of the individual.

It is also worth mentioning that some respondents expressed the need for long hair. As much as good hair is considered a shameful term, some women implicitly desired long hair which is an attribute associated with good hair. Given that Afrocentric hair has been understood as the opposite of Eurocentric hair, the notion that Black hair does not grow fast or is generally short and tightly coiled, would be common thought and anyone who is capable of gaining and maintaining a length, would be perceived as having better hair. Therefore, anyone regardless of her ethnic background or race, would be comparable to the Black woman.

*Well like I said when I was younger cause you wanted to have long hair to your waist like the other girls. Wanted to be able to flick it (laugh) like the other girls.—Beth*

### Hair Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness was not only an issue of hair extensions or considering natural hairstyle. There was an underlying, persistent scrutiny and embarrassment that the respondents were trying to evade.

For instance, women who had grown up in predominantly White neighbourhoods or attended predominantly White elementary schools, underwent the scrutiny of their hair as being an oddity. They were asked questions about the texture of their hair and its appearance. At times it was an annoyance and an irritation.

*My hair was more different. More like this weird fascination, like what is this? Why's your hair like that? It's strange. cause growing up with natural hair one didn't want to go to the pool and wet it just like that cause that's a whole hell to detangle so I was invited to friends' houses for this and that 'I can't get my hair wet' they're like, 'Why not?' you're like 'Augh! It's a long story. We won't get into that.' (chuckles).---Beth*

Another respondent experienced embarrassment for unpicking her braids after a classmate was curious to know how her hair looked in another state.

*And I remember one time in primacy school [...] They were White and 'cause I always kept it in those pigtails my texture was so different from theirs they were like 'what is going on there?' Like I remember this one girl asked me what does it look like down? And I remember one day she asked me if she could undo my pigtails and I finally gave in and said yes and she did it and it was a disaster for me because I had like my hair wasn't in order like loose and...I don't think I was happy. ---Tanya*

*When I got to high school, it was more a fascination because that's where I really started doing a lot more Black styles Black influenced styles, a lot of braids, you could do so much stuff and it was like every month they would be a new style and everyone's like 'Wow you changed your hair! You change your hair so often this is so cool. This is so cool.' [...] I think the world has changed a bit. It's nice, it's new, it's cool but it's not necessarily beautiful if I really wanna if I start being on the covers of Cosmopolitan magazine, no! ---Beth*

Beth's quote illustrated a slightly more positive curiosity from onlookers that is related to their admiration for the versatility of Black hair care. However, she acknowledged that it was not the accepted norm of beauty.

### Summary

On the whole, the discussion on hair revealed that hair aesthetics represent the most open and easiest narrative for the respondents. Given that it was a shared experience for all the women, it can be assumed that this topic of discussion was the most familiar and most experiential. Self-disclosure on hair provided the women more of a bond than a contention since all women begin their hair narrative with natural hair. Then, their decisions on their hair both imposed and voluntary, indicated the time and money they were willing to invest in improving or changing their look. For instance, sporting a wig may be seen as a low maintenance option but given its image, it may be perceived as being lazy and cheapening the individual or that she cannot invest in her natural hair. Any alteration to one's hair whether it is chemical, synthetic transformation or extension



provides a self-reflection in relation to other people, especially other Black women who are the most aware of the types of changes that are available and acceptable.

Therefore, shame may be understood in not investing sufficient time and money into one's hair. Shame may be understood as having disorderly or unmanageable hair that is in public view. In other words, hair is symbolized as the value of being presentable and orderly. When hair is in its natural state, it may still be perceived as improper. The following two quotes emphasize the self-consciousness and criticism that some of the respondents have felt with regards to their hair and their racial identity:

*Yeah. I've always – of course you want your hair to look good (what's looking good?). To me, it's anything. I have no objections to anyone's hairdos, to be honest. If you want to wear a wig, if you wanna wear your hair natural, if you wanna have your hair permed, as long as your hair looks tidy, and it doesn't look like a mess, that my theory (looking like a mess). Unkempt, untidy, like it doesn't look brushed it looks...you know, if you have cornrows that have been in for ten – looks like it's been growing out, it's time to do them. To me, that—I don't mind if you wear your hair in cornrows just keep it looking neat. I don't care if you have a weave, keep it looking neat. Like, don't have it look like it's been in forever. To me, it's about looking –you know, well kept, looking put together, 'cause people judge you on how you look. And I said you know you're already Black so you might as well like make sure you look good. (What do you mean?) I feel...that whenever you go anywhere I always feel (anywhere) anywhere meaning go to the mall, you go abroad anywhere I don't know why I feel this way I always feel I'm representing Black people, I'm representing Black women, I'm representing Black people. So what I do reflects on Black people. I feel this way. I really do. Meaning, if I go out and I speak a certain way or I act a certain way, people are going to look and say 'You know what? Look at this girl'. She's not going to say 'Look at hername'. She's gonna say 'look at this Black girl acting blah blah blah' or 'look at this Black girl. Look how she looks. She's come to this event or come here dressed a certain way'. I know ----- I don't think everyone feels this way but I really feel that so when I go somewhere I look my best so that people will be like 'oh! You know, look at her Black woman, dadada' cause I think sometimes you know, something happens and the person happens to be Black and people think that way that it's like that for all Black people I know that's not true but I think people can't help but think that way. So for that reason, I feel that you know you should try and keep yourself looking best possible so...the questions about the hair, self-consciousness about the hair, my hair sorry um...I like my hair to look good basically...to look nice. Whether you know and I think it's easier to achieve that wearing my hair in extensions it's easier my lifestyle you know you sit for four hours, get your hair done for two months, you get up you put it in a ponytails you go. (Extensions mean) I mean braids or...I have braids now but you know if it's a weave if it's whatever suits you*

*(for you) for me yeah (is it braids) I usually wear my hair in braids. Before braids –um I haven't had my hair permed in about now it's going like seven years. Before this I got my hair pressed um, my hair's pretty soft so when they pressed it they actually thought I had – people thought my hair was permed! People were like 'Oh! You permed your hair' I was like no. They just pressed it. But that, it doesn't last very long. It only lasts about two weeks so I think braids are like the easiest thing. ---Irene*

*Oh are people looking at me like I'm a sell-out?...People looking at me like I want to be something else. Yeah that's the way I feel sometimes [...] 'Cause I find Black people are more inclined to talk about another Black person's hair than a White person [...] Black people criticize my hair more than White people. When my hair is in Afro puffs or whatever, White people love it. Black people: 'Oh why don't you tone it down?' ---Ophelia*

#### IDENTITY: UNDERSTANDING THEIR POSITION IN CANADIAN SOCIETY

When discussing one's identity racially or ethnically in relation to Canadian society, many respondents considered the subject matter challenging and had to reflect before answering, which lent itself to hesitation. The respondents indicated more of what they were not and by virtue of that, how they identified themselves was made clearer.

In general, the respondents discussed elements of their upbringing in terms of values and beliefs in comparison to what they perceived as the norm in Canadian society. This included asserting oneself in front of injustice, remaining true to one's values and being an upstanding citizen. The responses were framed in such a way that difference was not an issue in terms of skin color or ancestry but by moralistic or cultural attributes like religious beliefs. Others discussed their parents' perception of Canadian society and the possible discrimination that might occur in the lives of their children. There was also an emphasis on completing a proper education in order to succeed and be accepted in Canadian society.

One of the unifying elements within the discussion was the push for high achievement from an older Black individual. For most it was through their parents, for one respondent it was her high school teacher. This conversation that I labelled “the speech” was a lecture reminder of their position in society as a Black person, the importance of an education and the emphasis on hard work and high achievement in order to be viewed by the majority population as a valuable citizen and employee.

*Parents say they came here in order to have a better opportunity for our children. They want us to be law abiding they want us to take the opportunity of an education use it run with it and do well and be part of the society to make up like everybody else. Pay your taxes, raise your 2.5 kids, have your pet that's it that's all. My parents also taught us that we would have a difficult time because being a visible minority you have more obstacles even though we know we're told from young we have to work harder for that A than anybody else in the classroom doesn't mean we give up, our parents really pushed us. I have a lot of friends, a lot of them, a lot of them educated among them very ----- Actually it's one of the cultural things. If you go to Jamaica where my parents are from a lot of their friends, our family have gone to college have gone to university, have great jobs. It's very pushed education and down there it's private, here it's public so my parents are like look you don't even have to pay for this stuff use it to your utmost and one thing that nobody can say against you is that you don't have the education. They may not like you because of your skin color because your eye color because of your shape but if you have a degree they can't discriminate against it. So they pushed what they know from their country education is the doorway to empowering yourself and improving your situation and also helping your community and they transfer that here to us because they pushed school, school, school, school. You know my parents didn't want me to get little summer jobs they were like no we don't want you to think about money, we want you to concentrate on school. The money will come later so I think that's good. My parents were never like...I have friends who got little jobs in the summer and they were like ok now you have to pay a little rent because you're working now. My parents were never like that. They were like 'look you take that money you buy your you wanna Nike, iPod you wanna this you buy your little stuff but don't worry about it when school comes you have clothes on your back, food on the table, and your books will be paid and you go to school. That's your job'. And they recount the struggles 'when we came to Canada we didn't have this, we didn't have that, one suitcase, I worked two jobs.' They also reinforced that they struggled hard to get us a better life so kinda don't mess it up. You've been given this opportunity a lot of people would kill for it, die for it so take it. I think I admire our generation, the first generation the 60s, 70s that came in waves and I think we're doing well, it's not the best, we still have a lot of upheaval, we still have to deal with a lot of discrimination. Some people are not ready still to see Black faces in certain industries but eventually it has to change. I guess because there are obstacles it doesn't mean we have to bow down to it. ---Beth*

*My parents have had their share of very bad experiences here. And you think that okay the sixties first Black wave not even, but the first major Black wave you're seeing in Montreal -----. It's not letting up it's letting up a little bit but it's some things you cannot say. My parents have tried to prepare me. They try to prepare you for the time someone calls you a nigger but it's still a shock if someone does call you that cause it still hurts. (That has happened to you?) Uh yeah (chuckles). It happened when I was in elementary school and I got very upset and almost got into a fist fight over it. And after when I went home my mom said don't bother it doesn't matter what they call you. You still have self-worth, you're beautiful, you're still smart and doesn't matter what he thinks 'cause you're going to make it. And she goes there's always going to be someone who doesn't like you. What are you going to do please everybody? You're not going to change your skin color because they don't like it? What next, you can't wear this pants because they don't like it? You can't wear this shoe 'cause they don't like it? My mom was able to sorta able to diffuse it [...] It's not easy being Black (why?). When I tell people I'm a Jamaican background, two things: you smoke marijuana, you know someone who smokes marijuana, you know someone who sells marijuana. Like why would I know that!? Reggae, Bob Marley and marijuana, that's it, that's all. (chuckles) It's like gimme a break. I'm talking about people who live here never travel nowhere and that's all they know: Bob Marley, reggae and spliffs. ---Beth*

*My parents are from Trinidad...How has my upbringing affected the way I've been raised in Canadian society? How I see myself...Um I think my parents being West Indian, they're not super strict but they always valued you know 'you can do anything anyone else can' whether you're Black, whether you're --but at the same time be aware that you are Black, you know what I mean? And there are times where you might have to work harder or might have to give more because of who you are. But at the same time, it's slightly easier when you're female than if you're male. That's what I think. I think being a Black female, it's easier than being a Black male but in terms of I see myself in Canadian society, it being a very multi-ethnic, but at the same time, whether you're going to school, going to class, you can't help but notice, whether you go somewhere, you're the only Black person or if you're the only Black one, so I think it's still something I'm aware of not like my parents, 'Oh you're Black. Everything's gonna be --you're just like everyone else.' No. They made it aware that 'Ok you're different'. (What comes with that difference?) I think certain individuals might have preconceived notions if you're Black you know, and some of them are stereotypical notions that whether it be Black people are lazy or Black people you know, they don't work as hard that you need to push them harder, things like that. People might have those notions. So to be aware of these things. Or even just ignorance. I think that people fear what is different. So because you look different people might think you're different. It may not necessarily be true but some people might think that. ---Irene*

*It was one of those you know, focus in school, do very well in school, everything that you do you gotta be twice as good as that because it's always like a double negative of being Black that's part of thing that I was taught [...] You know what? It was just my perception of it with the way my parents, my friends' parents all around us, you would hear the*

*discussion going on you know if—you couldn't just get an 80 you know? If the White guy next to you got an 80, I gotta at least get an 85 or a 90, just so you could measure up to their level or their standard. That's sort of how it felt. --- Genevieve*

*I really don't know who hasn't been given that lecture. If you find someone who hasn't been, please introduce them to me. ---Genevieve*

### Linkages and hyphenations

Many of the women were fascinated with their identity that was linked elsewhere during at least one phase of their lives (generally during late adolescence and young adulthood). They explored the culture of their heritage or race by listening to music or reading books linked to the African Diaspora. Others were exposed to their heritage by virtue of their parents' participation in cultural clubs or community associations.

All of the respondents perceived themselves as Canadian with the exception of one woman. Ophelia, perceived herself as Canadian but at a varying degree. She expressed that although she was born and raised here, she believed that there was a lack of belonging in Canada. She thought her identity would never be viewed as simply Canadian. Her identity, like the others was hyphenated but the emphasis was more on the heritage of her parents.

Unlike Ophelia, the other respondents stated that their identity was more linked to Canada than their parents' home countries. A few explained that in their discovery of their parents' homeland, they were unable to fully relate to those native to the place. As much as they were aware of the food and culture, the nuances that solidify their link to these countries eluded the respondents. In other words, the historic narratives their parents had revealed were never completely justified in reality. Their memories did not reflect the contemporary realities that their children encountered. In effect, their ties to

Canada are more substantial though unarticulated, than the narratives of their predecessors.

#### Distinctions from African Americans

In exploring the notion of the Canadian identity, I posed the question of their perception of African Americans. The respondents were generally united in pointing out the historical fact that African American's ancestry was linked to Africa and slavery. For a few respondents they were fascinated and sympathised with the verity of not knowing one's ancestry. Given that their parents came from a place that was tangible and clear, the confusion about African ancestry does not plague them as greatly as someone from the United States. Although both peoples from the U.S. and the Caribbean were rooted in the African slave trade, the history in the Caribbean allowed for a greater distinction between the scope of racial discrimination that occurred in the U.S. and the consistent reminder of one's disputable past. In the Caribbean, abolitionist history allowed for more cohesion within the Black population to foster a sense of belonging, tradition and pride.

For other respondents they observed that the history of African Americans has impacted the social progress of Blacks in U.S. society and emphasized the fact that the value of hard work and achievement was essential in contemporary society. In other words, some respondents expressed the stance that African Americans' work ethic was dispassionate and full of self-pity. The attitude of "playing the victim" or "blaming the man" was perceived as a poor excuse for not excelling in school, regardless of class or socioeconomic income.

Another respondent perceived a lack of openness from African Americans:

*Yes. If you asked me this question five years ago, I would've answered something -- I would've answered differently. Maybe said not so much. I think African Canadians and*

*African Americans are different. I think like I said, because most African Canadians, a lot of us are first or second generation, we still tend to have the culture, language, food, music, etc, etc of our parents or wherever we're from. I think African Americans like a lot of American other things, it's more like the melting pot idea. Like you're American, you're, I don't know, you don't maintain your individual I don't want to say identity but culture wise. And I also think African Americans, I don't want to say that they've been through more, but they have, they have the history of the slavery, you know what I mean? They have the idea of – I'm not saying we don't have this here—they have the idea of affirmative action, the whole – I know as African Canadians we have that too but Canada was the place where a lot of people came to get out of that. So think in a way, African Americans in some ways are still kind of oppressed. I don't know. (African Canadians oppressed?) I just feel that...As a Canadian being exposed to more other like different races, we're a lot more accepting of others. Of course this is how I feel – I just feel that we're more accepting of others – and I'm only speaking from personal experience – as opposed to African Americans they're a lot more closed, a lot more close-minded. They're not willing to open to others. I find a lot of the media stereotypes, they still give into, this whole idea of light and dark, this whole idea of light skin versus dark skin, especially I'd say females I think who went to university. A lot of the girls I've met who went to university, specifically the ones who went to Historical Black Universities, HBCUs, a lot of them are in sororities. Ever the sororities still the history of them it's divided by like this sorority most of the girls in this sorority are light skinned (still?) Yeah, well it's transcended, it's one of those things even though it's from the 20s or the 40s, you still find it...today. Even though it's obviously it's ok she's in a sorority 'cause she's light but it just happens still transcends to society. ---Irene*

Irene's quote highlighted aspects that the other respondents mentioned concerning the distinction between Americans and Canadians: a greater concentration on intraracial and interracial issues, socioeconomic issues that reinforce negative stereotypes and the melting pot imagery.

Ophelia was one of the few respondents who admired African Americans for their honesty and frankness. She was frustrated with what she perceived as a pretentious, cliquish impression of African Canadians. This cliquish perception may be due to what Queenie and Tara noticed about Canadians' emphasis on multiculturalism, bi-cultural identities and its effects on how Blacks represented themselves. This means that if Blacks

are encouraged to take on the hyphenated identity, then discrimination between cultures or nationalities may ensue.

### Racism: Confusion and Perceptions

Racism is an issue that occurred for many during childhood whereby they were called insulting epithets. The outcome for many was countered by the counsel of their parents or defended by friends and peers. Some of the women grew up in neighbourhoods where otherness was more associated with French Canadians/Quebecois inhabitants. In other words, some respondents were raised in neighbourhoods with many other second generation Canadians and by virtue of that, the differences were equalized and shared. White Canadians, therefore, were the anomaly and their labelling of otherness on all of these second generation children was intolerable and resulted in fights for some:

*I have no idea but that's what I remember being called chocolate chip. Of course you end up getting called the N word. (You were called nigger as a child?) Yeah! Because in my neighbourhood, it was English and French and it's usually the French kid that would actually call you names, you know the Quebecois kids, not the other people that I hung out with that were English speaking that's Greek and Indian and we were a whole mix but I would have to say if anybody got attacked, if I got attacked by any culture, it was more a Quebecois culture than a Greek or...yeah! --- Karen*

Other forms of racism played a part in many of the respondents' experiences.

Tanya encountered racism in her elementary French class:

*In class we were doing conjugations these like conjugating verbs. They were actually activity sheets the teacher gave us with like we had to write in the verb ending and one of the sentences that we had to conjugate was like literally was this: niggers are lazy. (laughs) It's true. It's terrible. I'm not joking. I think I even have the activity book we – they were printed sheets, old conjugation sheets he was giving us I think I still have it at home and we were doing it orally altogether. So we got to that question and so it was like, 'niggers are lazy'. The teacher was like now kids this is obviously a racist comment. This is not correct. I just want to get into why someone would write something like that. These are old papers. Also too he went into the history you know certain Blacks were*



*enslaved so that's where they got the reference niggers are lazy blah blah blah. And then this one kid who was sitting next to me was like 'I would never want to be a nigger and be a slave like you'. And that's one of the ...there were only a few incidents like that. --- Tanya*

From that quote, not only was racism found in the class material but in the unknown student's reaction after the teacher attempted to dismantle and dissipate the example, providing several layers of discomfort for the respondent. Another respondent recalled an incident that occurred on the playground that was possibly the outcome of extraneous influences and mimicry:

*He was in a lower grade than me and I was in grade three. I hadn't been at the school that long and he called me a nigger [...] He wasn't angry at me at all. He was just—we were all playing on the playground and I think he threw sand at me and I told him that wasn't very nice and then he called me the name. ---Genevieve*

Others were able to recall incidents where they perceived racism or discrimination in subtle forms. One of the respondents remembered moments during her childhood where a playground game of kiss tag had exceptions if she played with the other children:

*If I was tagged, they would kiss my hand, not my cheek. How come it was different for me and not anybody else? ---Georgia*

Other respondents encountered the subtle surprised body language when seeking employment or when employed, the problematic interpersonal relations at the workplace:

*There's always places where you submit a CV somewhere and then you walk in and they're like 'Oh!' you know they're – whether they don't say—of course they're not going to say 'Oh! You're Black!' you know? But you can tell sometimes that the person is surprised of how you look and I've had that. That kind of thing happened to me. ---Irene*

*There is a race card to be pulled. In Montreal it's very subtle but it's still there. I go to work and for some reason I'm the only one the patients ask, how long have you been in Canada? Why do you ask me how long I've been in Canada because I don't have a White face? ----- the major majority White Anglo, White French treat us like hey it's like wake up and smell the coffee there are Black people in Montreal, Black people born and raised here. You know and I'm tired of giving my cultural run down and when my parents get through customs and what year and what time. It's very rude and very demeaning. So I*

*don't answer it anymore. What island were you born on? The island of Montreal. Oh but where are your parents from? Here. It's none of your business. You're a sick patient. Why are you concerned about my cultural ladder where we come from? It's rude. It's rude. It's so inappropriate. ----- After that, people would tell me oh I'm just humouring them. No! That was 30, 40 years ago, you're humouring them. This is not humouring them. You're really rude 'cause I don't ask you which town in Quebec you're from. I'm here to treat you for your illness. That's all. You don't ask this one here where she's from because she's White she's not questioned about where she's from [my emphasis]. They assume she's from here because she's White. I have a mutual friend who sees it. No one asks her where she's from 'cause she's White and she speaks English. They assume that she is from Montreal but I am from somewhere else because I'm a visible minority [my emphasis].*

*I go to work. I'm in a very, I could say....I've moved up the rungs of my department. I'm sometimes at the head of charge of the department, a very heavy loaded department and people come around 'Oh where is the nurse? Where's the nurse in charge?' It's me. And I can see them do a double take like Black girl is running the emergency department? She's the head right now? Yeah, wake up and smell the coffee. And this is not 20 years ago. This was 3 years ago or 2 years ago when I started dealing with critical patients. I'm in the room at the bedside stethoscope is there under my full uniform, the doctor walks in looks around walks out and goes 'I need a nurse at the bedside. I need to do something.' So when I'm at the bedside in full nursing ----- I'm invisible. I'm the only one there besides the patient and the bed. --- Beth*

The recollections expressed by the respondents demonstrate that racism has two unusual natures: being visibly excluded or being made invisible. Besides the racial insults that obviously displayed that the women were different, being seen as not part of Canadian society and being asked about one's heritage was an irritant. Or, that one can have a certain credentials and speak with a Canadian accent but be perceived as an anomaly. If these incidents are a common thread for Black women in Canada, then the identity of many women is still visually and aurally contestable. Their image as being a part of Canada but never fully a part of the nation, may continue to be a questionable space to inhabit for the rest of their lives.

For the other respondents who could not recall any direct racist encounters in their lives, the indirect nuances of racism were points of surprised confusion as the women

discovered that in spite of their strong awareness and knowledge of racism, they were exempt from the moments that would typically reinforce their beliefs that North American society was prejudicial.

### The 'Acting White' Issue

As mentioned in the theoretical literature, scholars proposed that African Americans who excelled in school or enjoyed scholastic activities were deemed as “acting white” by others. Other traits synonymous with this label were taste in music, clothing and possibly family income. For instance, if an African American individual were to live in a predominantly Caucasian neighbourhood and have a stronger affinity with this peer group, then their attitude, behaviour and preferences might be perceived as being more White than Black.

In the case of the African Canadian women interviewed, some of them encountered this stigma when others witnessed their habits, hobbies and behaviour. This is interesting because the African Canadians interviewed, had narratives that included being raised in multicultural neighbourhoods and having a diversity of friends, which may mean that the notion of “acting white” would be irrelevant. However, it remained within the discourse of the Black communities and peer groups. This theme emerged for at least three of the respondents at different points in the interview. The following three quotes feature an incident where the issue of blackness came into question:

*People be like 'Oh what are you doing this weekend?' 'I'm going skiing.' 'What? Black people don't ski!' Well that's only if you limit yourself do you understand? I don't know I mean basically running I would think is a kind of exercise where you kind of liberate yourself and set yourself free [...] so it really depends on who you're living for [...] I love to figure skate. I went to Alberta this winter and I'm the only Black person in Red Deer Alberta on this pond and I couldn't even care less who was looking at me skate or whatever 'cause I was just happy to be one with the ice and you know that whole stereotype that Black people don't skate and Black people don't ski, well no! This is an*

*activity that I enjoy, I'm getting the chance to express myself, why am I going to limit myself to just that? There's a lot of things that people want to kind of suppress us with our own kind of people and if we let them, it will get into our psyche to actually not take that opportunity you understand? I'm a biker. I bike all summer long. You don't see a lot of girls – I have a machine bike, I wear the biking tights, the whole look. I have the gloves and trust me, I get a lot of attention because people are not used to seeing a Black girl with dreadlocks in the whole biking gear but I become used to it where it's actually fun in a way. And when I see another Black girl biking, I'm like 'Alright! Go on girl!' or just rollerblading or just enjoying themselves doing an activity but like I said we're dealing with people who sometimes they want to suppress us on what we are able to do. I said maybe for me where my psyche is where being an artist people are already telling you what you can't do than what you can do? [...] Oh we're supposed to do just what? Just dance or just sing? Or that total typical stereotype of what Black people are supposed to do and what they're not supposed to do. And if we go outside of that box then we're trying to do something that we're not and we're trying to be White or we're trying to be better or we're--do you understand?---Karen*

*That's a whole other issue like in terms of the voice thing. That I've had tons of people tell me 'Oh you sound White' or 'You're whitewashed' that I had a lot of when I was younger. Yes and – because I went to a private all girls' school, because I went to a private CEGEP and I was like am I considered White because I want to forward my life? Because I like going to school? I like reading a book? (Where did you get this?) Oh I've had those comments in high school, like from other high schools, not from (our) school, no. From other individuals. I had it in CEGEP. (Were those people Black?) Sometimes, yeah. Most of the time, yes. And, I'm just like because I don't swear every second word? Cause I'm not 18 and pregnant? Because what? And I still find that a lot of people, even Black people still have that mentality that if you're trying to make something of yourself, it's acting White. I think I got even more of that than being physically teased. Being called (because of the way you speak) The way I speak or just the things I like to do or the way I carry myself or cause I like I dunno, painting or cause I like reading or 'cause you know, I like books 'cause I like I dunno watching Discovery Channel I don't know something like that's not typical I guess of what a young – or maybe 'cause a lot of my friends are White you know, but a lot of my friends are Black too. I'd say most of my friends are Black and I that also transcends into like relationships but that's a whole other story, you know what I mean? ---Irene*

*I was told once that I talk White. I don't know what it is to be taught to talk White but apparently (laugh) I talk White and then they went to explain that well it's because you speak proper most of the time. And I'm thinking 'ok how am I supposed to speak then?' --  
- Genevieve*

This issue highlights not only the stereotypes that still persist but the confusion within the Black Canadian identity in that there are activities that are understood as quintessentially Canadian but are exclusive to a certain population. If one identifies oneself as Canadian,

then there are habits, hobbies, accents, language cues and other norms that influence the individual. In the case of a second generation Black Canadian, the quotes demonstrate that according to their critics, the women had to choose elements of their identity because blackness and Canadianess are mutually exclusive.

The Black Canadian identity derived from these responses, indicate both the fluidity and rigidity that exist in defining oneself. The respondents' experiences showed the prejudices embedded in the lives of different people and systems, and how these prejudices moved around through various discourses. Although the topic of race is less volatile here than in the United States, the problem remains in subtle forms or one treats them as anecdotal anomalies. Given the Black Atlantic experience of various attributes of the African Diaspora crossing and influencing different areas, the respondents are caught in a position where they encounter perceptions from elsewhere in the Diaspora and contemplate less of their own perceptions. In other words, the Canadian value of openness and tolerance permits women to be on the receiving end of information from the Americas, Africa and Europe, but the reciprocation of transmitting information from Canada to elsewhere does not appear to exist in a deliberate fashion. This allows for spaces of contention in that stereotypes about Canada remain White and the sense of belonging for others is not complete. The quiet exclusiveness permits questions about one's ancestry to be perceived as valid and accommodating and not an irritant for those who are born and raised in Canada. Thus, one's behaviour is placed in contention if they demonstrate elements that are part of what is excluding them. The rigidity of this concept contradicts the corporeality of the women's lives, including the emphasis on gaining a proper education and becoming an upstanding individual.

The social interactions, information and discourses that the women have encountered have constructed their identity. Therefore, their self-definition of their identity is based on these experiences regardless of the rigidity of some claims. What remains incomplete is an articulation of their Canadian identity beyond their place of birth.

## FINAL DISCUSSION:

### PROBING THE CONCEPT OF DISTINGUISHABLE BLENDABILITY

The findings highlighted from the interviews provide affirmations of theoretical frameworks from the scholars and academics featured in Chapters two and three. The discourse shaping the respondents' aesthetic identity displays fluidity in that they are able to manoeuvre through cultural and societal concepts and choose their representation. This had led to some of the responses featuring a self-definition that was not as clear in some frameworks as others. For instance, the boundaries of beauty and aesthetics were relatively limited to the discourses on femininity within their family and friends. For most, the limitations were the Eurocentric norms of beauty. However, their resistance, acceptance or confusion towards these norms was indirectly related to the Afrocentric discourse of self-consciousness and how they have normalized and practised the knowledge learned about their blackness and their aesthetic position in Canadian society.

Their familiarity with the concepts of skin color and hair texture demonstrated salient issues that have affected the Black female experience in Canada. Hair and skin can be interwoven and analyzed with racialized sexuality and the typologies presented in Black Feminist Thought.

As mentioned previously, hair can be linked to one's skin color and one's skin color can be linked to one's sexuality. In other words, the self-perception of the respondents as 'in the middle' or what may be labelled as brown or medium brown, indicate that not only is there a vast range of shades within the African Diaspora but there might be an underlying desire to be viewed as neutral or average. In other parts of the world like the United States and the Caribbean, distinctions on color might be more

apparent to classify colors in varying ways, but given that many of the women interviewed experienced a distant and opaque distinction of themselves in terms of pigmentation, the women were left to judge for themselves. To be classified as dark or light/fair might be a jarring experience for some because it was not fully a part of the discourse that they constructed about themselves. Their point of reference was their family and for the majority, they perceived their color as a combination of their parents' colors, that is, a middle color.

The neutrality of their color as 'in the middle' therefore raises the issue of a sense of belonging. As much as each Black woman interviewed is a visible minority in Canadian society, there is a need to blend in beyond the Black community, not to be perceived by the attributes that may exist with being dark or light.

If skin color is associated with sexuality, then the perception of darker skin is linked with possibly all the negative attributes labelled on Black women such as hypersexuality. If one is perceived as brown or medium brown then the negative attributes lessen. In the case of the women interviewed, the middle brown skin tone can be associated with a tolerable, modest sexuality possibly associated with The Black Lady typology. But, it is also associated with forgettable, asexual characters on television as well as the few Black models featured in advertisements with other White models. Some of the fairer skinned respondents perceived themselves in the brown range, not conceiving that their color could be associated with the light skinned ideal within the Black community.

The data on body image and facial features did not express strong Afrocentric views from the respondents, but what remains clear is that good health has become



universalized as a social norm. And, as most women interviewed demonstrated, good health is valued more for its internal benefits than for its external, aesthetic benefits. Low self-esteem was not an issue for any of the respondents and it may be linked to the discourses associated with their parents and their encouragement to focus on abilities and future achievements. This discourse possibly affected the way the respondents perceived and critiqued celebrities and their notoriety based prominently on talent, abilities, achievement and lastly, aesthetics.

It also confirms how appearance and aesthetics have been prioritized. Historically, Black women's beauty may not have been admired or praised, so its importance in desirability was tainted by hypersexuality or masked by asexuality. Whether parents were aware of it or not, the discourse of sexuality formed the respondents' attitudes and the importance of moral uprightness and pride in accomplishments such as academics or sports or both.

With that in mind, some women were not esteemed based on their looks. It was not a topic of discussion or a fond memory for the respondents. Their memories were reactionary in the sense that they had an incident where their beauty was negated and they had to affirm it. For another, it was through the compliments of others and overhearing the affirmation from their parents. Otherwise it was an unspoken, unimportant esteem builder.

For those who consumed beauty from the periphery (i.e. those who read magazines, watch TV and perceive beauty as admirable but inapplicable to themselves), their parents critiqued their lack of femininity and coaxed them to consider wearing makeup, dress, or change their hairstyle. For another the critique was apparent when her

mother watched television shows that showcased Black models. In either case, the aesthetic critique may have influenced the respondent to distance or dissociate themselves from their parents' subjectivities. Perhaps it resulted in the application of these aesthetics as beyond their boundaries of modesty. Perhaps the aesthetic image is truly perceived as a fantastical image which is inapplicable and unbeneficial to their lives.

For others aesthetics was an esteem builder but their beauty was also emphasized or associated with an internal appreciation of hard work, intellect and creativity. They had familial memories that were positive and sustainable during difficult times. For Genevieve she was perceived as dark skinned and was at conflict with her desirability. However, the encouragement from her family enabled her to excel academically and to place her focus on facets of her identity beyond her appearance. Possibly unrecognized by their parents, their emphasis on the presentation of self as upstanding socially and academically has influenced the discourse on beauty as being almost unspoken.

The modification of the self for the respondents was rationalised through ideas of personal choice. The women were exposed to the governmentality located in beauty, health and fitness. Their decision to join a gym or to lose weight was due to a personal evaluation and was not perceived as influenced by external forces. What should be noted is that all the respondents perceived a societal definition of health despite its actual social practice as debatable. In addition, many of the respondents had experimented with different hairstyles and altered their hair's structure in various ways. The various choices were perceived as questionable depending on how the respondent understood authenticity. What remains is the experimentation and the diversity of changing one's aesthetic, which for the women was either based on a notion of personal choice or a

subtle coercion by peers and family. Either way, authenticity was a form of resistance to social norms despite being de-politicized by most respondents. Natural hair was the site of contention in that the discipline it took to care for it was less efficient than the other chemically enhanced alternatives.

Another problematic theme that arose within the discourse on beauty was the polarizing notions of good/bad hair and colorism. The understanding or root cause for these dichotomies was unknown, especially in the context of Canadian society. Unlike the United States and the Caribbean where these hierarchal ideas of beauty may persist, the Canadian respondents appear to have received a fragmented awareness of intraracial discrimination and its binary thinking. If their parents de-emphasize beauty and issues of beauty, this intraracial discourse exists as anomalies, exposed in quips, mild teasing, and anecdotal stories but is never fully dealt with by the respondents, unless they make a conscious decision to resist these definitions. Consequently, all the women expressed a conceptual aversion to good/bad hair and chose to eliminate it from their vocabulary, yet were not aware of the phrases ‘hair politics’ or the ‘politics of hair’, which encapsulates the subject matter. These fragmented pieces of information would only be understood if the respondent invested time in learning about the struggles of Black women throughout the African Diaspora or exposing herself to the works provided by Black women artists. It demonstrates that terms historically linked with self-hatred existed in the lives and possibly psyche of the respondents, but it became a transient, inconclusive phase that they eventually resisted.

It also confirms the possibility that the respondents are more likely to receive information but due to its fragmented nature may not fully rationalize what to do with it.

Unfortunately, if the resources on these terms were readily available or dealt with by the parents, then there might be more strength in resisting these intraracial attitudes. In other words, The Black Atlantic concept of transferring information and changing the discourse is not as salient for Canadian Blacks as it might be in other parts of the Diaspora. So, the dialectical encounter may be such that they only dispel or affirm the discourses that persist in the representation of North American Blacks, which mainly features the discourse from the United States. The present representation provided by the respondents, features the outcome of The Black Atlantic experience in that there is a developing un-particularity that diminishes notions of ethnic absolutism and permits an open expression of the merging cultural understandings that co-exist in Canada (Gilroy 1993). However, the respondents' identity will be concealed and experienced through the discourse of others as something that is never fully Canadian but Caribbean, African, or African American. It is a multiple hyphenated identity that may not be appreciated as embedded in the Canadian experience but one that can only be defined deductively.

The political notions of multiculturalism and the mosaic symbolism in Canada have permitted the women interviewed to play with the transfer of cultural information from the African Diaspora and elements of double consciousness. The tension that may exist within the experiences of the women is the reproduction of the information, testing boundaries of the discourse on beauty and expanding them. To illustrate the transfer of hairstyles and fashion from politicized realms, may have been translated to the empowerment of choice. Hairstyle choices and fashion trends lose their saliency and are merely perceived as style and therefore, a representation of the tolerance within the

mosaic imagery. Nevertheless, the distinction not only in skin color but in aesthetic look, also reifies the mosaic imagery that if one looks different then she is from elsewhere.

The multi-dimensional discourse on beauty and identity reveals a Black Canadian trait that I term *distinguishable blendability*, where in the multicultural discourse of the mosaic symbol, the tessera (as mentioned in the beauty typologies) in its true form is a malleable, transparent piece, able to overlap other pieces and clear enough to be seen on top of the other pieces. For the women, their understanding of Canadian blackness is unhindered by essentialist norms from the Diaspora and yet permits the elements of that discourse to taint their identity.

## CONCLUSION

The significance of beauty in society provides a means of comprehending how we represent and contemplate ourselves both internally and externally. Our mental reflections are embodied in our outward presentation. It illuminates the values that may influence our decisions in life and our attitude in interacting with others (Psychology Today 1997). In addition, beauty represents an indicator of our collective conscience--the accepted illusions, injustices and realities, and the impact of these norms globally.

In North America, the feminine beauty ideal has conventionally been associated with the White population, causing a dichotomy of norms between Whites and non-Whites. The preceding work exemplified the historical and contextual nature of beauty amongst women of African descent and the Diaspora, specifically in the Americas. The outcome provided insight to the discursiveness and depth in focussing on the body image, hair texture and skin color. Once this lens is placed upon Canadian women rooted in African ancestry, an exchange of discourses is exhibited demonstrating the extent and significance of certain concepts.

Theoretically, notions of double consciousness and socialization permeated the narratives of the ten respondents. They encountered tension within the divergent standards of Black representation in the media and their parental guidance. Moreover, the continuous development of their identity as Canadian and Other compounded this tension. For instance, defining blackness was a fragmented process of acquiring information from discourses with no distinct references. In other words, The Black Atlantic experience as mentioned by Gilroy (1993) was a flux of uprooted knowledge that permitted aesthetic and moral choices to exist. Consequently, the techniques of

domination and self are opaque, as the women's narratives exposed a form a self-governance where they encountered choices on their self-representation aesthetically. However, the constant access to choices permits fluidity in an indefinable identity and a lack of an attainable physical ideal. The docility in their choices was transient, where the respondents' experienced phases related to body image, skin and hair. Their blackness is process that exists on the fragmented elements of Black Feminist Thought, which provides a critical perspective on elements of essentialism in African self-consciousness and the typologies, stereotypes and attitudes existing in North American society.

My research attempted to demonstrate how socio-cultural concepts impact the beauty and body image satisfaction amongst African Canadian women. The ten respondents exposed the multi-dimensional discourse of identity, the body, skin color and hair.

The social constructs of a Black identity emerged from the experiences in learning difference from a young age through expressions of racism or the warnings of their parents and guardians. This learning process has strengthened the character of the women and how they generally perceive themselves in society. Beyond the political underpinnings of their identity, knowledge and experiences about their hair, colorism, popular culture and their individual cultural heritage provided a unifying thread for all the respondents.

I have shown that the critique of North American society provided an affirmation of the discourse of Eurocentric ideals still resilient today and its problematic paradoxes in society. This Black Feminist standpoint of 'outsider-within' was apparent throughout the interviews as well as an African self-consciousness, apparent in discussions about skin

color, hair and body image. The relationship the women had with this consciousness and perspective was an evaluation of difference that affected their lives as Black women in Canada. A few of the respondents were irritated by the politics of difference as their sense of belonging or sense of Canadianness was put to question repeatedly. These narratives influenced the respondents to side with their ancestral heritage or combat the narrow notion of Canadian as exclusively Caucasian. However, these responses were also in tandem with critiques that consciously diminished an essentialist perspective, possibly because the respondents emphasized a universalized identity with other hyphenated Canadians.

In addition, the African Canadian respondents integrated concepts of external beauty in varying levels. However, the underlying message from each woman interviewed, demonstrated that internal beauty defined by hard work, intelligence and acceptable morals, was the guiding variable that expressed their awareness of beauty in fashion and popular culture. Furthermore, the internal beauty guide was the variable that critiqued the Eurocentric ideals of thinness and the limited representation of cosmetics and aesthetics by Black women. In turn, this influenced women to find media alternatives that reflected themselves.

The internal beauty guide also influenced the respondents' rationale and justification to maintain a healthier lifestyle which is emphasized in North American society. Moreover, the family history and for a few respondents their personal body shape desires, impacted the need to maintain a healthier lifestyle.

That being said, the majority of the women indicated a body image satisfaction with 'mild' concerns and a healthy self-esteem. Some women recognized the racialization



of body image and Black women in that the emphasis on having a curvaceous body was an acceptable aesthetic. Many rejected the concept or made no connection with their body shape and their racial identity. The normative was an undefined mid-point body size and shape, which permitted nearly all respondents to accept their figures as they were. Only specific elements of the body were racialized but if one were to merge this data together with theoretical concepts, then one would see the need for Black women to be viewed as acceptable but not invisible in society.

Overall, my thesis illustrated that the significance of cultural or ethnic retention and double socialization was influential in the lives of second generation African Canadian women. The concept of beauty and health was generally expressed indirectly to most women, which steered the women to seek out their understandings through discourses that lacked reference points. This ultimately revealed the ongoing confusions that exist within the discourse of body image, skin color and hair and its relation to the Black identity in Canada.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research demonstrated the ongoing discourse on beauty ideals can be extensive and complex. For instance, the respondents had to discuss a subject matter that was challenging because of the resistance to the socio-historical concepts that are generally linked with White women. Therefore, the open-ended interview process had to be detailed with specifications. If discussing beauty was socialized to be an uncommon or irrelevant topic amongst friends and family, then the responses can neglect all the nuances that exist when understanding Black women and beauty. For instance, the confusion regarding skin color for some of the women showed that a deeper study of colorism and self-consciousness in Canada is needed.

I highly recommend further research in this field of study, especially an integration of quantitative and qualitative methods. Then, the questionnaires and scales associated with topics such as body shape, self-esteem, and racial/cultural identity attitudes can be utilized to its full potential as well as other variables like education and socioeconomic status. Moreover, a greater number of voices from African Canadian Montrealers need to be heard. The history of cultural diversity and its present outcome on the lives of women should also be analysed extensively. It may supply a clearer reflection of the current state of multiculturalism in Canadian society.

I would also recommend an analysis of Black women at the cusp of adulthood. I believe that there is potentially another standpoint emerging in Black femininity with the onset and impact of Hip Hop culture in the media. A younger generation of women have an awareness of Hip Hop as normative as opposed to the older young adults who have witnessed its emergence and observed the evolution of the trends and themes.

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**APPENDIX I: Preliminary Questionnaire and Interview Questions**  
**CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

This is to state that I agree to participate in a research study being conducted by *Susan-Blanche Chato* as part of her Master's Thesis under the supervision of Dr. Anthony Synnott, Department of Sociology at Concordia University.

A. Purpose:

I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to examine whether African Canadian women experience a tension between acculturating North American beauty ideals and retaining the ideals instilled from their parental cultural background.

B. Procedure:

The research will be conducted in a quiet, neutral setting that will permit the participant to complete the questionnaire and talk openly with minimum distraction. The participant will be required to complete the survey and interview session between 30 and 60 minutes. Due to the nature of the subject matter, some questions might be considered sensitive. However, all participants will be guaranteed confidentiality.

C. Conditions of Participation

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences.
- I understand that my participation in this study is CONFIDENTIAL, meaning that the researcher will not disclose my identity.
- I understand that the data from this study may be published.
- I understand the purpose of this study and know that there is no hidden motive of which I have not been informed.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

WITNESS SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

*Preliminary Questionnaire*

Part I: Survey

DEMOGRAPHIC INFO:

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Height (ft): \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please check the best answer that applies to you)

Weight (lbs): \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is your highest level of education?

- Less than high school
- Graduated from high school
- Post-secondary diploma
- Undergraduate degree
- Graduate degree
- PhD

2. What is your household income?

- Less than \$20,000
- \$20,000 to \$39,999
- \$40,000 to \$59,999
- \$60,000 to \$79,999
- \$80,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 and over

3. How would you describe the majority of the people in your neighbourhood?

- European descent (Caucasian/White)
- African descent (Black)
- South Asian descent (e.g., Indian, Pakistani)
- Southeast Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- Native Canadian
- Other

Please explain:

4. The majority of my close friends are:

- African descent (Black)
- European descent (Caucasian/White)
- South Asian descent (e.g., Indian, Pakistani)
- Southeast Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- Native Canadian
- Other:

Please explain:

5. The majority of my co-workers are:

- African descent (Black)
- European descent (Caucasian/White)
- South Asian descent (e.g., Indian, Pakistani)
- Southeast Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- Native Canadian
- Other:

Please explain:

**If you do not work, please skip this question**

6. The majority of my classmates are:

- African descent (Black)
- European descent (Caucasian/White)
- South Asian descent (e.g., Indian, Pakistani)
- Southeast Asian
- Middle Eastern
- Latin American
- Native Canadian
- Other:

Please explain:

**If you do not attend school, please skip this question**

*Body Shape Questionnaire*<sup>15</sup>

The next questions deal with your feelings about your appearance over the PAST FOUR WEEKS. Please read each question and circle the appropriate number to the right. Please answer all the questions.

OVER THE PAST **FOUR WEEKS:**

	Never				
		Rarely			
			Sometimes		
				Often	
					Always
1. Have you been so worried about your shape that you have been feeling you ought to diet?.....	1	2	3	4	5
2. Have you thought that your thighs, hips or bottom are too large for the rest of you?.....	1	2	3	4	5
3. Have you been afraid that you might become fat (or fatter)?.....	1	2	3	4	5
4. Have you worried about your flesh being not firm enough?.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. Has being with thin women made you feel self-conscious about your shape?.....	1	2	3	4	5
6. Have you noticed the shape of other women and felt that your own shape compared unfavourably?.....	1	2	3	4	5
7. Have you avoided wearing clothes which make you particularly aware of the shape of your body?.....	1	2	3	4	5
8. Has eating sweets, cakes, or other high calorie food made you feel fat?.....	1	2	3	4	5
9. Have you felt excessively large and rounded?.....	1	2	3	4	5
10. Have you felt ashamed of your body?.....	1	2	3	4	5
11. Have you thought that you are in the shape you are because you lack self-control?.....	1	2	3	4	5
12. Have you worried about other people seeing rolls of fat around your waist or stomach?.....	1	2	3	4	5
13. Have you felt that it is not fair that other women are thinner than you?	1	2	3	4	5
14. Has seeing your reflection (e.g. in a mirror or shop window) made you feel bad about your shape?.....	1	2	3	4	5
15. Have you pinched areas of your body to see how much fat there is?....	1	2	3	4	5
16. Have you been particularly self-conscious about your shape when in the company of other people?.....	1	2	3	4	5

<sup>15</sup> Cooper, P. J., Taylor, M. J., Cooper, Z. & Fairburn. 1986. The Development and Validation of the Body Shape Questionnaire. *International Journal of Eating Disorders* 6: 485-494.

*Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*<sup>16</sup>

Instructions: Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself.

If you **strongly agree**, circle **SA**. If you **agree** with the statement, circle **A**. If you **disagree**, circle **D**. If you **strongly disagree**, circle **SD**.

- |   |    |   |   |    |
|---|----|---|---|----|
| 1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.                                  | SA | A | D | SD |
| 2. At times, I think I am no good at all.                                     | SA | A | D | SD |
| 3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.                             | SA | A | D | SD |
| 4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.                       | SA | A | D | SD |
| 5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.                                  | SA | A | D | SD |
| 6. I certainly feel useless at times.   | SA | A | D | SD |
| 7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others. | SA | A | D | SD |
| 8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.                               | SA | A | D | SD |
| 9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.                     | SA | A | D | SD |
| 10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.                                 | SA | A | D | SD |

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<sup>16</sup> Rosenberg, M. 1965. *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

## Part II: Interview session

### Health & Lifestyle

- ◇ How do you define a healthy lifestyle?
  - Do you follow this definition?
- ◇ How, do you think, is the mainstream society's definition of health?
  - Do you think they follow that definition?
- ◇ Do you exercise? Why?
- ◇ Have you ever resorted to food to cope with your emotions (i.e., stress/anger/sadness)?
  - Why?
- ◇ Have you ever felt pressure to change the way you look?
  - No
    - Why?
  - Yes
    - Who/what pressured you?
    - How did you react?

### Media

- ◇ How are Black women portrayed on [scale 1-10: 1 being unfavourable and 10 being favourable]:
  - Television
    - Music videos
    - TV hosts
    - Sitcom/Dramatic characters
      - Why?
  - Magazines?
    - Why?

### Race/Ethnic Identity

In terms of your ethnicity/race, how has your upbringing impacted the way you perceive yourself in Canadian society?

## Beauty

- ◇ How would you describe the perfect woman?
- ◇ How would you describe the perfect Canadian woman?
- ◇ Do you identify yourself with this ideal? Why?
  - Do you aspire to become this ideal? Why?
- ◇ How do you define beauty?
- ◇ How do you think mainstream culture defines beauty?
  - Do you think you fit that definition? Why?
- ◇ Do you consider Black women beautiful? Why?
- ◇ What have your parents taught you about beauty?
- ◇ Do you think wanting to change your appearance in any shape or form is behaving outside your race/ethnicity/culture? Why?

## Body Image Satisfaction

- ◇ What is your best asset?
- ◇ What do you like the least about yourself?
- ◇ In terms of beauty, what is your favourite physical attribute? Why?
  - What do you like the least? Why?
- ◇ Were you ever teased as a child about your physical features? Y/N
  - No
    - Why?
  - Yes
    - Which ones?
    - Why?
    - How do you think that situation has affected you?
- ◇ Have you ever compared yourself with other women in general?
- ◇ Do you ever feel self conscious about your physical features?

## Hair, Face and Skin

- ◇ Have you ever felt self conscious about your skin color (your complexion)? Why?



- ◇ Have you ever felt self conscious about your facial features (i.e., nose, eyes, lips, bone structure)? Why?
- ◇ Have you ever felt self conscious about your hair? Why?
- ◇ Have you ever compared yourself with other women in the media?
  - Which women?
- ◇ Why?
  - Were they of the same ethnicity or race as you?

### Miscellaneous Semi-structured Questions

- Do you consider yourself Canadian? Why?
- Do you feel a connection with your parents' culture? How so?
- What is home?
- Do you use the term 'home' to refer to your parents' origins?
  - Where are they from? Do you go to their country often?
- Have you ever been given the "speech"? (e.g., "you must work hard because this world is tough and you're Black so you have to work extra hard to be respected", etc).
- What do you think is the reasoning behind this "speech"? Do you think there is an urgency to succeed since your parents desired to succeed in this society and want you to do the same?
- What is the difference between African (Black) Americans and African (Black) Canadians?
- Have you ever experienced any form of racism in Canada?
- Do you know the term: hair politics?
  - Do you know the difference between good hair and bad hair? What are the differences? Have you ever used these terms?
- What are your thoughts on:
  - Dreadlocks
  - Relaxed/Chemically treated hair
  - Hair extensions:
    - Weaves
    - Wigs
    - Braids
  - Coloured contact lenses
- When selecting a mate/partner, do you have a skin color preference?
- Have your past lovers/mates/partners indicated that they had a preference for your skin color?
- What are your thoughts on Black models?
  - e.g., Tyra Banks, Alek Wek, Naomi Campbell

- What are your thoughts on Black female artists?
  - e.g., Beyonce, Lil Kim, Mary J Blige, Rihanna, Destiny's Child
- Have you ever experienced “cut-eye” or “the elevator” from Black women in public spaces? In other words has a Black woman ever given you a “dirty” look? Why do you think you received that “look”?
- What is your academic history? e.g., Elementary school, neighbourhood:
- What was the ethnic makeup in each setting?

## APPENDIX II: Additional Quotations

### AIN'T I A WOMAN?<sup>17</sup>

By Sojourner Truth<sup>18</sup>

#### Delivered 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

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<sup>17</sup> Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage, ed. 1881. *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol. 1, 1848-1861. (New York: Fowler & Wells), 115-117.

<sup>18</sup> Truth's speech was recorded and published by feminist activist Frances Gage several years after the Women's Convention in 1851. It has been debated whether this speech as well as the entire account of events are accurate or an embellishment, given the Southern dialect and profile attributed to Truth (Mabee 1993).

## Phenomenal Woman<sup>19</sup>

By: Maya Angelou

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I'm telling lies.  
I say,  
It's in the reach of my arms  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It's the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But they can't touch  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them

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<sup>19</sup> Angelou, Maya. 1978. Phenomenal Woman. *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. New York: Random House.

They say they still can't see.  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman

Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need of my care,  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.