Honors Thesis Proposal

For

The Sociocultural Perception of the African-American Woman's Bodily Aesthetics

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Entered
In 2011 an article written by Satoshi Kanazawa surfaced onto the Internet theorizing and analyzing the beauty of black women. At the conclusion of this article, Kanazawa deemed black women to be the least attractive in comparison to women of other races. His analysis compared the beauty of black women to that of black men, thereby simultaneously dismissing the aesthetic beauty of these women while praising that of black men. Though extremely questionable, Kanazawa’s article exposes the ways in which the standard of beauty is imposed within the United States, and arguably globally. This view influences how other races see African-American women, and black women to a larger extent. It also serves as a reminder of the ambivalent disposition held towards African-American female beauty. Kanazawa’s choice to diminish the beauty of the black women at the expense of the black man—and other women—brings about a familiar perspective to the definition of beauty in regards to African-American women. This commonly propagated perspective is often translated into visual and verbal representation of women in American Media.

The aesthetic physique of African-American women—though not frequently and openly discussed—on occasion, serves as a topic for subtle discourse. In fact, articles written with similar perceptions of the African-American female bodily aesthetics to that of Kanazawa are not uncommon. When the African-American female aesthetic is not being completely dismissed, it is confined to categories that diminish its complexity. As Tracy Patton acknowledges, in the literary world “some historically yet popular reoccurring negative manifestations of African-American beauty include the oversexed
jezebel, tragic mulatto, and mammy figure¹” (Patton). The “mammy figure” though illustrated as motherly, she is not considered beautiful. Her beauty is diminished and her visual appeal is coarse and almost “manly.” The tragic mulatto is subjugated to choose between both racial identities. While she is considered beautiful, her beauty is often only praised as a result of her European features. The oversexed jezebel is considered to be beautiful, but only in a manner that constitutes to fetishism. This categorization of African-American female representation and aesthetics confines those seeking to formulate an understanding of black beauty.

Although a substantial amount of information is provided about the influential factors behind this sociocultural perception of black women and forced confinement to marginalized representation—i.e. European colonization and cultural imperialism—, the logic behind the continued perpetuation of this ideal remains ill-defined. My thesis will attempt to provide an explanation for the continuation of such beauty perception in regards to African-American woman within the black community and investigate any literary form of female rebellion that may have arisen in response to such perceptions. As for now, an outline of my thesis as well as an examination of the research found related to this topic will commence in the subsequent sections of this proposal.

**Structure of Thesis**

¹ The “Mammy Figure” refers to a mythologized character within literature that serves as a mother for white children. She is responsible for raising the children of white women at the expense and neglect of her own. Typical idiosyncrasies include obese, coarse, and maternal. The mammy figure represents a romanticized perception of black women in relation to white women and their children. An example of a “mammy figure” is illustrated in the book (later created into a film) *The Help*. 
The proposed thesis will open with an in-depth discussion about the idealized conception of beauty. Beauty “is subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class” and therefore affects those within the minority who are unable to acquire the physique epitomized by that class (Patton). Therefore, in order to fully comprehend the negative perceptions about African-American female aesthetics being perpetuated and the need for black beauty liberation, a historical background must be established within context of the topic. The introductory portion of the thesis will do just that. After the introduction comes to a close, the paper will be divided into appropriate sections so that the sociocultural perception of African-American bodily aesthetics may be analyzed in an efficient manner. The first section will examine the Aesthetic Physique of the African-American Women, which include: hair, body and, skin complexion. The second section will discuss the environmental factors that influence the continued perpetuation of such views. The third section will investigate differing forms of female rebellion portrayed in response to such perceptions. All of these sections will be analyzed in the context of three particular literary works: *Venus, Their Eyes Were Watching God,* and *God Don’t Like Ugly.*

As art imitates life, these literary authors have taken it upon themselves to illustrate sociopolitical issues through the construction of three invigorating storylines. The expression of oppression at the hands of the patriarchy, implementation of stereotypes, and the blatant encouragement of colorism threaten to break the image of

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2 Colorism is a modern concept given to the idea of skin color discrimination encouraged within the African-American community. The preference of lighter skin as opposed to darker skin tones constitutes to colorism in its contemporary context. The word itself is new, and is used mostly amongst the younger generation of African-American activist against color discrimination and self-hatred.
self for the characters within their stories. It is through deconstruction of self that each character (and reader) is provided with an understanding of self-defined beauty. That being said, these works as well as scholarly written articles will serve as the cornerstones of the thesis.

**Summary of Each Work**

Before diving into the sections of the thesis, a foundation for each story must be provided through brief summarization. The first work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel written by Zora Neale Hurston that follows the life of her main character Janie from a youngster to an adult. Janie is a multiracial individual who was born to her mother as a result of rape. Growing up she embraces an almost imaginative sense of sensuality that is metaphorically represented in the form of a pear tree. Her desire for beauty liberation is confined by not only the men she marries—Logan, Jody, and Tea Cake—but also by her grandmother who instructs her to be practical. Her first husband Logan treats her like a servant girl. Their relationship lacks romance—which is something Janie, idealizes immensely throughout the novel. Her second husband Jody uses her beauty for his own personal gain. He parades her around like a trophy wife in his own scheme to create a delusional world that he projects onto the townspeople of Eatonville. Janie’s last husband Tea Cake is everything she desires. He embraces her romanticized view of sensuality. However, he too falls susceptible to mistreating Janie. The men in her life throughout the novel repeatedly crumble Janie’s original perception of self. It isn’t until the end of the novel; after she is forced to shoot the man she loves the most that she regains the sense of empowerment she originally possessed. This novel will be used as an
example of a woman empowered by her beauty that is subjected to a negative perception of African American Aesthetics at the hands of the black and white community.

Venus is a short play based on the true story of Saarjite Baartman, a woman who was but on display for the purposed of amusement. Mystified by her untraditional body structure, she seen as a caricature. The play strives to reconstruct Baartman’s story and bring to life the abuse she suffered as a result of western imperialism and colonization. Baartman illustrates the sexualized perception of black woman’s beauty. Rather than being appreciated for her body, she is either fetishized or ridiculed. Baartman serves as an example of the marginalization of African-American beauty. Rather than being truly appreciated, such beauty is either criticized or fetishized.

The novel God Don’t Like Ugly by Mary Alice Monroe tells the story of a young girl named Annette who struggling with the idea of beauty. The men in her life also diminish Annette’s physical aesthetics. Her father’s act of abandoning her mother for a white woman influences her perception of self as well as the sexual abuse she is subjected to by Mr. Boatwright. The novel brings to light to deep-rooted conception of color and size discrimination. Annette’s darker skin tone and larger size causes him to suffer much more abuse with both the white and black community. She is often compared to her beautiful mixed raced friend Rhoda, which also reveals the idealization of lighter toned females within the black community. It is not until Mr. Boatwright is murder by Annette’s friend Rhoda that she seems to be able to come to terms with her own sexuality and bodily aesthetics. This novel, like Their Eyes Were Watching God, illustrates the psychological impact men within the black community have on the perception of black female aesthetics.
The Aesthetic Physique of African-American Women

This section will be divided into subsections within the thesis in order to provide a better platform for analysis. The aspects of the African-American woman’s bodily aesthetics—hair, body, and skin complexion—will be the main focus of these subsections. All will be analyzed in context of each respective piece of literature and scholarly articles provided on the topic. For the purposes of this proposal these aspects will be briefly discussed to provide a preview of what would appear in the formal thesis paper.

Arguably, the hair of the African-American woman is a sacred feature seldom appreciated. The attempts to lAME African-American hair tend to outweigh any form of admiration it may receive. Rogers V. American Airlines³ reiterated such attempts when the court ruled it acceptable for employers to prohibit the wearing of braided hairstyles at work. Rogers’ decision to contend her employer’s right to prohibit such styles reemphasizes the unattainable beauty standards implemented by the ruling class. In order to comply with their standards Rogers would have had to alter the biological makeup of her hair and assimilate into a culture that discouraged styles meant to embrace African-American hair.

Even though American Airlines’ act of prohibiting Roger from wearing all braided hair may not have been deemed an act of racial discrimination it dismissed an

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³ This case was taken to court after Rogers filed a lawsuit against American Airlines for wrongful forced resignation. Rogers argued that the company had discriminated against her because of her choice to wear her hair in cornrows. In the end, the court decided to uphold the employers’ right to prohibit such styles. During the trial Rogers mentioned that other employees of the same race were permitted to wear their hair in braids, which complicated her race discrimination lawsuit.
important part of the African-American female aesthetic. Not only do braids serve as a
form of aesthetic expression, they are often the only option for African-American women
seeking to retain the length and health of their hair. During slavery times, the significance
of black hair did not go unnoticed. After “realizing the prominence hair played in the
lives of western Africans, the first thing enslavers did was shave their heads; this was an
unspeakable crimes for Africans, because the people were shorn of their identity”
(Patton). This idea of trying to control, manipulate, and confine black hair is a familiar
theme that is translated into a variety of literary works such as Their Eyes Were Watching
God where Janie’s husband requires her to conceal her hair. Janie’s hair represents
something significant within the story. Not only is her hair long—which is something
considered to be a beauty defining aspect—her hair is not like most African-American
Women. Her hair represented her freedom, beauty, and embodiment of self-proclaimed
power. It also illustrated a collision of two racial identities and the struggle of her to
embrace both without completely neglecting her black beauty. Janie’s husband’s decision
to conceal her hair infringes upon her personal rights to black beauty liberation. A deeper
exploration of this ideal will be discussed further within the formal thesis along with a
discussion of the role hair plays within each literary work previously stated.

According Kanazawa “Black women are on average much heavier than nonblack
women” (Kanazawa). Although he does not claim that having a higher BMI than other
women as the reason behind why “black women are less physically attractive than
nonblack women,” he still stands by the conviction that black women have a lesser
attractive size. The idealization of a thinner frame is a familiar concept within American
popular culture. Saartjie Baartman—from the play *Venus*—exemplifies the influence Eurocentric standards has had on the perception of black bodily aesthetics. The public portrayal “Hottentot Venus” “took on a life of its own and eclipsed the humble and human origins of its possessor stands as stark reminder of the power of mythos. Mythos in the context of cultural domination has been the bane of black people’s existence” (Henderson 948-49). Hottentot spent her life as a spectacle and eventually she ceased to be human. Even after her death her bones and life sized cast remained imprisoned by her possessors. Although the writer of the play *Venus* is American, the main character lived in Europe. Though the character is not directly African-American, her situation is reminiscent of the objectivity objected onto the African American female body. Baartman’s beauty was objectified, in the same way that many African-American women subjected to such oversexed fetishism. The purpose of incorporating Hottentot Venus into the thesis is to establish a foundation upon which the other literary works will be discussed in the context of bodily aesthetics. Hottentot’s dehumanization at the hand of European forces represents the over-sexed image distortion of African-American women, which in turn affect the perception of their bodily aesthetics.

While slenderness was envied by popular culture in the early 1940s and 50s “the urgency for extreme slenderness never resonated in the African American community” (Matelski). This doesn’t mean larger women never encounter any form of discrimination

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4 The term Hottentot was coined by White Europeans to refer to Khoikhoi Africans. Saartjie Baartman is a Khoikhoi descendent, which is one of the reasons her possessors used this term in reference to her. This term is considered to be offensive and belittling, which some assume to be the intention of the original term.
within the African-American community. As a matter of fact, when paired with a darker skin tone, wider set nose, and kinky hair the African-American woman is exposed to more scrutiny than her lighter-skinned sisters. This ideal is explored within the novel *God Don’t Like Ugly*. Annette, a heavyset young girl, is not only susceptible to discrimination from the white community, but within her own community as well. Her perception of self is largely distorted by the perception others project onto her. Compared to Annette, Janie’s lighter-skin and long wavy hair gives her a greater advantage than Annette when it comes to beauty. Unlike Annette, Janie holds a sense of self-love and confidence that intimidates those around her. Janie also does not worship her Eurocentric features in the same way other African-Americans—specifically black males—do. The role that men play in the perception of African-American female bodily aesthetes will be further discussed in the formal thesis. The purpose of dissecting each aspect is so that a proper understanding of the significance of each can be provided.

**Environmental Factors**

In this section of the thesis I will discuss the outside factors that affect the perpetuation of such perceptions. In addition to slavery and the implementation of Eurocentric standards, the perpetuation of stereotypes that surround African American women’s bodily aesthetics are strongly influenced by the men in their lives. As previously mentioned, the men in the novels *God Don’t Like Ugly* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* play heavily impact the way the women view themselves. Although Janie’s character is much more confident than Annette, she too falls susceptible to a
distorting of self at the hands of the patriarchy. The influence of male preference is one hypothesized explanations about the continued perpetuation of such negative and confined views of African-American bodily aesthetics. This in no way assumes that all men are to blame for the continued perpetuations.

The desire to assimilate in order to be considered attractive is another one of the hypothesized explanations for the continued perpetuation of the negative sociocultural view of African-American Women aesthetics. Due to the fact that “beauty cannot be quantified or objectively measured; it is the result of the judgments of others,” the desire to acculturate becomes greater when the ruling class establishes a subjective standard of beauty that could only be attained through assimilation (Patton 30). When individuals start to assimilate, it is argued that a sense of ambivalence towards one’s own culture often arises within those who choose to conform to these subjective standards (Patton). Patton calls this the Lily Complex, which she defines as “altering your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive” (Patton). Though self-hatred is not always the result of assimilation, it is still a possibility. An example of this self-hatred appears in Their Eyes Were Watching God when Mrs. Turner praises Janie because of her European features and encourages her to be thankful that she isn’t fully black. Individuals like Mrs. Turner, who discourage embracing black beauty liberation, also take part in the perpetuation of the negative perception held towards African American women. This will be furthered explored within the formal thesis.

Female Rebellion
This purpose of this particular section is primarily to explore the ways in which females have chosen to rebel against this perception. Janie and Annette both display their own forms of rebellion against the judgment projected onto them in regards to their beauty. Annette chooses to embrace her body size despite the society’s condemnation. Janie defies society by indulging in a nonconventional relationship with the younger man Tea Cake. Janie and Annette’s rebellion will be juxtaposed against other forms of rebellion displayed within this society to analyze the difference and similarities discovered. Each character will be investigated according to their actions after finally freeing themselves from the confining constraints of societal judgments.

In additions, this section will also serve as a platform to discuss future predictions about the standard of beauty held in regards to contemporary African-American women and modern representatives of black beauty. Examples of these women include Lupita Nyong’o, who has graced the cover of several beauty magazines and managed to take on unconventional roles within films. The representation of African American females will also be discussed further in this section.
Bibliography


Parks, Suzan L. *Venus.* 1996.
