

The weave as an 'unhappy' technology of black femininity

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Black women everywhere seem to be in weaves these days. Afua Hirsh (2012) half-jokingly declaims that “the weave has invaded Africa on its march to world domination” while, referring to North America, Cheryl Thompson observes similarly that: “From Oprah to Janet Jackson to Tyra Banks and a slew of others, weaves have become a normative part of Black beauty. More so than ever before, Black women are bombarded with images that have normalised long, straight hair” (2009: 847). Certainly the research that I briefly reference in this standpoint piece, a study of young Nigerian women who dress in what I call “hyper-feminine style” (Dosekun, 2015a), began with my subjective sense of being surrounded, in Lagos, by women in cascading hair extensions. Yet whether in relation to black women in Africa or in the diaspora, feminist and other critical literatures have not caught up with the weave at all. Women’s contemporary hairstyling in Africa is under-researched in general, while in a number of works on black diasporic women and their hair, the weave is considered only as one style among others, in some cases merely listed (e.g. Tate, 2009; Thompson, 2009). The larger concern in these works is on black women straightening or otherwise chemically altering the texture of their hair.

The significant lack of scholarly attention to black women’s weaves does not mean the lack of a certain prior and sedimented mode of seeing the style, however. There is a tendency, scholarly and popular, in Africa and beyond, to see black women’s appearance with hair longer and less ‘kinky’ than ‘nature’ would have it as evidence of a relative racial ‘self-hatred’ and ‘inferiority complex’; as a form of repudiating ‘blackness’ and sign of desiring ‘whiteness.’ For instance, Francis Nyamnjoh and Divine Fuh cite participants on a South African television debate on the topic of “Natural vs Weave” who

contend that black women in weaves “mimic the standards of beauty set by whites, standards which [push] them to seek to distance themselves from their natural black African hair, seen and treated as inferior” (2014: 59). Nadine Sanger additionally frames such debate in the context of South Africa in terms of an oppositional ‘African/Western’ binary, writing that in local adverts for chemical hair straightening products the “racist Western construct of straight hair as beautiful is presented as aspirational for black African women” (2009: 143). Having heard a range of perspectives from black women in Canada on why they use such products and/or wear weaves, including the deeply problematic notion that the look of their hair impacts their employability, Thompson still concludes that such hairstyling practice “stunts any potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred” (2009: 855). Looking at a magazine cover featuring the African-American singer, Diana Ross, posed naked with an extra-long black weave running down her back, bell hooks ‘sees’ that: “The longing that is most visible in this cover is that of the black woman to embody and be encircled by whiteness, personified by the possession of long straight hair” (1992: 71).

Frankly I am *tired* of such analysis. I am *frustrated* with such too-ready and too-simple suppositions that the grip of white supremacy on black feminine subjectivity and psychic life is so totalising that the beauty black women come to desire is ‘*white* beauty.’ The casual recitations of such claims is performative, producing a seeming truth that needs no evidence, support or justification beyond its own assertion, as in the few examples above. I am fully in agreement with Shirley Tate when she critiques it as a “*myth* which still circulates in feminist writings on beauty... that all ‘Black women want to be white’, because white beauty is iconic” (2012: 195, my emphasis). I am not sure if this ‘myth’ grates more when I find it in black or white feminist writings. In the former, it seems almost irresponsible in its simplicity, if only from our own racialised positionalities, black feminists should know that black beauty is deeply complex, and should also know to accord it status and consideration as a thing in itself, not a mere derivative or external imposition. From white feminists, the analysis seems patronising and ultimately self-confirmatory. In either case, the notion that black women want white beauty psychopathologises us as racially damaged and presumes gross delimitations of our capacity for self-reflexivity and agentic self-stylisation, our capacity to take on new styles – also our very right, I would insist. Instead it fixes

and essentialises blackness and its ‘proper’ or ‘authentic’ appearance, thereby disallowing that black beauty is necessarily multiple, fluid, contested and syncretic, including in and for its ability to incorporate white and other beauty norms.

In this short piece I want to join black feminist scholars of black beauty such as Maxine Craig (1997, 2006) and Shirley Tate (2009) to argue that we must complexify and move beyond the analytic claim that black women effectively want white beauty. Because I deem the claim ultimately racist in its presuppositions and effects, my charge here is especially directed at black feminists. By way of reference to the weave, I will briefly outline a new conceptual view of such a hairstyle that neither over-privileges whiteness in black women’s desires for it nor forgets the racist histories and logics that contribute to constituting these desires. In the first place, my argument is that we must allow a style like the weave into blackness, aesthetically, conceptually and politically, not least as it is already here, worn and desired by many a black woman around the world. This is not a naïve, ‘happy’ or merely empiricist argument. Rather it is premised on what I deem the necessary theoretical understanding that blackness, like all other racial categories, is a performative fiction: a political, material and cultural construct that is made and re-made, and thus can and does change, versus an essence that simply is. Following Tate (2009), we can see that by definition a ‘black hairstyle’ is also performative. That is, a black hairstyle is a matter of doing, styling, naming, *making* ‘black.’ Whatever it may comprise or look like, a black hairstyle becomes any that results from the manipulation of that which is itself performatively named and produced as ‘black hair,’ and any located on a body variously and multiply racialised as black. As Tate further adds, such a hairstyle recursively constitutes and signifies blackness too, including when it looks ‘fake’ or ‘unnatural’ for the body to which it belongs, as is a popular critique of the look of black women’s weaves.

That all the above necessarily applies to ‘white hairstyles’ nullifies by rendering incoherent or impossible the notion that certain black styles are mimics or approximations of the former. Within a performative theoretical framework, the so-called ‘original’ is understood to be as performatively constituted and therefore as unfixed and unfixable as its said copy. Thus white hairstyles are also cultural fictions. They are not inherent, necessary or exclusive to whiteness, and nor are they somehow owned by white people.

Rather white hairstyles are a matter of doing – and, quite tellingly, they too can be done through weaves (e.g. see Berry, 2008). As such a performative theoretical view enables us to see past the simplistic notion that black women in weaves are copying or desiring whiteness – an analysis further called into question by the fact that, these days, black women may be wearing or seeking so-called ‘human hair’ from such non-white places as India and Vietnam. Instead we are enabled to see the weave as *a technology of black femininity* meaning a way or style of doing black femininity – and one of very many (Tate, 2009). This opens up our analytic and methodological horizons. It means that rather than presuming to already know what black women in weaves are doing or about, we can and indeed must *enquire* into it, and can and must do so with more nuance and with greater analytic respect for our research subjects.

As I have stated above, I am not seeking here to make a ‘happy’ case for the weave, which I mean in Sara Ahmed’s (2010) critical sense of the happy as that which obscures or forgets or enjoins us to ‘get over’ power and violence. I am also not making a consumerist case for the proliferation of black beauty styles and technologies. Yet happy, apolitical, ‘girly’ consumption was precisely what I heard from the class-privileged young women in Lagos whom I interviewed about their spectacularly feminine dress style (Dosekun, 2015a). As with the other elements of their style – long acrylic nails, heavy and immaculate make-up, false eyelashes, towering high heels and so on – the women embraced and experienced their fabulous weaves as promising spectacular beauty and femininity, and, with and through these happy states, a subjective sense of self-confidence and empowerment. For example, one participant, pseudonymously called Diane, recalled her 21st birthday when she had been wearing a long-desired, especially expensive human hair weave as follows:

Diane: I knew I was looking nice, believe me, cause everybody was telling me I was looking awesome.

Simidele: (*laughs*) Because of the hair or the whole package?

Diane: *No, the hair!* The hair just gives you a different look. It gives you, it gives you. And I think when I look nice, I have this (*pauses*) a different me. I’m so confident.

Simidele: Oh really?

Diane: Like it brings out this different me.

Overall but also in direct relation to their weaves, I argued that my research participants positioned themselves as ‘already empowered’ or ‘postfeminist’ subjects, as happily beyond patriarchy.¹ Thus in my research I conceptualised the weave more specifically as a technology of black *postfeminist* femininity, a conceptual view also suggested by the ubiquity, if not near compulsoriness, of the style in what could be considered exemplary black postfeminist figurations: from Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj to the women on transnationalised reality TV shows such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* to African celebrities such as Dencia and Tiwa Savage. But while the Lagos women with whom I spoke expressly celebrated their weaves, as well as insisting on their consumerist right to the style, there was an undercurrent of ambivalence and melancholy in the women’s positions, a wish that things might be otherwise. Consider the rather rueful words of Folake:

I wish – if I had longer hair, maybe I’d stopping doing all of this [i.e. wearing weaves a lot], cause I’ve got really thin hair, I’ve got thin but long hair, but what I really like, what I would *really* want is a really, I would like my hair to be fuller. Fuller and longer. And then maybe I’d carry [i.e. wear] my natural hair more often.

As we hear in this quote, part of the happy promise of the weave was to solve one’s putative ‘hair problem,’ in Folake’s case the problem of too-thin-not-quite-long-enough hair. Yet as I heard it in the sum of the 18 interviews that I conducted in Lagos, the hair problem was, of course, not merely personal or idiosyncratic. To the contrary it was deeply structural, historical, and shared, and effectively taken for granted. The problem was *racial*. The problem was ‘natural black hair.’

In its very promise to solve this so-called problem, the weave in fact expanded and exacerbated it. The fact of the weave expanded the category of ‘natural black hair’ to encompass both chemically unprocessed and processed hair. In other words, next to the weave, the natural became the hair that had grown from one’s head, regardless of what was subsequently done to it. The putative deficiency of such hair was then exacerbated by the new standard of the weave, that is, in comparison to the fetishised look, feel and experience of wearing a long, full head of extensions. We can hear this logic of comparative natural deficiency in Folake’s remarks above, as well as an additional sense of self-alienation in another participant’s comment that, when not wearing the weaves to which she was increasingly accustomed, she felt that her own hair (chemically processed) looked “too *flat*... [and] so *strange*.”

For my research participants, young, fashion-conscious, educated career women in Lagos, the weave represented the most spectacular standard for doing black femininity and beauty. Hence the women positioned themselves as happily doing weaves. But as I have briefly shown, it was far from all happiness because the women's views of the weave and deeply felt preferences for it were premised on and continued what we might call '*unhappy*' histories of black hair. Ahmed theorises "unhappy objects" as those that "embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness" (2010: 159). With this, we can understand the weave as a most unhappy object for black women, understanding, though, that this does not render it any less a performative technology of black femininity but rather enters precisely and fundamentally into this performativity and all it promises.

My standpoint, then, is to conceptualise the weave as an unhappy technology of black femininity. This standpoint allows us much. It allows us to admit the weave into black femininity; to depathologise and de-psychologise its place there; to decentre whiteness from this aspect of black women's beauty practice; but, in all the foregoing, to not forget or wish away the fact that race is both founded in and a form of structural and symbolic violence. Understanding the weave as an unhappy black technology allows us to keep white supremacy firmly in view yet without reducing blackness and black subjectivity to it. It allows us to remember the much less than happy histories that render such a hairstyle especially desirable for many black women, but not collapse the present into this past or simply equate the two. Thus, most importantly, what the new conceptual view that I am proposing here allows is analytic recognition of and respect for the complexities of the fact that, as subjects who variously desire 'beauty' and style ourselves to achieve it, black women do so in a world certainly not of our choosing.

Endnotes

- 1 See Dosekun 2015b for my argument about how and why it is possible to think in terms of 'postfeminism' in such a place as Nigeria.

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