

**STRAIGHT HAIR, BROWN SKIN, AND A KILLA' SHAPE:  
BEAUTY STANDARDS FOR YOUNG BLACK GIRLS**

**A senior thesis presented**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

My goal in conducting this research is to include black adolescent women in the discourse on body image, respond to the shortcomings of the literature and research attempting to speak on behalf of black adolescent women, and empower black adolescent women to address and complicate these prevailing misconceptions by encouraging them to speak on their own behalf.

Although I cannot speak on behalf of all black women, based on the research that I conducted with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade young black girls participating in “Girl Talk”, I found that there is a recognizable standard of beauty that young black girls desire to live up to. The girls identified straight, long, flowy hair, medium skin, and a curvy but skinny shape as an approved template for attaining beauty. On the other hand, the girls felt insecure when they did not have their hair done, were poorly dressed, or felt that their skin was too dark.

As the girls actively negotiated black womanhood, they remained both connected and disconnected to a legacy that preceded them. The issues that the girls were facing such as a desire for agency, self-definition, inclusion and mobility were very similar to the desires of black women in the past. As the girls navigated beauty ideals, their awareness of the battle they were simultaneously fighting against racism (and the extent to which their social norms have been intoxicated with white ideals) remained vastly underdeveloped.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

**“There just isn’t a black standard of beauty to live up to”**

- Mikki Taylor, beauty director at Essence Magazine (1980- 2010)

My interest in writing a senior thesis was triggered by a quote from Mikki Taylor, reigning Beauty and Cover Director of ESSENCE magazine, a publication designed to exclusively cater to African American women, from 1980-2010. Within an article titled, *Black Women Ignore Many of Media’s Beauty Ideals*, Taylor makes the following claim, "There just isn't a black standard of beauty to live up to" (Smith 2004). Taylor continues, "We celebrate our uniqueness, whether it's different skin hues, or different hair. Unlike mainstream culture, there is no one standard that is going to make us feel inferior" (Smith 2004).

Taylor’s statement argues that black women do not feel pressure to look a particular way or live up to an approved model. I find it difficult to believe that black women do not experience pressure to change or conform to a beauty standard, especially considering the images and content produced through media outlets such as television and the Internet. The belief that black women do not experience anxiety about how they should look can only exist as a result of oversimplifying what it means to be a black woman.

As white feminism and white feminist literature remain at the forefront of efforts to understand and abolish the oppressive ideology of beauty and appearance, the exclusion or oversimplification of the experience of black women is not a new phenomenon (Lovejoy 2001). Research and literature that manages to include the experience of black women, still fails to properly provide a voice for black women to tell their story and express their grief. There are two primary reasons for this dearth of representation. First, the majority of researchers fail to understand and account for cultural differences that exist between white Americans and black Americans living in the United States. With white Americans as the oppressor and black Americans as the oppressed, different cultural values and standards have emerged for each community. Failing to understand the difference between the dominant narrative of white Americans and the counter-narrative of black Americans results in a failure to understand why explanations for one group are not simply transferable to the other. For example, the discussion of body image in relation to white women generally yields the consideration of weight, exclusively. However, Anne Marie Witkege's qualitative study of body image in relation to black women yields the inclusion of topics such as hair, shape, complexion, and phenotypic features, in addition to weight (Witkege 1996).

Researchers who fail to realize that body image can be defined differently based on the ethnicity or cultural identity often miscalculate the relationship between respondents and the issue at hand. For example, because an alarming level of concern about weight, specifically, has not been detected within the black community, African American women are repeatedly misunderstood as being less vulnerable and less relevant

in conversations of body dissatisfaction than white women (Molloy, Herzberger 1998; DeBraganza, Hausenblas 2010).

Secondly, black women have remained misunderstood and misrepresented within body image discourse due to the disproportionate number of researchers choosing to conduct comparative studies. Concomitant with the proliferation of comparative studies comes a deficit of scholarship that studies and evaluates the black female community, exclusively. Seeking to understand the sentiments of the black community, only in relation to sentiments expressed by the white community, means that the black experience only manages to be defined and explained to match the extent to which the white experience can be articulated. What is overlooked is the fact that certain issues are culturally relevant to the black community specifically and need to be explored separately as the primary focus of research, not as a subordinate subcategory to a larger argument.

After realizing the extent to which black women, and more specifically black adolescent women, are deprived of a space and opportunity to formally express their views and opinions on appearance and beauty, reconciling this disparity became a priority of mine. Because self-definition has a lot to do with self-image and self-esteem, it becomes important to truly understand the significance of body image and beauty to Black adolescent women. My desire is to answer the following questions regarding Black adolescent women: How do they think others view them? What do they love about themselves? What do they think other people love about them? How do they feel about their skin, hair, and size? Do they think they fit in? When do they feel the prettiest? When do they feel the most confident? What does it mean to be beautiful? What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be female?



My goal in conducting this research is to include black adolescent women in the discourse on body image, respond to the shortcomings of the literature and research attempting to speak on behalf of black adolescent women, and empower black adolescent women to address and complicate these prevailing misconceptions by encouraging them to speak on their own behalf.

Ultimately, my research was led by my desire to assess the validity of Mikki Taylor's statement. What I found was that although I cannot speak on behalf of all black women, based on the girls participating in Girl Talk, there is a recognizable standard that young black girls desire to live up to. The girls identified straight, long, flowy hair, medium skin, and a curvy but skinny shape as an approved template for attaining beauty. This means that the girls have reached a consensus about what is acceptable and unacceptable. In terms of what is unacceptable, the girls feel insecure when they do not have their hair done, are poorly dressed, or feel that their skin is too dark. There is a black standard of beauty although it can appear very informal compared to the concrete nature of white ideals.

Although the girls are ultimately using both black standards and white ideals to define their sense of beauty, none of them aimed to personify whiteness, meaning they did not want to be classified as White, and they rarely identified the opinion of the white community as something they were concerned about. The girls often compared their behaviors to behaviors they felt were characteristic of the white community. They often made strong 'cultural' distinctions between Black and White as if the two identities were binary and drastically unrelated. Although people classified as White were used as a point of comparison, the girls failed to realize that they were actually reacting to white ideals

and experiencing a tension between the dominance of white ideals and their personal desire for self-definition outside of white norms. As the girls actively negotiate black womanhood, they are simultaneously connected and disconnected to the legacy that precedes them. The issues that these girls are facing such as a desire for agency, self-definition, inclusion and mobility are very similar to the desires of black women in the past. However, the awareness that these girls have of the battle they are fighting against racism (and the extent to which their social norms have been intoxicated with white ideals) is vastly underdeveloped.

Contrary to my belief that young black girls desire characteristics such as straight hair and lighter skin because they exclusively appreciate white ideals, I found that black girls' interest in trends that may build on white ideals denotes neither a desire to identify as a White person, nor a desire to disidentify as a Black person. Allegiance to certain trends should not be interpreted as an indication of racial pride. My research demonstrates that the racialization of certain trends and ideals has decreased over time, and will continue to decrease over time.

This research is important, first and foremost, because black adolescent women deserve to be heard and properly understood. Secondly, if there does exist anxiety and a sense of insecurity surrounding the pressure to feel beautiful, it is important to understand whether such pressure is perpetuated through the historical baggage of America's racial caste system or whether it is generated by a contemporary context independent of America's racial history. Third, understanding the impact of such standards may encourage communities to find ways to uplift and possibly eliminate pressures to conform to an "approved model." Understanding how black adolescent women perceive

these approved models can reveal how threatening such standards are to society and a young woman's sense of self. My research needs to be considered by parents, overseers of middle school environments, extracurricular activities, anyone in a position to monitor the development of black adolescent women, and anyone that plays an influential role as black adolescent women strive to find or establish their priorities and identity. If we fail to recognize the struggle that often ensues between 'ideal' and reality, we may fail to understand the extent to which the emotional security and sense of self worth of black adolescent women remain at stake.

The construction of focus groups with 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade adolescent women attending Durham public schools became my primary tool for conducting research. Based on my history of mentoring and working with middle school guidance counselors throughout Durham, I chose to limit my focus groups to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. It is typical for 13 year olds to be in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade and for 14 year olds to be in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade, depending on when their birthday falls. Research has shown that between the ages of 13 and 14 it is hardest for adolescents to differentiate between real and ideal (Naigle 2004).

"Girl Talk" was the name of the focus group experience where I recruited the participation of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls living in Durham, North Carolina. A design point of the group was to provide participants with the opportunity to meet and discuss their concept of self, ideal of beauty, and the confidence that they have in who they are and the way they look. There were a total of 4 different focus groups: 2 different focus groups consisting of 7<sup>th</sup> graders at Durham School of the Arts, 1 focus group consisting of 8<sup>th</sup> graders at Durham School of the Arts, and 1 focus group consisting of 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders

at the Emily Krzyzewski Center, also located in Durham. From October to December, I organized and conducted “Girl Talk” sessions with focus groups consisting of 8-10 girls that met for a total of 6 sessions.

I chose Durham School of the Arts (DSA) as my first field site partly because of its proximity to Duke’s campus but largely because it is a secondary magnet school. Different from traditional local public schools, where students attend based on school districting, the only way to enroll into DSA is through the school lottery. As a result, the students attending Durham School of the Arts hail from all over Durham and represent a blending of multiple demographics. The Emily Krzyzewski center became my second field site. Also known as the Emily K Center, it serves as an after-school facility with the following mission: “to inspire economically disadvantaged students to dream big, strive for excellence in school and life, build strong character, and reach their highest potential as our future generation of citizen leaders.” Students attending the Emily K Center include residents from all over Durham who attend a variety of schools throughout the Durham area.

In choosing these two locations as field sites I was hoping to access and evaluate a community of students as diverse as possible. Another important factor in my decision to approach DSA and Emily K as my field sites was the fact that I had a standing relationship with both programs. Serving as President of The Girls’ Club (TGC), a Duke student group aiming to connect middle school girls in Durham with a female Duke student, I had approached both DSA and Emily K approximately one year earlier to recruit students for TGC. Trusting my ability to create a productive and appropriate

learning environment for middle school girls, both DSA and Emily K were extremely receptive to my proposal for “Girl Talk.”

My recruitment efforts at DSA primarily consisted of passing out flyers in the cafeteria during lunch time. There were two flyers, both consisting of questions and statements collaged to take up half of an 8½” by 11” sheet of computer paper. The first flyer included the following: “Are stereotypes about Black females true?”, “What are your favorite TV shows?”, “Talk about fashion- hair, clothes, shoes”, “Discuss the issues affecting Black females”, “Meet new people”, “What is body image? Is it important?” The second flyer replaced the question “Are stereotypes about Black females true?” with “Is beauty skin deep?” and replaced the statement “Talk about fashion-hair, clothes, and shoes” with “What opinions do you have about beauty?” There were no images on the flyer, simply black text on white paper. I did, however, write each line in a different font to make the appearance of the flyer more exciting and inviting. In addition to flyers being distributed, I sat at a small round table in the back of the cafeteria where black female students could approach the table and learn about what the focus group would seek to accomplish. If students were interested they could leave their name and grade on a sign up sheet. Recruiting at the Emily K Center simply consisted of sending information home to parents and allowing students to sign up once they had received their parents’ consent. Because the number of students attending the Emily K Center represents a fraction of the number of students attending DSA, there were a much smaller number of students who qualified to participate in Girl Talk, making the process of identifying potential participants substantially less unpredictable.

Although participant observation is a common strategy for conducting field work, focus groups were an extremely important aspect of how I wanted to conduct my research. It did not make much sense for me to try and speak on behalf of black adolescent women without first allowing them to speak on behalf of themselves. Even as a young black woman, less than 10 years removed from the reality that 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders currently face, I felt that my personal evaluation of today's youth, in the absence of their voice, could easily have been another misreading, just as presumptuous as the ones that came before me. As I conducted this research, it was my goal to remain steadfastly devoted to uncovering and amplifying the voice and views of these young women.

The research I conducted yielded several findings. The first ethnographic chapter, titled, "My Hair is My Beauty" will discuss the impact of hair on the Black adolescent woman. Hair was the aspect of presentation and beauty that the girls were most concerned with. It was not the sole determinant of body image and self esteem but the girls often described hair as a major element of feeling beautiful. Having a good hair day meant attaining the ideal hair style of straight hair that is laying down instead of sticking up, silky instead of frizzy, flowy instead of nappy and long instead of short. The label often given to describe ideal hair was 'white girl hair', considered to be synonymous with pretty hair. The word 'nappy' was used to describe hair that failed to look like 'white girl hair' and was therefore ugly. Overall, the girls' concept of what constituted pretty hair was not very flexible.

The second ethnographic chapter, titled, "Because It Brings Men" discusses feelings towards weight, size, shape, and dress. Although four components of body satisfaction were identified, the girls did not seem to expect or anticipate that they would

attain all four ideals at once. Furthermore, one aspect of body could redeem and balance out another. For example, not having a figure could be offset by someone proving to be a good dresser; weighing more than others could be offset by having a shape that was considered curvy and proportional. All of the girls demonstrated a strong degree of self-acceptance in spite of perceived imperfections. Although when discussing weight some girls entertained ideas of body manipulation, such as starvation and bulimia, never did their lifestyle seem to revolve around their desire to attain a certain physique. Each girl seemed to idealize a different combination of these four elements; however, dress was one factor that seemed universally non-negotiable. Having a sense of style, often expressed through acquiring certain brands, proved to be very important. Strong distinctions were made in terms of how black girls can dress and white girls cannot.

The third and final ethnographic chapter, titled, “The Darker the Berry”, discusses the social meaning of skin tone and its ability to influence the lives of Black adolescent women. Skin tone proved to be an issue for some and not others. Girls with darker skin seemed most dissatisfied with their skin tone although girls with lighter skin also expressed a degree of dissatisfaction. Those possessing a medium brown skin tone seemed least concerned about the meaning of their skin tone. Although negative comments were made with regard to light skin and dark skin, there was an absence of criticism with regard to medium skin tones. Although none of the girls expressed a desire to have white skin and most were comfortable with being ‘black’, many of the girls were turned off by skin that they felt was extremely dark and frequently disassociated with it. Girls with medium skin tone felt entitled to exaggerate the darkness of people darker than

them and often singled-out boys and girls with darker skin tone through derogatory name calling.

Ultimately, Girl Talk served as a platform for discussing the contemporary social norms (some directly relating to beauty and others seemingly tangential and unrelated) for young black women and understanding where they come from. Weaved within these discussions on beauty, the girls are also responding to issues of socioeconomic class, the role of the black mother, perceptions about race, and contemporary youth culture.

The history chapter, “Understanding Black Womanhood”, will provide an important context for understanding black womanhood and how black women and beauty ideals continue to come into contact with each other over time.



## **Chapter Two: Understanding Black Womanhood**

**“An African American female’s mother provides on-the-job training for Black womanhood”**

- Turnage (2004:160)

This project works to understand how beauty ideals impact the lives of 12 and 13 year old black girls in Durham. However, before evaluating their thoughts and opinions regarding beauty, it is worth observing the attitudes towards beauty that preceded them. This chapter will elaborate on the binary relationships that have defined the agency of black women in American society, discuss the social hierarchies that black women are unavoidably reacting to, and illustrate the dilemma that black women face as they react to the pervasiveness of the white beauty ideal. This chapter will also acknowledge the social influences that impact black women and their outlook towards beauty. These relationships and ideas are important to consider because they impact the domain that 12 and 13 year old young black girls inherit today.

Young, black, southern American girls today are the outcome of a cultural narrative and racial identity that began when the British brought slaves to the North American colonies in 1619. When examining the racial history that impacts these young black girls, the details of slavery and plantation life are less relevant than one’s understanding of the “binary thinking” that justified the institution of slavery as a whole (Hill Collins 2000:70). Patricia Hill Collins argues that binary thinking or thinking where

“difference is defined in oppositional terms” automatically results in a relationship where one half is objectified by the other half. Due to binary thinking, slavery was accepted as a space for black people to be objectified, exploited and abused by white people and resulted in the conditioning of black people to function as an “Other”; inferior to white people (Hill Collins 2000:70). In addition to a racial binary where White is superior to Black, there was a gender binary where male was superior to female. The patriarchal nature of American society further oppressed black women (Hill Collins 2000:71). The ways in which “binary thinking shapes understandings of human difference” are important to consider when dissecting history but also when evaluating young black girls today and their ability to relate to American society and all of the echelons that it contains (Hill Collins 2000:71).

As a result of existing within multiple binaries, black women are fundamentally enslaved within a racial and gender hierarchy. As a result of these relationships, black women have historically functioned within a space that was oppressed and unequal to those occupying the counterpoint of their binary. Because of this, the experience of black women in America, including young black girls’ today, has remained distinctly unique from women and men of other races. Black women have remained in a position where they have had no choice but to react the norms and ideals determined by the white society.

Because these binaries depend on a relationship where the agency of one half is reliant on the agency of the other, it has been impossible for black women to completely escape this position of subordination. Although black women exercise a culture of resistance, the position of the black woman as an Other has been important for white

society to maintain. The disempowerment of black women considered to be the Other results in the empowerment of white society as the manipulator (Hill Collins 2000:70).

In order to continue the suppression of black women and preserve a social order where White is understood to be ideal and superior, white people have allowed the image and character of black women to become perverted and distorted through stereotypes. Stereotyping became a tool for situating the concept of the black woman within public imagination in a way that would reduce black women to objects, never worthy of anything beyond the lowest class order. According to Hazel Carby, stereotypes don't aim to "reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations" (Hill Collins 2000:69). A series of labels emerged as a method of misconstruing black women. Historically, labels such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire were established as controlling images that limited the ways in which the public could conceptualize what it mean to be a black woman (Hill Collins 2000). Today, this culture of labeling persists and has resulted in titling black women as a "Welfare Queen" and "Angry Black Woman", among other things. (Hill Collins 2000:69; Kretsedemas 2010:151). According to Hill Collins, "Controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Hill Collins 2000:69). Once solidified as the Other of American society, black women were considered to be deserving of the oppression that they experienced. Ultimately, by insisting that black women fit into stereotypes such as the Mammy and the Jezebel and projecting onto black women characteristics such as being asexual or oversexual, onlookers are encouraged to rely on distorted and inaccurate

oversimplifications of black women as a method of actually understanding them (Hill Collins 2000:69).

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, black women began to take matters into their own hands in terms of communicating their worth to society. No longer confined to fields and plantations, Black women sought to find their place in society. This push for respectability insisted that black women reject “the stereotypes of scientific racism through insisting on a common ground of morals shared by blacks and whites” (Klassen 2004:51). Ultimately, these “politics of respectability” aimed to disprove the popular belief that “no black woman, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character” could attain “the status of a lady” (Klassen 2004:43). Determined to dispute this racist claim, African American women were charged to refine their individual behavior and leverage public appearances as opportunities to refute degrading stereotypes and discriminatory practices (Klassen 2004:51).

The purpose of reforming one’s individual behavior was to lead other black people toward ‘respectability’, and to convince the white community that black people were compatible with mainstream society and therefore worthy of inclusion (Harris 213). Through the strategy of appearing respectable, black people expected to experience more privilege, opportunity, and inclusion.

There were, however, mixed opinions regarding the approach black women would utilize in their efforts to maximize their newfound freedom. Two dominant but polar philosophies emerged. Either, black women could push to expand the boundaries of black womanhood by appealing to white society for inclusion into mainstream American

culture, or black women could embrace separatism such that all white ideals would become silly and irrelevant. The question became: to what extent are efforts for respectability “a strategic move for the future of the race” versus the “fetishizing” of whiteness oriented towards affectation (Klassen 2004:64).

The question black women faced in terms of how to attain power and control despite racism and sexism has yet to disappear. Meanwhile, the desire of black women for agency, equality, and inclusion remains. Beauty has been understood as an important tool for gaining inclusion (Wolf 2002).

Historically, social worth and societal value have been assigned based on one’s physical proximity to whiteness, the appearance of being White. Today, stigmas attached to hair, skin tone, and weight do not appear to be formally dictated through white people interpreting the social meaning of America’s racial caste system, but instead seem to relate more to how members of the black community have chosen, on their own accord, to assign value to appearance and aesthetic appeal. Ultimately, however, black women’s standards for beauty have been informed and influence by white beauty ideals, which function as the precedent that black women are forced to react to. The process of negotiating which ideal is better, that which belongs to mainstream culture versus counter culture, is an ongoing process impacted by a woman’s social influences. Moving forward, this chapter will discuss various social influences that have historically affected black women’s concept of beauty.

## **Motherhood**

Young black girls today are inevitably a part of the history and legacy that have been discussed. It is their mothers and grandmothers who remained committed to achieving a degree of inclusion and social mobility that would allow their children to experience a reality more charmed than their own. The girls that I spoke with for my research are undoubtedly the benefactors of the social progress that the black women before them have managed to make over time. However, though they experience more privilege and inclusion than the black women before them, the girls are not excused from bearing the brunt of black womanhood. They have not been entirely delivered from the baggage associated with being a black woman in America.

According to Barbara Turnage (2004), an understanding of how to navigate the reality of being a black woman is often bestowed on young black girls by their mothers. Turnage explains, “The African American mother can serve as a catalyst for growth when she prepares her daughter to address the harm that can result when African features are devalued and ridiculed” (Turnage 2004:157; Johnson 2004; Davis 2008). Often times black mothers wish to shield and protect their daughters from painful prejudices that they personally endured. It is this desire that becomes a defining aspect of a black woman’s approach to motherhood. It is believed that by preventing the wounding that results from “ethnic-oriented gender-based discrimination” and the potential scarring that can follow, mothers are providing their daughters with an opportunity to experience higher self esteem (Turnage 2004:157).

Although white women often engage media influences as their primary point of reference when trying to negotiate beauty ideals, black women often depend on their mothers and immediate peers to help sort through images and ideas of womanhood (Turnage 2004:158; Parker 1995). As a consequence, white women often buy into broad beauty ideals that have been standardized across regions and countries through social outlets such as television, Internet, and other publications. Meanwhile, black women maintain a more local concept of beauty ideals where boundaries are dictated by the thoughts, opinions, and influences of the people they trust. Turnage's research proves that young black girls place an enormous amount of trust in their mothers to assist them through the process of learning to assert their individuality and identity (Turnage 2004). A mother can have multiple impacts on her daughter: she can provide "positive and obtainable images of womanhood" (Turnage 2004:158) or instill an attitude that allows her to overcome adversity and remain assertive and independent in spite of prejudice and discrimination (Hill Collins 2000:185). Ultimately, the mother plays a critical role in whether or not, and to what extent, daughters are taught to "fit into systems of oppression" (Turnage 2004:159). This means that it is through the guidance of a mother, that young black girls learn how to either function within or in spite of the Black/White binary as well as the male/female binary. "An African American female's mother provides on-the-job training for Black womanhood" (Turnage 2004:160).

In her book *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, Noliwe Rooks tell her story of desiring straight hair and the ways in which her mother and grandmother influenced her decision to have it. The year was 1976 and she was thirteen years old. According to Rooks's mother, straightening her hair called into

question her ancestry, self esteem, beliefs, and identity in relation to larger society (Rooks 1996:3). Rooks' grandmother however, felt very differently and endorsed her desire to have straight hair. Her grandmother believed that "straightening [her] hair would give [her] an advantage in the world. It was one less battle that would have to be fought" (Rooks 1996:4). For Rooks' grandmother, "hair spoke to acceptance from a certain class of African Americans but had relatively little to do with white supremacy, Africa, or self esteem" (Rooks 1996:4). Ultimately, Rooks felt conflicted, explaining that "whereas neither road led to a desire for whiteness or white culture, both routes led to very specific assumptions about [her] place in relation to other African Americans" (Rooks 1996:6). The opinions of her mother and grandmother were very salient and memorable as she worked toward reaching a decision.

### **Society at Large**

Although mothers do play an influential role in crafting the outlook and experiences that young girls are expected to have, society as a whole also plays a role in dictating the behaviors and reactions of black women toward beauty and what they believe beauty to be.

Tracy Owens Patton, author of *Am I More Than My Hair?*, confirms a reality that was discussed earlier; that "the black woman had not failed to be aware of America's standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it" (Patton 2006:26). Labeled by white America as the antithesis of beauty, many black women had internalized the idea that their 'kinky', 'wooly' hair was ugly and undesirable. According to Sinclair,



“Blacks were taught that dark skin and kinky hair were ugly and inferior to Caucasian attributes; some were even taught that nappy hair was a punishment from God” (Davis 2001:32). White society lacked tolerance and appreciation for black women and their unprocessed hair. Although, black women during slavery lacked the tools and the time for grooming, white society often referred to the kinkiness of black hair as a defect that needed to be fixed (Walker 2007:9). To some, black female hair was considered “so unsightly” that a “mid-1800s city ordinance in New Orleans required black females to cover their “coilly” hair with a kerchief or tignon when out in public” (Davis 2001:32). Such policies and attitudes socialized black women to reject the natural texture and appearance of their hair (Johnson 2004). Conceding to beliefs that kinky hair was repulsive and unacceptable, black women understood Caucasian hair to be the ideal alternative.

As early as 1905, Madam CJ Walker began providing women with a beauty system designed to produce hair that represented the epitome of refinement and respectability. Claiming that her “Wonderful Hair Grower” had the power to transform the hair of black women and anointing herself the guru of hair care, Madam CJ Walker popularized the use of the heated metal comb and hair styles such as the press and curl and invented beauty regimes such as the application of vegetable oil and other products to combat dandruff and achieve cleanliness (Rooks 1996:56).

Now given a choice between natural, untreated hair and straightened, treated hair, most black women opted for the latter. Although Walker’s services were marketed as a form of racial uplift, they were actually responding to the disapproval expressed by the white community. Preoccupied with politics of respectability, a strategy that encouraged

black people to reform and refine their public appearance and behavior as a method of appealing to white interests, black women embraced the opportunity to attain hair that appeared styled and presentable. Their motive, however, was largely the disapproval from white society and the social exclusion that black women experienced because of it.

Similar to the public disapproval expressed in the 1800s, in the 1980s white society once again curtailed opportunities for black women to wear their natural, unprocessed hair. Unhappy with the deviance from white ideals, companies and employers such as corporate and government institutions, began limiting employment opportunities based on the candidate's hair style and texture (Davis 2001:35; Johnson 2004). The military for example, developed an anti-braid policy and "several women were fired or threatened with dismissal for wearing braids or cornrows to work" (Davis 2001:35). In response to this discrimination, there was a resurgence of relaxed hair that began in the 1980s, strengthened in the 1990s and still continues today (Davis 2001:36).

Other beauty ideals, such as skin tone, have largely remained uncontested due to their approval and endorsement by white society. Particularly in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, America was racially stratified such that opinions about hair and skin tone could often go hand in hand. If a woman had kinky hair, she more than likely had darker skin, confirming African ancestry. If a woman had wavy hair, she more than likely had lighter skin, confirming mixed ancestry. Mixed persons, also known as mulattos, legally considered Black because of the one-drop rule, were a product of a white person, usually the man, and a black person, usually the woman. Mulattoes often had lighter eyes, long wavy hair, and a lighter skin tone. The social hierarchy constructed such that white people were superior and received the most access and privilege, also rewarded mixed

people for their proximity to the white beauty ideal, while black people occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder. The darker you were, the further you were from the white ideal and the less privilege you deserved. Ultimately, this system was designed to correspond with societal beliefs that black people were “barbaric, savage, heathen, and ugly” while white people were “civilized, modern, Christian, and beautiful” (Hunter 1998:519). Eventually “dark brown skin, kinky hair, and wide noses *themselves* started to represent barbarism and ugliness” (Hunter 1998:519). Receiving advantages such as employment and education opportunities ultimately placed lighter skinned black people on a socio-economic trajectory superior to darker black people (Pearson-Trammell 2010).

Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, light skin became solidified as a social indicator of privilege and success. Studies conducted by Clark and Clark (1940), Seeman (1946), and Williams (1964) all confirmed, with various age groups and at different points in time, that within the black community light skin was valued over dark skin (Hughes, Hertel 1990). Although sentiments began to change throughout the black power movement, such that Goering found that white became a less desirable skin color, more black people were self identifying as ‘dark’ instead of ‘brown’, medium skin emerged as ideal, and there was an acceptance of a wider range of skin hues, research conducted by Thompson and Keith in 2001 revealed to many, light skin was still preferred. More specifically, light skin was linked to “popularity, professional status, and a desirable marriage” (Thompson, Keith 2001:340). According to Hunter, as of 1980s, “The occupational advantage that light skin has for African Americans is similar to the advantage that white skin brings to Europeans Americans in the job market” (Hunter 1998:531). According to Thompson and Keith, the only time skin color was a negligible

factor in a black woman's life was once she had achieved higher socioeconomic status (Thompson, Keith 2001:353).

Although progress has been made in terms of leveling the playing field between light and dark, for instance, Wade as of 1996 conducted research showing that "fair-skinned females' and dark-skinned females' self-rating of sexual attractiveness did not differ", the approval of white society of lighter skin has allowed it to remain desirable and ideal within the black community since the institution of slavery (Wade 1996:366).

The pursuit of beauty results from recognition of appearance as a tool for agency, but also expression. Accomplishing agency through beauty means gaining privilege and inclusion through appearance. Accomplishing expression through beauty means demonstrating one's allegiance to a certain culture or identity, which often evokes a strong sense of self-definition, by allowing community norms or values to dictate one's presentation. There often exists a tension between the former and the latter because agency is understood to be awarded by those occupying the most power, often the mainstream or majority, while self-definition is often understood to be accomplished by operating outside of the majority-oriented mainstream.

Black women often experience this tension when trying to decide on standards to embrace and ideals to pursue. For example, the politics of respectability, encouraged black women to adopt white beauty ideals as a means of gaining acceptance and inclusion into mainstream society. This strategy was embraced by women wishing to be recognized as ladies and desiring to be recognized as constituents of womanhood. During a time when most black women were aware of harsh sentiments about 'black beauty',

advertisements featuring phrases such as “Glorifying Our Womanhood“, “What a Change a Few Years Make” and “You, too, may be a fascinating beauty”, began to attach “deep emotional and social meaning to female appearance” (Walker 2007:42,34,49).

However, in resistance and opposition, social activists of intellectuals such as Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington criticized the act of straightening of hair as an attempt to emulate white people and elevate white standards of appearance (Sherrow 2006:187). Other opponents to hair straightening viewed the practice as “symbolic of racial oppression and a manifestation of self-hatred” (Davis 2001:33). Responding to the tension between polishing and improving versus conforming and disowning, pioneers such as Madam CJ Walker recontextualized the meaning of hair altogether, “shifting the significance of African American women’s bodies in advertising discourses from concerns with the dominant culture’s ideologies of beauty, upward mobility, and social acceptance and toward concerns with healthy, versatility of styling, hair length, and economic well-being” (Rooks 1996:42). Although this shift in thinking was ultimately successful, the fact that a shift was even necessary speaks to the tension that existed between various viewpoints within the black community.

Similar tension existed during America’s transition from the civil rights era to the post civil rights era. The Black Power movement served to upset white supremacy while instilling a sense of racial pride within the black community. What this social movement did with slogans such as ‘Black is Beautiful’ was work to ‘intervene in and alter those racist stereotypes that had always insisted black was ugly, monstrous, undesirable” (Patton 2006:12). Although many black women had embraced their ability to reclaim their heritage and express themselves independent of white beauty ideals, other black women

retained their straight hair and remained aesthetically unaffected by Black Nationalism (Walker 2007; Pearson-Trammell 2010).

This tension continues to occur because of how black men and women are positioned within society. This tension will always exist, as long as the racial binary remains. Considering how pervasive white ideals have become, it can be challenging to recognize what a counter ideal looks like. Counter ideals are generated outside of mainstream dominant ideals. As white society is often responsible for formulating dominant ideas, it is generally nonwhites who are responsible for producing counter ideals.

For example, although “white women emphasized a lean and athletic look as most attractive” (Allan 1993:330), black girls participating in Boyington’s study felt that “being skinny” was not in their best interest (Boyington 2008:3). According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, “Many African-American women know that *the most respected physical image of black women, within and outside of the community, is that of the large woman*” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003:114). Excess weight proves to be understood differently in the white versus the black community (Botta 2000; Parker 1995). According to Williamson (1998) “what may distinguish Black from white women is not their different levels of preoccupation with a culture of thinness, but their expression of trauma and powerlessness in distinct, culturally influenced manners” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2003:118). According to Beauboeuf-Lafontant, different cultural understandings of weight and size lead black women to strive for ideals unrelated to those of white women. For example, in the black community, ‘healthy’ is a slang word that can be used to describe woman with some meat on her, maybe 10 or 15 pounds overweight”

(Allan 1993:329). Being 15 pounds overweight doesn't disqualify a woman as attractive but is embraced and appreciated as good.

## **Implications**

Ultimately, appearance began to function as a gauge that could be used to measure the extent of someone's status and success. The physical manifestation of privilege was what you could buy in terms of material possessions and what you could afford in terms of personal upkeep and presentation. "In her book *Ain't I A Beauty Queen?*, Maxine Craig wrote, 'Straightened hair represented access to hair products, sanitation, leisure, and relative prosperity. A woman who put time and money into her appearance was dignified, and her dignity spoke well of the race'" (Sherrow 2006:186). Motives for popularizing and striving to attain a certain ideal were generally status-oriented.

Each of the influences discussed (approval and disapproval of white society, points of tension, social movements, counter ideals, and the acquisition of status) had a profound impact on black women and their idea of how black women should work to present themselves to and within society. A lot can be accomplished by examining how these influences have been handled in the past and then considering how they may influence young black girls today.

Recognizing these moments in history enables one to realize that the black woman's struggle for recognition and inclusion has been captured by her pursuit of various beauty ideals.

It has been demonstrated that by the nature of her position within society, a black woman is required to react to white ideals by either embracing mainstream culture or participating in a counter culture with counter ideals. However, each avenue comes with a different set of consequences. Unable to ever fully ignore or dismiss white ideals, due to their dominance, pervasiveness, and social supremacy, black women will forever be aware of and impacted by white ideals and white society (Sekayi 2003). Minorities reserve the right to resist the will of the majority, but such a disruption often comes with backlash and social repercussions.

Within a binary, each side has a distinct identity. There may be similarities between the two entities, however each half self-identifies as opposite and inherently different from the other. For this reason, the crossing over of black women into a culture that's recognized as belonging to the other half will have its advantages and disadvantages. Blending in with those who are powerful and authoritative is one way to transcend one's lower circumstances and begin participating in a culture of luxury and privilege. Often times it is believed that in order to make this transition, one has to discard their former identity. However, as the world becomes more global, and cultural boundaries are continuously permeated, one finds that she can step in and out of multiple identities without ever having to forsake or disown them. Although the present builds on the past, social meaning changes over time. Instead of remaining static, the relationships between black women and beauty ideals are constantly being renegotiated. For this reason, it's essential to ask the question, "for black adolescent women *today*, how do *they* choose to define beauty?"



Although all of the girls that participated in Girl Talk self-identified as Black, rarely did the young girls invoke the public memory of the black women that came before them. While they would often reference their mothers' values and habits, they were not able to explain or defend them (as a demonstration of their connection to or understanding of their mother's beliefs) and overall seemed to remain very unaware of why the black women preceding them had participated in beauty culture the way that they did. The girls didn't seem to understand the ways that hair, body, and skin tone had been racialized. The girls didn't allude to historical baggage that they or people before them had endured or managed to sort through and they didn't attribute trends to anything more than their (arbitrary) likes and dislikes. However, the girls did understand the repercussions of social exclusion and seemed to therefore be on a constant quest for inclusion. They failed to recognize the larger power dynamic that they were participating in and the legacy that they are automatically a part of by virtue of being a black female in the United States- more particularly the American South.

As I am aware of the legacy that precedes the girls, it's hard for me to imagine that they are disconnected from the temperament of generations that preceded them. Somehow the girls are not embedded in the racial history of the American south. Although it seems impossible to understand the relationship between black women and their ideas of beauty without simultaneously considering America's racial history and the racialization of beauty, the racialized experience of black women with beauty proves to be harder for the girls to recognize.

## **Making Connections**

This account of history yields two very important realizations about the body, as an entity: a) The body has a relationship with society b) The body is also in a relationship with an individual.

Several scholars have conducted research regarding the various ways a person uses their body to relate to society. Body is understood in Steven Van Wolputte's article *Hang On To Yourself: Of bodies, embodiment, and selves* by the 1975 Association of Social Anthropologists to be "a privileged medium or expression and nonverbal communication" (Van Wolputte 2004:253). In other words, it is believed that one's body can be utilized in a way that manages to it speaks for itself. The presentation of one's body becomes a vault of information, a cache of meaning, "a canvas on which major cultural, social, and political changes are projected" (Van Wolputte 2004:264). According to Mauss, "people are identified and distinguished by the way they "use" their bodies" (Van Wolputte 2004:253). Douglas then adds the dimension of natural body versus a social body. "Each body, she claims, is a physical entity but also is a representation; it is a medium of expression but one that is controlled and restricted by the social system...The social body, hence, is a body of symbolic representation, a representational reality that 'constrains the way the physical body is perceived'" (Van Wolputte 2004:253). "Csordas (1990:5) argues that the body should not be considered as an object but as the subject—the existential ground—of culture and that the latter should be studied by focusing on embodiment" (Van Wolputte 2004: 253). According to Van Wolputte, "the body unlocks a moral universe that often escapes social (symbolic) discourse" (Van Wolputte 2004:259).

The body functions as an important social mediator in both local and global communities, however, it is ultimately a person's social understanding of body image that directly affects the way in which they actually mold and present their body. In other words, there's a linear or non-linear relationship between how the body should look and how the body does look.

Furthermore, "In most Western cultures we generally take that which is communicated by the body to be a message about the self" and a metaphor of how people interact with society as a whole, in the sense that "size and shape of one's body has come to signify the moral state of the individual" (Koo 2004:300). According to Koo, the relationship between body and society can be understood in one of two prominent ways. First, the symbolic body allows the body to "function as an icon of social values by focusing on the symbolic nature of the body as a conduit of social meaning" (Koo 2004:298). Second, the agentic body "requires the body to function as a mechanism of social power and control by highlighting that role of the body as an active participant or agent in the social world" (Koo 2004:298). All things considered, which one of these ideals do black adolescent females prioritize?

To answer this question, it will be worthwhile to consider several theories which have been constructed in an effort to explain the ways in which people use their body as a method of loving and appreciating themselves. The Social Comparison Theory states that, "people constantly compare themselves to images that they find realistic and attainable, and those who perceive a discrepancy will be more impelled to narrow the gap as a result of the comparison (Zhang 2009:264). According to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, "beauty is an objective attribute that all women necessarily want to embody" (Koo

2004:301). The theory that seems most often applied toward efforts to understand the black woman's relationship with herself is what I have deemed the White Emulation Theory. The White Emulation Theory describes the practice of applying Shorter-Gooden's "Lily Complex" to all thoughts and actions of African American beauty culture. The Lily Complex "is defined as 'altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive...As Black women deal with the constant pressure to meet a beauty standard that is inauthentic and often unattainable, the Lilly complex can set in'" (Patton 2006:25). As a result of suffering from the Lily complex, it is often believed that Black women fall into a sea of self-hate, unable to recognize the beauty of their natural state.

On the other end of the spectrum is the Afrocentric theory. "Potentially liberating for Black women because it frees them from having to conform to a single, rigid, externally derived measure of beauty", the Afrocentric aesthetic "accents self-expression in multiple domains. Rather than relying exclusively on physical appearance, it is a more egalitarian standard—one that is attainable by anyone with the use of imagination and self-knowledge" (Lovejoy 2001:249-250).

Another perspective worth considering is that of Anne-Marie Witkege. After conducting a qualitative study with 32 middle black school girls, Witkege found that various cultural attitudes and traditions can influence the relationship between the body and the individual. While most research, aligning with the prerogative of mainstream White America, defined body image as "how fat or thin someone thinks he or she is" or "whether someone can correctly identify his or her body shape" (Witkege 1996:3), Witkege's research on Black adolescent women found that black girls "believe that body

image is related to a person's behavior as well as their appearance" (Witkege 1996:76).

Distinctions were made between the cultural tendencies of whites and their views on the body versus the cultural norms for blacks.

I am hoping to explore the following idea: in light of historical trends and patterns used to describe how black women relate to body image and beauty, how do the girls today view their bodies? The following ethnographic chapters will elaborate on the standards and ideals that the girls pulled from to create their idea of beauty.

### Chapter Three: “My Hair Is My Beauty”

**“Raise your hand if you feel that way, that if you lost your hair you would just lose everything essentially”**...Five of nine hands shoot straight up in the air.

The moral sanctions regarding the presentation of hair have been examined and dissected since the turn of the twentieth century. Relaxed hair versus natural hair and consequently straight hair versus unstraightened hair are at the forefront of controversy and debate. Similar to Marcus Garvey, Booker T. Washington, and Alice Walker, many feel that straight hair is an oppressive practice that prevents black women from enjoying and appreciating themselves in their natural state (Sherrow 2006). When Blacks appear more committed to changing their hair texture instead of maintaining it, they are quickly identified as assimilators.

I remember sitting in my 9<sup>th</sup> grade English class at my predominantly white, conservative high school in Atlanta, Georgia. We were discussing Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* and I was the only black female in the class. When the theme of assimilation surfaced my teacher directed the entire class to look at my hair. “This is an example of assimilation” she said. When I looked back at her with an expression of surprise and confusion, she asked me to confirm that my natural hair texture was not actually straight. Now extremely self conscious and only determined to take the attention off of myself, I nodded in confirmation. In that moment, I did not know whether to feel ashamed, justified, or righteously indifferent.

Before I could stop her, she assigned a meaning to my hair that I never consciously intended for it to have. Granted I had complained of poofiness before relaxing my hair, I still loved my hair. In fact I was *torn* as I decided whether I wanted a relaxer for my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday or if I wanted to wait. I say wait because with all of the black women around me relaxing their hair (friends, cousins, etc), my turn seemed inevitable. Getting a relaxer was simply presented as a rite of passage. Was I an assimilator?

As I present to you the thoughts, reactions, and conversations shared among 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls at Durham School of the Arts (DSA) and the Emily Krzyzewski Center (Emily K Center), my goal will be to evaluate the motive of the girls as they make decisions about their hair; this data is expected to contribute to the discussion on whether hair presentation is a vehicle for emulating whiteness or a harmless method of gaining inclusion, unrelated to ethnic pride. Is there a standard for how hair is supposed to look? Furthermore, based on its social meaning today, how does hair play into these young girls concept of body image and beauty?

For seventh and eighth grade black female students attending Durham School of the Arts, a charter school geographically situated between downtown Durham, NC and Duke University, hair surfaced as a major concern. Two to three times a week, I pull up to Durham School of the Arts around 11:25am prepared to conduct “Girl Talk”. Carrying pizza or sub sandwiches, I enter through the side door, passing a few kids that are straggling and late to class, and eventually enter the library. Nine girls are sitting and waiting around a rectangular table in the cozy media room, situated in the rear of the library and away from many interruptions and distractions.

I enter the room and greet them with a “Hi Ladies!” as I drop my bag and keys, get my folder and voice recorder out and place the food on the table before them. Once I take a seat amongst them, sometimes first having to close the room doors or run to get napkins, I have to prompt them to eat. Although they know that the food is specifically for them and that I have promised to feed them every time, unless I explicitly tell them they can eat, the food will sit there and remain untouched.

I begin by asking for the chatter to cease and for everyone to settle down, and then introduce what is planned for the day. Looking around, Adrianna and Tempus have their hair pulled back into a pony tail, Sheryll has her hair braided back in cornrows- a combination of her hair and extensions, and the remaining six people have their hair down and out. Janette has short straightened hair that is combed down and flipped under on each side resembling the crown of a mushroom. Taryn, Diana, and Sheree have longer straightened hair, past their shoulders. Finally, Gabren and Jasmine have straight hair that falls slightly past their chin.

Wasting no time, I power up the projector and display a powerpoint slideshow of 26 slides. Each slide featured two pictures of black women- some were celebrities and others were unknown. I personally constructed the slide show by consolidating images of black women found using Google. The images were paired very deliberately and strategically. For example, I chose scenarios where the same woman was depicted wearing her hair differently and where two different women, with similar complexions, displayed variations in hair such as length, style, or texture.



The girls were asked to decide which image was more beautiful, not based on who the person was in general but how they looked and appeared in the particular photo. As images appeared on the screen, the girls often reacted verbally by stating their preference aloud. In order to keep track of everyone's opinion and impression, I asked the girls to raise their hands as another method of demonstrating their preference and then to record their thoughts on the corresponding worksheet that was provided.

Their reactions and observations are worth noting.

Although there were broad concerns such as who appeared to look "natural" versus looking like they were "trying too hard," it appeared as though a variety of factors seemed to be influencing their preferences. There were nine participants reviewing Photo 1 and 2. For Photo 1, which compared headshots of Regina King (A) and Fantasia Barrino (B) [see photo 1], both were shown with short, black hair and both women are

displayed smiling. Some preferences were concrete and well-articulated. One student recorded her preference for Regina King's photograph and cited the following reasons, "light skinned. Not big lips or nose".

Some comments included vague explanations such as "glowing" while other comments seemed very nitpicky and trivial. For example, in the scenario for "Photo 2", the same student that concretely commented on the phenotype of Regina King over Fantasia recorded her preference for a photograph

of Queen Latifah (B) over Taraji P. Henson (A) [see photo 2] due to the appeal of

Photo 2

Latifah's eyebrows.

Most girls also evaluated the presence of details such as facial features, jewelry, earrings, lip gloss, eye shadow, and cleavage.

Additionally, the girls consistently factored in the subject's perceived attitude and overall presence when deciding which image they found to be more beautiful. For example, many of the girls justified their choices with comments like "because she looks like she wants to be there", "because it looks like she's saying bring it on" and "because she's relaxed and calm". Ultimately, the girls' awareness of a multi-dimensional concept of beauty reflects an afrocentric beauty ideal, which encourages girls to maintain an open minded, flexible, idea of beauty where self expression matters just as much as one's outward appearance (Lovejoy 2001:250).

It seemed that for photographs that appeared extremely 'ordinary' and lacked the feeling of being glamorous or fashionable the girls tended to choose "neither". There were 14 participants reviewing Photo 3. In this photo, Nicki Minaj who wore a bright orange wig was preferred over a woman displayed with long, flowy, shiny hair. Fourteen out of 19 hands were raised to indicate that students found Nicki Minaj to be more beautiful. The other five hands were raised to indicate the student's belief that they found neither woman to be attractive.

Photo 3

Some of the approving comments of Nicki Minaj were as follows:

“She is rockin her wig”

“Rocks the hair”

“Looks exotic”

“I love her hair- she has pretty skin”

“That’s my main Barbie- really beautiful and different personality.”

In Photo 4, where a contrast of straight vs curly hair was depicted, a consistent and noticeable trend emerged, as the 21 girls evaluated the subject and commented on the aspects of the image that they found appealing or unappealing.

Two images of Raven Symone were placed side-by-side [photo 4], one displaying Raven with straightened hair and the other with short and curly hair. 18 students raised their hands for option A, 1 student raised her hand for option B, and 2 students raised their hands to indicate that they were equally beautiful. Comments that supported choice A over choice B were the following: “Looks better”, “prettier”, “hair is pretty”, “‘B’ head

Photo 4

jacked up. ‘A’ has good-hair is pretty”, “because straight hair is cute”, “I like straight hair”, “More natural and pretty, straight hair is the thing”, “Better with straight hair”. The phrase “better with straight hair” reoccurred verbatim on four different worksheets.

In Photo 5, which compared two unknown black women [photo 5]- one with shoulder length dreads and the other with twisted natural hair organized as a small afro of kinky and curly hair, neither of the women are showing their teeth but they both appear pleasant and even as if they are smiling with their eyes. In spite of this, the following comments were recorded as a reaction: “UGLY! Hate both of theirs hair”, “‘A’ doesn’t look good with dreads and ‘B’ looks like she has worms on her head”.

Photo 5

Ultimately, 15 students raised their hands to indicate they believe that option B was more beautiful than option A. 6 students raised their hands to indicate ‘neither’.

Photo 6

There were 19 responses to Photo 6 which displayed two different pictures of Solange Knowles [photo 6]- one with the majority of her hair shaved off and the other with long straight hair and bangs. Of the total, 10 students raised their hands indicating that neither image was attractive, 1 student felt that option A was more beautiful, 5 students felt that

option B was more beautiful and 1 student felt that the two images were equally beautiful. The comments surrounding these opinions were the following:

“Neither, her hair”

“Bald is ugly. Bangs too short”

“Looks ugly with bald hair ewww”

“Lips are too big and has real big lips. Too short hair and too much weave”

“They look awkward”

“‘A’ looks a hot mess and ‘B’ has a big bottom lip”

“They’re lips are big and she has no hair”.

Before continuing to explain other activities conducted with the girls, I would like to pause and briefly analyze the patterns that have emerged thus far. The majority of the girls responded positively to Nicki Minaj, with a clear majority of the girls mentioning their approval of her bright orange wig. In earlier slides the girls had criticized and reprimanded Tyra Banks for wearing what was clearly a weave. Even though Nicki is clearly wearing a wig, it does not seem to be a problem or have any negative connotations. Perhaps it was the fact that Nicki seemed to be wearing her wig to stand out, not to fit in. Nicki is also displaying an elaborate necklace and a diva-like pose but none of the girls commented on that aspect of the photo- only her hair. The use of the words like “rockin”, by one girl, and “rocks”, by another, indicates approval of how Nicki is carrying and presenting herself. The comment “that’s my main Barbie” is also worth noting. Barbie dolls in American society are traditionally designed to epitomize beauty and perfection- sometimes serving as a young girl’s concept of womanhood. It is interesting that a young girl would say “my main Barbie” to describe a live person.

Perhaps she is not yet past the stage where she needs and wants somebody to stand in and illustrate an idea of aesthetic perfection. Nicki received a high approval rating, while very few comments were made about the other woman depicted next to her. The other woman had long, shiny, flowy hair, with a full bang—a style the girls favor—but nobody seemed to notice.

After they evaluated the slide of Raven Symone, it became clear that these girls possessed an overwhelming preference for straight hair. What is interesting is the language used to describe it. Pretty was being presented as synonymous to straight. The allegiance to straight hair seemed unwavering, both because it was “the thing,” implying something trendy and because it was described as “better” and “pretty”, indicating that straight hair was seen by some as superior.

In Photo 4-B Raven has tight ringlet curls, arguably with hair texture of someone of mixed descent. No one described her hair as nappy, yet someone commented that her hair looked jacked up (in spite of the fact that it seemed to be styled). It is interesting that the girls do not recognize option Photo 4-B as “exotic” or “rockin” like they did with Nicki Minaj. The use of “more natural” to describe straight hair is also interesting. Perhaps the student feels that the word “natural” is appropriate to describe straightness as something comfortable and customary. She seems to be using the term ‘natural’ to indicate the appearance of normality and not the natural texture of Raven’s hair.

In spite of indicating on a worksheet that natural hair and relaxed hair were equally beautiful, when viewing the slides, no one endorsed dreads and Solange’s short cut was considered bald. Also, it was when describing unprocessed hair that the word

ugly surfaced the most. I came to realize that the girls were conceptualizing 'natural' hair completely different than I was. I considered 'natural' hair to mean unprocessed hair. However, they often applied the term 'natural' to the look of the style, regardless of whether the person's hair is processed or unprocessed.

Next, the DSA girls participated in an open discussion on body image and beauty by responding to questions and scenarios that I posed to the group.

When I asked, "So, what if all of a sudden you woke up and all of your hair had been shaved off?" The girls were outraged. Initially there were several reflex reactions from the girls such as "Mmmmmmmmm!!" and "O my gosh", and then seconds later Diana adamantly blurts out in all seriousness, "I couldn't survive because my hair is my beauty". For Diana, beauty and feeling beautiful plays a very active role in her self-worth, as her outburst becomes an indicator of this. Diana is very aware of the power that she has as a result of being considered beautiful, a privilege that she is not only proud of, but also very protective of. Tatianna, however, someone with hair about the same length and thickness as Diana, feels very differently about the value of her hair. According to Tatianna, hair is dispensable and something she loves but can let go. While not everyone agrees with Diana's position, I eventually followed up on Diana's sentiments and asked "Raise your hand if you feel that way, that if you lost your hair you would just lose everything essentially." Five of nine hands shoot straight up in the air. Next, I asked the girls, "What if when your hair grew back you couldn't put relaxers on it and stuff like that?" The question garnered a mixed reaction. Some responded with "Oh nooooo" and "No, no, noooooo" others proudly asserted "My hair is natural" and "I don't put relaxers on my hair". It is worth noting however, that those who don't apply perms use

texturizers, a milder treatment but still a form of chemical straightening; Diana was the only one with completely natural hair.

When talking to the girls at the Emily K Center, the discussion that followed the question “What if, all of a sudden you woke up and all your hair had been shaved off” went a lot differently. It is worth noting that while I met with DSA girls during their lunch break in the school day, Emily K was an afterschool arrangement on Friday afternoons at 4:05. While the participants in both groups were 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, I had distinctly different experiences working with one group versus another. While DSA seemed extremely structured and organized, the environment at Emily K, at times, felt like restless energy and pure chaos. Nonetheless, all of these young ladies were extremely smart and opinionated, in a way that was very candid and refreshing.

When conducting sessions at Emily K, I learned to assign each question to one specific person who was then appointed to respond first and lead off the discussion. I found that throwing out open ended questions for everyone to tackle was dysfunctional and unproductive. When I asked Abbrin, “what if, all of a sudden you woke up and all your hair had been shaved off,” several people in the room erupted in laughter. Others expressed their disbelief by responding “ooooooooo”. After reminding everyone that I expected to hear from Abbrin first, everyone got quiet in anticipation of her response. I prompt Abbrin again saying, “Someone shaved all your hair off, what happens next? How would you feel?” Finally she responds, “I would be very upset” and then continues explaining in the same somber tone, “It took a long time for my hair to grow, and...” Before Abbrin can finish her thought, Carrie dynamically interjects, “It’s not like white people hair!” The girls burst out into more laughter until I prompt Abbrin to continue



with her original thought. Finally, Abbrin finishes her statement saying, “I would just be really upset, that was *my* natural hair.” Abbrin talks about her hair like it is a piece of her, something valuable because she personally produced it and therefore feels a sense of ownership and connectivity to the outcome. Furthermore, her careful formation of the words “*my* natural hair” and the inclusion of the word “natural” reinforces the fact that she has remained patiently invested in her hair, nurturing it through the slow process of its growth.

Following Abbrin’s response, I returned to Carrie so that she could finish her outburst from earlier. Without missing a beat, Carrie jumps back in, “We not like White people hair, we not like- all you gotta do is put some mousse on it and then it just slick down- you gotta comb it and blow dry it and iron it and do everything to it, she says.” By enumerating the hair regime that black women have to go through and all of the things that they have “gotta” do, Carrie is acknowledging the time, energy, and money that goes into the presentation of hair such that one can be pleased with it. She references the desired end result as hair that is slicked down. However, for someone to complete this regimen they would either have to pay for the service at the salon or have access to a comb, blow dryer, and iron- all of which can be expensive tools. Carrie’s use of the word “gotta” is also interesting. She inserts the word as if to describe a chore that she is responsible for. Empathetically relating to what Carrie has just expressed, others begin adding items to the list that were forgotten, “Wash it too, texturizer, perm.”

As this tangent is ending, Aliyah immediately begins a new one, “I got a question, how come black people hair different from white people hair?” Everyone begins responding at once: “Different cultures, different cultures”, “Because that’s just the way

our hair is”, “their genes, their genes”. The girls are talking over each other, and everyone wants to be heard, which is why people begin stating their answer multiple times and repeating themselves. Everybody seemed to have an answer that they adamantly believed was correct. This being the case seems to indicate that either the girls had already taken it upon themselves to dwell on such a question, had already personally asked the question, or somebody they knew had already volunteered or provided a perspective.

Following the flow of the conversation, I say in the form of a question, “So if ya’ll could choose between Black people hair and white people hair?” Once again the entire room erupts as everyone starts speaking at once: “Black people hair”, “Black people hair”, “No, because White people be getting lice and all of that stuff”, “I like my hair, I’m ok...they wash their hair every night”, “I would get Puerto Rican hair”, “I would get mixed hair”.

“So how many of yall would get Puerto Rican hair”, I ask. Four out of ten hands go up. “And how many of you guys would get mixed hair”, I ask. Six out of ten hands go up. When I asked the girls to explain why they would chose to get Puerto Rican or mixed hair the commotion resumes. As things eventually quiet down, two people speak up. The first explains, “Well my aunt has mixed hair and she said if she get in the shower her hair is already curly and she doesn’t have to do anything to it- that’s why I would get it, so you don’t have to do as much work”. The second person, Lorielle, responds saying, “You know how we finish washing our hair and stuff and we flat iron it and something, and we have to part it piece by piece? I went to my friends house and after she washed her hair she can just take like a chunk and flat iron it and just like that her hair will be straight, and we have to part it piece by piece.” As she tells her story, Lorielle portrays herself as

someone who is disadvantaged because she cannot quickly and effortlessly straighten huge chunks of her hair at one time without parting it “piece by piece”.

Next the girls begin talking about roots, explaining that black people have “thick” roots while Puerto Rican and mixed people get “thin” roots. It is then that the n-word surfaces for the first time...nappy. Once asked to say more about their roots, the girls respond, “They nappy as I don’t know what”, “They be getting nappy”, “Nappy”.

Nappy is presented as the cause for needing straightening and the goal of all straightening seems to be to eliminate nappiness. Overall the girls highly preferred mixed hair over black hair. One girl even mentioned Indian hair looking the best. Another girl compared the fact that mixed people do not have to get perms but if a black person did not get a perm it would be “matted” while a white person’s hair would be straight. When I asked the girls who thought their hair would be pretty if they could not get perms, Bridgett was the only one to speak up and argue that her hair would still be pretty replying, “Anybody’s hair could be pretty if you do a little work on it...like just because you can wake up in the morning shake your hair and all that stuff and it be straight if you mixed or something, like that don’t really mean nothing...that’s the same thing if you wrap your hair at night, and you black or whatever- and you comb it out , it’s gonna be straight”.

As other girls begin mumbling in disagreement, Terrie, a small brown-skinned girl with short hair and the identical twin of Carrie, aggressively exclaims, “Mixed people think they’re all that just because we had to sit in the back of the bus... Yeah...just cause they mixed they think they got it all...you might be mixed but you still black honey- get

it right”. Terrie’s tone is very defensive and indignant. Everyone in the room is Black, yet she is making these statements as if she was personally reminding a mixed person of their identity, and rebuking the idea of a social hierarchy. For Terrie, there is still historical baggage attached to someone’s blackness or proximity to whiteness. Finally, Terrie shares, “And then this boy, today we had to do this social studies thing, and this boy Chris- he got some good hair because his daddy Black and his mama White, and then she was like it carries- if your daddy black that means you black too, and this boy, and then this boy was like Chris I guess you a n\*\*\*\* too”. Although Terrie is angered by the idea that mixed people may think they are better than black people, when telling her story about Chris, she acknowledges her belief that he has “good” hair.

As the topic of hair continued to resurface as a major point of discussion, several noteworthy and revealing observations were captured. First, was the reaction to nappy hair. Second, was the notion of “pretty” hair. Third, the ways in which the girls desired to style their hair. The next few pages will provide an analysis of the ways in which I observed the girls connect with and relate to each of these ideas.

### **Nappy Hair**

The biggest dilemma for the girls participating in the focus groups seemed to be the task of eliminating what they considered to be ‘nappy’ hair. For example, during one discussion, Diana took it upon herself to explain to the group, “My hair is natural...cause when my mom made me get perms and stuff that’s when my hair started getting nappier and nappier and now it’s starting to get more prettier and prettier”. I asked the logical

follow up question, “So what does pretty hair mean?” and received the following responses in this order: “Like, white girl hair”, “Natural”, “Not nappy”, “Not looking like you’re on The Color Purple”. By following the comment “Not nappy” with the comment “Not looking like you’re on The Color Purple”, an association is being made between ‘nappy’ and the depiction of black women in the 1920s and 30s as the opposite of pretty. This seems to imply that the person who made this comment is trying to get away from an image that they believe is socially recognized as ugly. Furthermore, it sheds light on the fact that as young Black women look back on history and try to deduce a notion of Black beauty, they often times have to rely on depictions, they view as unflattering, which that simply recycles the portrayal of the “ugly” negro.

A number of the girls from DSA and Emily K were born in 1998, and without knowing how to embrace a notion of nappy hair, rebuke it, afraid that it (something so uncivilized and raggedy) may be confused with them. Perhaps there is a fear of ‘nappiness’ because the term is understood to stem from a very primitive projection of Black people and in a lot of ways remains stigmatized within the public memory of both Black and White Americans. Maybe it is not about how they look at themselves but about how other people would look at them? Perhaps hair has no social meaning to the girls and they are committed to straight hair because that is what is cool and they do not know ‘pretty’ to be defined any other way?

Although it is not completely clear what ‘nappiness’ means to them and the full complement of connotations and baggage they believe it carries, in subsequent discussion, ‘nappy’ continued to surface when describing hair that is puffy, frizzy, ugly or hard to lay down. What is interesting is that when used by the girls, ‘nappy’ is a term

which promotes disdain. To them, there is nothing pretty about nappy- in fact, it is just the opposite. For example, one girl stated “My friend, I’m not gonna say any names but she sometimes has braids and it’s like a bang of nappiness right there and it’s not all that pretty”. Overall, I gather that nappy represents the opposite of progressive and presentable and is therefore, not embraced, but rather a turn-off.

### **Pretty Hair**

The notion of pretty hair, in particular, was a concept that also continually surfaced and resurfaced. The girls expressed their opinion that there is not an effort to imitate the standards that exist within the White race, however, ‘white girl’ hair becomes a term and idea regularly used to describe a type of black hair. Ultimately, white people are being used as a point of reference to evaluate black people. The analogy that seems to develop goes as follows: nappy hair is to ugly, as ‘white girl hair’ is to pretty.

When asked the question, “So, in terms of beauty, do you think in some ways black people are encouraged to look like white people”, Sheryll responded, “Yeah, because like all of the black people are like, o I want white hair and I want white this and I want white that and like everything, so yeah”. In asserting her opinion that White people continue to set the tone and pace in terms of what is identified as cool and beautiful, Sheryll makes a very interesting and sweeping statement that really calls into question the sense of security that black adolescent women have or do not have about their own sense of beauty. Sheryll’s account suggests that the Lily Complex remains relevant to black girls today. Additionally, she asserts that black girls desire what white

girls have, but often do not admit to it. Sheryll's insight is particularly interesting because she presents herself as someone who feels a connection or allegiance to neither black culture nor white culture, based on her professed belief that race is not anything more than a skin color.

When asked the same question as Sheryll, Adrianna answered saying, "I don't think they're encouraged to but I think most people compare them". The comparative relationship between the black women's concept of beauty and the white women's emblemization of beauty is captured in a tangent that the girls ended up on where they were candidly discussing their mother's hair. Stemming from the statement, "But its easier to do white people's hair than black people, cause white people's hair just falls into place"; the girls made the following statements consecutively: "Black people you gotta get a little bit of time and you've gotta comb it and brush it", "My mom is black but she's got white girl hair- it's really thin and straight...unlike my hair", "My mom, she has good hair, but it's not white, it's silky but it's not white white, it's like Adriana's", "My momma hair aint white", "My mom hairs thick- black", "My mommas hair is white". Ultimately, in this digression of 6 statements, "white" was used as an adjective to describe black hair a total of 6 times.

Ultimately, 'white girl hair'—straight hair that hangs down and flows freely—has become part of the black standard of beauty. Relaxers resurged and black women began committing to and investing in the processed version of their hair. For decades, black women have flaunted their shiny, flowing hair. The social value of such hair was established in the 1920s and has remained engrained and relevant to black culture for nearly a century. Labeling straight, flowy hair to denote a degree of superiority has been

a tradition for decades. Colloquial terms like ‘Good hair’ and ‘white girl hair’ are evidence of this. The concept of black girls idolizing white girl hair presents a degree of irony. The use of this term in particular blatantly acknowledges a point of comparison between white and black, where the white ideal is being elevated, yet the girls threw around the term so casually and trivially, as if it did not even register in their minds that aspiring to have white girl hair maybe imply an overall aspiration towards whiteness. It becomes apparent that someone, or even an entire generation, arbitrarily choosing to rename preferred hair ‘white girl hair’ instead of ‘good hair,’ does not mean that a new phenomena has emerged, but instead that a different name has been assigned to describe the same game. The concept has become so engrained and so culturally understood over time, that what you call it and how you describe it ultimately means nothing. Renaming ‘good hair’ as ‘white girl hair’ is comparable to renaming ‘food’ as ‘eat-eat’. The only advantage may be that some names may end up being more descriptive than the other; however the two terms will ultimately represent a commitment to the same principle and idea.

### **Hair Styling**

Length is presented as something important to several of the girls. When Diana announced, “Yeah, like I’m thinking about cutting my hair”, Taryn quickly shut down the idea by saying “No Diana, you is not goin to look right”. In fact, Taryn did not even allow Diana to finish her thought before interrupting her to comment. All she heard was the word ‘cut’ and immediately she disapproved. What Diana was going to say was,



“have you ever heard of layers?”, however, because Taryn was not patient enough to hear the latter part of her statement, the question ultimately fell on deaf ears. Next, another girl commented, “My mama said she’s gonna cut her hair off and get dreads...I’m like, no mommy”. Again, there is discouragement from doing something different, non conventional, and contrary to the general acceptance, by these young black women, of long, straight, hair.

When asked about their favorite way to style their hair, the sweeping response was ‘down’ or ‘in a pony tail’, often with a bang. Key words that surfaced often as the girls made an effort to explain their preferences were ‘easy’ ‘manageable’ and ‘pretty<sup>2</sup>’. Although Adrianna’s hair would most likely be considered ‘good hair’ by most Black people’s standards—primarily because of the wavy curl pattern, Adrianna’s personal preference lines up with the same standard of “straight and manageable” hair desired by her peers. After slowly and uncomfortably admitting that she is biracial, Adrianna goes on to discuss her dissatisfaction with her hair in comparison to her mother’s hair, who is White. Adrianna states, “Well I’m mixed so my mom is White and my dad is Black so her hair is different from mine so...good looking and shiny...and then there’s this (touches her own hair)”. Adrianna seems to think that her hair is inferior to her mother’s and has yet to embrace the uniqueness of her own hair. Adrianna seems to feel inconvenienced or disadvantaged, maybe even burdened, by the challenge of having to do more to manage and control her hair, in comparison to her mother. Adriana does not focus on the flexibility she has in styling her hair, compared to her mom.

Consistent with her disapproval of Diana cutting her hair, Taryn became very specific when asked about her favorite way to style her hair. She stated, “I have my bang,

I put it up because it grew too long, I gotta get it cut...I like getting perms...I like my hair long, I don't like short hair, I like long hair and I like it to be flat ironed". When it comes to hair, the girls were explicit about what they liked and what they did not like. It seemed important to them that they have the freedom to express themselves as they wish through their hair.

When asked, "When do you feel most beautiful?" 17 out of 34 total responses from DSA students had something to do with hair. When asked, "When do you feel least beautiful?" 13 out of 34 total responses related to hair. For example, the following answers were given in response to the first question, "When do you feel most beautiful?":

"When I get new clothes and get hair done"

"When I get my hair done, nails done, feet done, and get new clothes"

"I feel the most beautiful when I do my hair and get dressed"

"When my hair is fixed and when I have nice clothes on"

The following answers were given in response to the second question, "When do you feel least beautiful?":

"When I have a bad hair day and not matching"

"When I don't have my hair done and no accessories"

Regardless of whether or not the girls consider the presentation of one's hair as grounds to judge others and their sense of beauty, they clearly feel that it provides grounds on which they can judge themselves. When asked to describe how they like to

wear their hair, 22 out of 34 total responses indicated 'straight down' as a preferred option.

There are several other hair styles that the girls remain open to. "Layers, half up half down, in a scarf, ponytail, braids, in a banana clip, Chinese style, in a half pulled through ponytail, curled under, bangs, twists, style up, weave, rubberbands, kinky twists, in a bun, cornrowed, curled, Senegalese twists, and micros" were all alternative hair styles that the girls mentioned. Most Puerto Rican or mixed people cannot pull off the majority of these hair styles, yet, they are still envied by girls like Terrie and Loriele and many more. Some, although not all of the girls imagined that certain hair styles carried a particular message. For example, one girl, when asked about how she liked to wear her hair responded, "down and elegant" as if the two were synonymous. Meanwhile, when discussing hair in a group setting, Adrianna remarked, "Sometimes nappy hair is kind of cute in a way- like on little girls it is, little girls have nappy hair, like puff balls and that's cute but not if you're like 18 and you have nappy hair and you're wearing puff balls!". Adrianna, first of all, seems to be equating unprocessed hair with her idea of nappy hair. Adrianna's tone as she made this statement was very sarcastic and disapproving. Ultimately, Adrianna automatically relates puff balls to nappiness as they require hair that is not permed or treated with chemicals. Furthermore, Adrianna makes it clear that "nappiness" is something that a woman is expected to grow out of. She presents this critique as if it is acceptable for a small child that does not know any better, but not for a young adult that has arrived at the age of independence.

At the end of the second group discussion, the girls were asked to fill out a survey and describe a good hair day versus a bad hair day. The good hair days were described as

the following: “You just got a perm. Straight hair”, “When my hair is straightened and down”, “When my hair isn’t frizzy and its staying back and not puffy”, “When I just get my hair done”. The bad hair days were described as the following: “When you just took out your braids. Your hair is nappy”, “braids with a nappy piece”, “When my hair is in a ponytail”, “When my hair is frizzy, puffy and lopsided”, “When you can see my new growth”.

The major findings as a result of discussing hair are the following. Straight hair worn straight down is considered the ideal hair style and is seen as superior to alternative hair styles. Pretty hair is understood to be hair that is straight and flowy, such that it resembles that of a white person. Nappy hair is associated with black hair that is unstraightened and is considered ugly and unacceptable. Ultimately, in order for the girls to feel put together and presentable, their hair is an important part of the equation.

These beliefs and this articulated ideal seems to recycle the sentiments and social values expressed throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Ultimately when it comes to hair the girls largely rely on a white ideal, always preferring it to alternative hair styles. Sentiments from the Black Power Movement, where hair could be used as a symbol of activism and rebellion, are not ideals that the current generation seems exposed to or trained to appreciate. The counter narrative of what ‘natural’ hair meant seems to go untold. Straight hair is a social norm established nearly a century ago, nurtured through advertising and the beauty industry, and rewarded by the majority of professional environments. The extent to which the straight hair beauty

ideal has been perpetuated over time leaves barely any room to question its validity as a norm.

Although the girls are relying on a standard that some people recognize as historically white, they are also relying, in their eyes, on a social norm that everyone around them, regardless of race, seems to subscribe to. Although language such a white girl hair seems to denote a preoccupation with whiteness, ultimately, the girls are just following a pattern and trend that has preceded them for nearly a century.

## **Chapter Four: “Because It Brings Men”**

**Question: “What if all of a sudden you gained 20 pounds?”**

**Answer: “I would eat and then stick my finger down my throat and that would make me throw up so I’d be skinny”**

**Question: “What if all of a sudden you woke up and you had big hips?”**

**Answer: “Ooo, cause you can have a killa shape...that’s what my mom said”**

**Question: “What if all of a sudden you couldn’t find any clothes that matched?”**

**Answer: I would not go to school, I would hide under my bed and cry”**

The dominant narrative within contemporary discourse remains that Black women experience very little body dissatisfaction when it comes to weight and size. Distracted by the evaluation of the response of black women to the beauty ideal defined and dictated by the white women of America, many fail to consider whether Black women are operating under a culturally different understanding of ‘body ideal’.

As I grew up, I was casually told by a number of my white peers that they envied my body. According to them, my bust size and flat stomach were the two things that they would have stolen from me if they could have. But what they never thought to ask was why I wore pants every day. Extremely self conscious about my skinny, boney legs and tiny ankles, I wore pants everyday and refused to put my legs on display for people to ridicule and pick over. I had worn shorts once before in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and did not

appreciate the stares and somewhat playful comments about my “little chicken legs”.

Frustrated, I wondered to myself, *why* are my legs such a spectacle?

The most compelling outcome that resulted from discussion about the appearance of the body was the realization that weight, shape, size, and dress function as four distinct but equally important components that collectively enable the girls to formulate a version of themselves that they are most proud of and most confident in.

When asked if they were happy with their weight, only 5 of 16 girls at DSA said yes. The other 11 indicated that they wanted to lose weight in some capacity. When asked what would make their weight more acceptable, I received the following answers:

“lose a little weight”

“If I eat healthy”

“If I lost 5 pounds”

“diet”

Furthermore, the word “skinnier” appeared a total of five times, on five different worksheets out of the eleven claiming to be unhappy. Meanwhile, when asked if they were happy with their body shape, 10 of the same 16 girls responded saying yes. When asked what would make their body shape better, I received the following responses: “if I exercise”, “If I had a little bit bigger hips”, and “skinnier”. When asked to define their sense of beauty, in addition to comments made about the importance of hair, 10 out of 25 DSA girls mentioned dress. The next question was, “When do you feel most beautiful?” Responses from 15 of the 34 girls indicated dressing up, buying new clothes and looking stylish made them feel most beautiful.

This chapter aims to expose the anxiety that Black adolescent women possess with regard to size, shape, and appearance. Asking the girls to respond to a series of hypothetical “what-if” scenarios like those listed at the beginning of the chapter, provided a first glimpse into their impression of ‘ideal’ body weight and size. Each scenario was designed to serve a distinct purpose. For example, I asked the girls about gaining weight because there is an illusion that black women are indifferent to weight gain. I asked them about losing weight because there is a misconception that Black women do not have a tendency to develop eating disorders or possess a drive for thinness. Although Black women are known to have a flexible, multi-dimensional concept of body image and beauty, a broad range of tolerance is not necessarily an endorsement of one option versus another. I am hoping to extend the conversation about body beyond what the girls will tolerate to also include what they will not tolerate.

All of the scenarios that were introduced were prefaced with the words “what if” because I wanted the girls to use their imagination to apply a specific possibility to their own life. Although there were worksheets asking questions like “when do you feel most beautiful?” or “Is there anything you would change about yourself?” such questions were too open-ended and non-specific to a particular issue like weight or size. Most importantly, what-if scenarios required the participants to choose between the extremes of ‘yes’ and ‘no’, two book ends that fail to capture the possibility and reality that the girls may not have a clear answer.



## **Weight**

After being asked “What if all of a sudden you lost 20 pounds?” the girls began to casually contribute their personal opinions. One girl bluntly stated, “I’d be anorexic.” Another responded “Ooooooo my God, I would kill myself.” Perhaps her peers were used to extreme and dramatic statements because nobody reacted to the severity of her statement. Contrary to the tone that had been established by the two people responding before her, the third participant exclaimed, “I’d be like Hallelujah cause then I’d be 101 pounds!” Whereas the first few statements seemed to be gut reactions, the fourth response seemed to be the result of more pensive reflection. “I would try to gain more pounds but not eat too much so that I wouldn’t get like fat...I like to be medium size”, she says.

Through her statement, this participant is communicating the delicate balance she perceives when it comes to weight and shape. Her concept of this balance seemed calculated and somewhat premeditated; as if she is trying to process the reality that conceptually there is a lot to navigate. She displays an interest in gaining weight but then acknowledges that eating is something you cannot do carelessly, as getting fat is described as something undesirable as well. Ultimately, she summed everything up by saying, “I like to be medium size.” However, ‘medium size’ is an ambiguous idea that does not necessarily correspond to a particular weight. It is worth noting that although this participant began by talking about the prospect of gaining weight, she ended by discussing her preferred size. Now having had plenty of time to reflect on the scenario at hand, two more responses were provided, “I’d be happy” and “Instead of gaining twenty pounds, I’m losing twenty pounds- I’m happy”. While the first statement is short and sweet, the second seems to illustrate the respondent’s seemingly logical conclusion that it

is better to lose weight than gain weight, and that such an arrangement will ultimately result in happiness.

After hearing consecutive responses indicating both pleasure and displeasure with losing twenty pounds and sensing that the girls are personally invested, I say to the girls, “Tell me why you’re happy and tell me why you’re not happy”. The first response I received was, “I’m happy because I need to lose twenty pounds”, followed by the statement, “I’d just be happy, for myself”. Both of these comments seem to reflect a legitimate degree of self-awareness. To say that you *need* to lose twenty pounds indicates that you have already evaluated and assessed your body to determine your level of satisfaction with it. Although it is unknown how this person expects their shape to be impacted by the loss of twenty pounds, *needing* to lose weight is openly communicated. The second statement, “I’d just be happy, for myself” seems to imply that decisions about appearance are personal and intended to satisfy a sense of self before satisfying anything or anybody else. It is as if she expects to feel rewarded by successfully managing her body and her ability to lose weight. The next statement made, similar to sentiments expressed earlier, explains “I’d be mad because right now I’m 101 pounds so if I lose any more weight, I’d be anorexic”. Lastly, Terrie remarks, “Dang now I feel fat, I weigh 93...Carrie weighs 90 pounds and I weigh 93”.

Ironically, Terrie was also the one responsible for saying, “I would eat and then stick my finger down my throat and that would make me throw up so I’d be skinny” when asked, “What if all of a sudden you gained twenty pounds?” Terrie and Carrie are identical twins. They attend the same school and come to Girl Talk wearing the exact same school uniform. They wear their hair the exact same way and your best hope of

telling them apart is by observing the color of their accessories. They were each wearing a headband that matched their earrings and bracelet. On this particular day, Terrie's accessories were a hot pink, while all of Carrie's accessories were a lime green. After Terrie made her original statement about resorting to bulimia to lose twenty hypothetical pounds, I asked her, "do you know what that's called?" First responding "yes" and then changing her answer to "No, I don't know", Terrie waited to see if her peers could correctly answer the question. The closest guess to the right answer came from Aliyah who responded "Bolivia". By the time I corrected Aliyah saying, "Bulimia, that's a disorder", Terrie had launched into her own story. Talking rapidly, as she always does, Terrie remarks, "I heard this model had- he was so sexy- but then he stuck his finger down his throat and then he got all skinny and he died". As her peers begin asking questions along the lines of why and how could somebody do that, Terrie continues to share, "Cause they throw up and then they scar their stomach and intestines". I was amazed at how knowledgeable Terrie was about bulimia as a disease, from the act of forcing yourself to vomit down to the consequence of scaring your stomach and even dying. My next question to Terrie was "So would you do that knowing all of those things?" To which she responds, "No, psych, I would work myself and I wouldn't eat as much as I would since I knew I gained 20 pounds".

Terrie, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader weighing 93 pounds, was actually probably one of the smallest girls in the bunch once you factor in how short she was. With the exception of her twin sister a participant named Bethany, and a participant named Aliyah, Terrie was, by far, the next smallest out of the group of 10 girls. What we see as Terrie becomes disturbed about weighing three more pounds than her twin sister, is the social comparison theory at

its finest. According to Tylka and Sabik (2010), Social Comparison Theory suggests that individuals have a drive to gauge how they are doing in a given area, and in order to estimate how they are doing, they look for comparison targets in their social environment. In other words, Festinger's social comparison theory predicts that Terrie will constantly compare herself to Carrie, someone who is similar, and theoretically identical to her, to confirm her beliefs about how she is supposed to look. What is ultimately communicated is that Terrie is someone who remains conscious of her weight.

Without having recently seen a doctor or specialist, I personally, would not be able to provide someone with my exact weight. At most I could give them a range of estimates. Because of this, I was surprised by how many girls knew exactly how much they weighed off of the top of their heads. While none of the girls ever professed that they were happy with their current weight and size, all of the participants were either happy to lose weight or unhappy to gain weight.

I chose to propose the loss or gain of 20 pounds because I wanted to push the girls to consider noticeable weight gain and how they would feel if they had to compromise their body type. I have no way of knowing how, in their minds, they distributed the 20 additional pounds- whether they envisioned themselves with a belly or with a bigger butt, or their pants needing to be twice as long. I did not suggest gaining 5 or 10 pounds because it is quite possible for a woman's weight to naturally fluctuate by 5 or 10 pounds. Fifteen pounds seemed like an awkward number so I chose 20 pounds. The number seemed large enough to denote considerable weight gain without implying instant obesity. When I opened the activity by asking "What if all of a sudden you gained 20 pounds" the first response was "I'd feel fat and ugly." Next, someone said, "I'd probably

feel the same way.” Fat seems to be a label that all of the girls were turned off by. They were all different sizes and none of them openly self-identified as fat or overweight. Furthermore one referred to their peers as fat or overweight, making it was difficult for me to understand their mental concept of what being fat meant. It was the third responder who provided some clarity when she explained, “If I see my thighs poking out, oooo Jesus...I would cry if that happens”. The final comment was, “I would scream”.

Outside of describing their emotional reaction to gaining twenty pounds, some of the girls offered what they saw as practical solutions to their sudden weight gain. For example, two of the participants made the following statements, “I would go to the gym everyday or something” and “I would run a mile, everyday”. Although these are logical responses to gaining unwanted weight, the girls are essentially saying that they would *start* exercising, as if it is not an activity that is part of their current lifestyle. An ongoing fitness or exercise routine would suggest the girls’ attachment to maintaining their current weight and size. However, in the absence of this activity, no such conclusions can be drawn.-More than exercise, their most visceral reaction to the sudden weight gain is to restrict the type and amount of food they consume.

Overall, the girls at DSA shared views that were very consistent with the opinions shared by the girls at Emily K. However, no one made a comment as extreme as Terrie’s.

Just like the Emily K girls, when asked to entertain the idea of gaining twenty pounds, the DSA girls also expressed concern about gaining weight and their preference to lose weight instead. When I then asked, “What if you lost 20 pounds” Diana responded saying, “I’d be happy, I weigh like 110 pounds”. Identical to the reaction of the girls at

Emily K, once Diana disclosed her weight, all of the other girls followed suit, chiming in to discuss their specific weight. Also similar to the reaction of the girls at Emily K, the option to “run or jog it off or something” was mentioned. When I asked why gaining twenty pounds is such a bad thing, Sheryll responds saying, “I don’t know it’s hard to explain, people in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade like they work so hard to be like skinny...it’s kind of annoying though because not everybody’s a toothpick”. When I asked if anyone else felt that such a standard existed some said yes and some said no.

Of all the 7<sup>th</sup> graders at DSA, Tatianna was the only one that was considerably larger than everyone else. In a one-on-one interview, one of the many questions that I asked her was “do you sometimes not feel beautiful on the outside?” Tatianna’s response was the following, “Mmhhh...It hurts my feelings sometimes but I don’t show it to people because then they’re just gonna keep on doing it if they know that it hurts my feelings, so I’m just like ‘whatever, you know’, because some people they make fun of you because they don’t like themselves, you know, so they trying to make themselves feel better by putting somebody else down, so I really don’t be paying attention to it- but yeah”.

Although we can assume that Tatianna is exhibiting the mental toughness necessary to remain positive and self-accepting in spite of her size, she never actually names ‘weight’ or ‘size’ as the issue at hand when she discusses being teased. In an earlier discussion Tatianna remarked that if she suddenly lost twenty pounds she would go to church and praise God, however, that was the only other time she or anyone else made a direct reference to her size. Her comment about going to church, as if it would have taken a miracle for her to lose twenty pounds, seemed to be an indicator that weight

was something that she was presently struggling with. Her peers were very sensitive to this reality and were careful about calling attention to weight as something to be embarrassed or ashamed of. Overall, Tatianna's reluctance to speak directly or confidently about her size also seems to indicate that it's not something she is comfortable with.

When I asked Tatianna to tell me about the prettiest people she knew, she listed her mother and her grandmother. When I asked her why, she explained:

Because they look like me and I don't just look at their outer beauty, I look at their inner beauty because they're like really nice parents- because I don't have my father with me so my grandmother like filled in the place and like, I actually give them props for raising me like that being a single mom, and then- I just love them really much...they're the nicest people I ever met and they're really pretty. But like, some people make fun of my mother and my grandmother because like- they're not overweight but they're not skinny, so like that hurts my feelings and sometimes I feel like fighting but then I'm like, never mind- I'm not going to fight over something like that but I just like protecting my mom and my grandma but I don't care about their size, I care about them.

Tatianna was ecstatic as she talked about her mother and grandmother and seemed to feel more compelled to defend them in their struggles than she was to defend herself in her own struggles. Tatianna was very appreciative of what her parents have been through in order to raise her, suggesting that perhaps her mother and grandmother fall into a category of women whose weight is a reflection of their stress and struggle. Tatianna does not strike me as a worry free kid. I imagine that she is aware of the stress that her parents endure. Perhaps this has affected the way that she relates to food also. Perhaps

Tatianna finds herself mirroring her mother's more mature approach to dealing with life's problems, and does not even realize it. The fact that Tatianna is ready to fight people seems to be an indication that she endures mental and emotional stress and sometimes finds herself near a breaking point. Additionally, just as she did when explaining that people tease her sometimes, when describing her mother and grandmother, Tatianna avoids labeling their size as well. Instead, Tatianna beats around the bush and describes their weight saying, "they're not overweight but they're not skinny". Tatianna, seems accustomed to referencing weight in abstract, less incriminating terms, than to using words that have negative connotations to them, such as words like 'large' or even 'big'. It is hard to tell whether this is her attempt to display self-acceptance or if she is trying to pretend that certain realities do not exist when they do.

Next I asked Tatianna, "Do you think they care about their size?" To which she responds, "Like, they lost a lot of weight- they do care about their size, but if somebody makes fun of them they're not gonna just go kill themselves over that so they love who they are, and I love them too for who they are". It seems that because Taylor's mother and grandmother have modeled coping methods for Taylor, she has a greater sense of confidence that being larger than preferred is not the end of the world. Ultimately, it is quite telling that Taylor considers her mother and grandmother pretty, first and foremost because they resemble her. It becomes apparent that Taylor utilizes her parents as a source of support and validation and that they are enabling her to tap into a place of self-acceptance.

The attention shown towards weight seems to indicate at the minimum, an awareness of a thin ideal. Discussion revealed that although they are not obsessed, the



girls were certainly concerned about their weight and size. Shape and size seem to be categories where they have not fully formulated a rigid ideal. Although weight has not historically been a concern for black women, the girls do seem to be negotiating whether there is social value to being skinny. There remains considerable resistance to a thin ideal, however, largely because skinniness has not been extensively role modeled by other members of the Black community as an important beauty ideal.

## **Shape**

To explore the students' views on shape, I posed another hypothetical scenario asking, "What if all of a sudden you woke up and had big hips?" After two of the Emily K girls promptly responded saying that they already had big hips I decided to ask who else felt they had big hips to clarify their definition of "big hips". To my surprise, six girls raised their hands. Several of the girls who raised their hands, in my opinion, did not have noticeable hips. Next I said, "someone who feels like they have big hips, tell me if you like them or not". The following responses were, "I do", "I do", "I do", "I like em". The girls answered quickly and their responses were upbeat with a hint of excitement, as if they were pleased to admit that they had something that is desirable. Finally, Aliyah weighs in, "Ooo, cause you can have a killa shape...that's what my momma said- a killa shape...a good body". Not only did this statement confirm the idea that hips are considered valuable, it also explained where Aliyah got the notion that hips do not just give you a shape but 'a killa shape'. This idea was passed down and bestowed upon

Aliyah by her mom and presented as something she should pay attention to and keep in mind.

The girls also offered what they saw as practical reasons to back up their view on hips being a good thing. For example, one participant reasoned, “Sometime, big hips can give you posture. Some people don’t have big hips, they um slouch when they walk and they don’t have no shape, and no butt”. Another participant commented, “It look like it hurt when you don’t have no hips, it look like your back hurts”. Finally, a third participant added, “And plus, when you don’t have hips, it’s like, how’re you going to put on jeans? If you don’t have hips...it’s gonna be saggin down like you a dude.”

While Black women have largely been excluded from the discourse on weight and body image, a reexamination of the factors that have the power to cause body dissatisfaction has allowed Overstreet, Quinn, and Agocha (2010) to challenge the notion that Black women are “protected” from sociocultural pressures to sculpt their bodies in a particular way. Once expanding the notion of ‘body dissatisfaction’ to include breast size, buttock size, and waist size, Overstreet discovered that idealized images of physical attractiveness can be thin *and* also emphasize a curvaceous body figure (i.e., an hourglass body figure that is small at the waist with a larger bust line, wider hips, and larger buttocks). This Curvaceous Body Ideal seems to be the ideal that the girls are relating to most.

Overall, the girls were very receptive to the thought of having hips, viewing hips as an asset that was sensible and necessary. Hips were not the only thing on the girls’ wish list. When asked, on a worksheet, what they would change about themselves, some

girls mentioned wanting longer hair or lighter skin, however the most common dissatisfaction was in reference to shape. “I would change that I have acne and my shape”, “My weight because I’m too fat and chunky. Like a thickmondon and I don’t like it”, “hair, shape, skin”, “bigger butt” and “looks because I’d change how my body looks” were all responses that the girls wrote down. Consistent with what Overstreet had suggested, shape and weight were simultaneously areas of concern for these Black adolescent women.

For example, when asked how she would respond to 20 additional pounds, Janice, someone with a very small frame, explained that she would “run it off”, demonstrating her preference for less weight. However, when the conversation later turned into a discussion about hips, Janice mentioned, “actually I want some hips too because right now I’m just like... [Gesture: ‘straight down’]”. Diana responds with a tone of condolence saying, “No, Janice you know you have a little butt too”. Having a butt was described as another important aspect of having a shape. After complimenting Janice on her noticeable butt, Diana comments about the size of her own butt and playfully jests that even though Janice has one, it’s not as big as hers. After congratulating herself on having a butt, Diana proudly credits the butt squats she started doing in order to get her butt bigger and “bring the men”.

Diana seemed to be the most confident and satisfied with her body. Diana patiently listens to her peers go back and forth about their ideal body type. One girl discussed feeling like she used to be fat because she used to have a pudge. Another discussing her desire to be skinny, but not “really really really skinny”. Having heard the preferences of her peers, Diana simply asserts, “I got a nice shape”. Diana also seemed to

be the one most aware of the fact that having a certain body can be used to a woman's advantage in terms of getting reactions and attention from boys.

It is also important to consider the role that Black men's preferences for a slender yet curvaceous body type contributes to Black women's perceptions of desirable body types. Although the girls seem to understand the difference between being liked for your body versus your personality, there seemed to be a consensus among the girls that their male counterparts were at an age where they like girls primarily because of their shape. When I asked the girls to write down what it is that they think guys find attractive, the answers relating to shape were the following:

“wide hips, big boobs”

“curves”

“If they got a big butt they will want them”

“If she has a butt and boobs then she has a good body, if a girl has tight shorts or mini skirts they like her because of that too”

“big butts, big chest”

“big booty and big thighs”

Most girls gave the boys credit by admitting that they sometimes approach a girl based on her personality. It did not escape my attention that “sometimes” was always the qualifier. Overall, the girls were keenly aware of what boys liked to see. It was hard to discern the extent to which the girls' desire for a curvaceous body figure was a function of their desire to satisfy the ideal of the boys that surrounded them. Some girls, in smaller group interviews, elaborated on their belief that they should not have to make changes and adjustments to appease the boys and people that surround them. Victoria, a dynamic

young girl, responded quite passionately to my question, “what do guys usually say [girls] have to look like?” saying “they’ve got to have tight jeans on, have some heels on, they have to wear some wife beaters and they have to be super tight and wet shirt...and I’m like o my gosh, I *know* you ain’t requiring this from *me*, as being a black individual”. Victoria’s response was extremely theatrical, complete with hand motions, neck shifting and eye rolling. Her tone and facial expression made it crystal clear that she found the idea of making such adjustments to be appalling and offensive. And if someone listening failed to gather her lack of tolerance for such behavior, Victoria finished her thought saying, “that’s not how a person should carry themselves- that way. And I don’t want to carry myself that way ‘cause generally what we would call it- a hooker”.

The objectification theory states that women regularly experience sexual objectification, being treated as bodies or body parts rather than a whole person; thus, their inner qualities are neglected at the expense of their outward physical appearance (Tylka 2010). Victoria’s statement appears to be a glimpse at her effort to assert herself as someone who refuses to be objectified. According to the objectification theory, low self esteem and body shame are consequences of objectification and the self objectification, however only one of the ten girls at the Emily K Center outright admitted having low self esteem. There were several girls who exuded a clear sense confidence and self-pride, undeniably possessing high self-esteem. The relationship between self-esteem and beauty however is one of several nuances. For example, the girls could possess high self esteem for reasons unrelated to their physical appearance or beauty. Perhaps, their parents, peers, and loved ones always reinforced their competency as a student or hard worker or friend/daughter without introducing the advantages of their

appearance. This high self esteem and sense of self-worth is then capable of guarding the girls from the objectification theory. Another possibility is that the girls produce high self-esteem because they are made to feel beautiful and praised for being beautiful. However, girls who possess high self esteem for these reasons may or may not begin to equate their worth with their bodies and appearance. For example, Terrie told a story about a girl walking down the hall and boys who made comments like “o she got it good” or “she gotta donk”. In response to this, Terrie then posed the question “how is a person gonna feel good if they’re saying negative stuff?”

It is important to realize that in both scenarios a girl has access to high self esteem, but one is distinctly different from the other. In both situations, self esteem can be compromised if the girl received negative feedback regarding her appearance. However, in the second situation, the girl can learn to objectify herself and through this process of self-objectification and body surveillance, set herself up for habitual body comparisons that will more than likely lead to body shame.

The girls seem to have maintained a strong connection to a cultural norm that has traditionally pertained to black women- real women have curves. The curvaceous ideal adequately describes their concern for weight and shape- a combination of white and black ideals.

## **Dress**

Having a sense of style proved to be extremely important. When I asked the girls, “What if, all of a sudden you couldn’t find any clothes that matched?” Tatianna responded, “OH NO! I WOULD FREAK OUT”. Following Tatianna, two other girls commented, “I would too” and “I would start crying”. Still not over the idea of not having clothes that matched, Tatianna decides to speak again, “I would not go to school, I would hide under my bed and cry”, she says. Other reactions included the following: “I would stay in the house all day”, “I would give all of my clothes to the homeless”, and “my momma would have fussed me out if I went to school unmatched”. When I asked Bethany, someone who is usually pretty quiet, if she would feel confident if she had to wear clothes that did not match, she responded saying, “No, I would I feel like an ugly nothing”.

Of all the girls, Janice’s sense of style was the most noticeable and elaborate. For her, it was not just about matching a top to a bottom or wearing clothes that fit- she had an elaborate sense of style. She heavily accessorized and for the first few Girl Talk meetings wore cosmetic glasses that matched her outfit and really made her stand out. I can remember one of her outfits in particular. She wore bright pink skinny jeans with a blazer that was motorcycle-themed and featured tons of zippers on it, a bright red purse, several bangles and trendy black boots. It was clear that Janice took pride in carrying herself in a way that was considered cute and classy. In addition to Janice, Tatianna also wore cosmetic glasses for the first few Girl Talk sessions. It was clear that Tatianna also prides herself on being different and being able to express herself through her style and the clothes that she wears.

A common, reoccurring topic of discussion was how white girls cannot dress. Adrianna recalls, “One girl came in and she had a plaid skirt, and I have this plaid skirt, but she was wearing Halloween knee high socks with like orthopedic tennis shoes....really? You’re momma let you walk out of the house like that? I could understand if it was like wacky tacky day or something. Like, it depends, I know, I’m not trying to be racist or anything, but mostly Caucasian people do that”. Diana then responds saying, “Well I know if I was a white girl I would wear like, knee highs, I mean I would just wacky- I really wouldn’t care, I’d wear like two pony tails and some knee high socks but it would have to match...like some black and pink knee high socks with some black shorts and a pink shirt or something...if I was white, but you know”.

The idea of ‘if I was white’ is interesting because it is implying that each race has an expected role or profile that they are ‘allowed’ to subscribe to. Diana describes wearing knee highs and looking wacky as something that she would find fun, maybe even liberating, but ultimately it is presented as a luxury that she does not necessarily have. It is also interesting that even if she were to dress wacky, she would not be able to resist the urge to still make it her own by matching colors such as black and pink, etc. white is presented as this idea that has to be impersonated and tacitly implies that white and black people are not afforded the same privileges or experiences or expectations when it comes to how they dress and present themselves. Diana finishes by saying, “Even if I was white, I would wear like, nice clothes, I wouldn’t want to go out of the house looking like ehhhh”.

Tatianna also makes a comparison between black people and white people, but with regard to how they spend their money. Tatianna comments, “When you think about



it, a lot of Caucasian people spend money on big things, like they probably live in a big house but they don't wear a lot of clothes...only have one pair of tennis shoes. But we, we spend money on jewelry and then we be livin up in an apartment, you know...we spend money on stupid stuff". Ultimately, Tatianna is acknowledging the relationship between how someone dresses and what that can indicate in terms of their financial worth. She seems to be implying that Black people feel more of a need to display their wealth by making certain purchases while White people do not. As she states this realization, her tone suggests that she feels as if Black people have been outsmarted. Tatianna seems to be insinuating that the strategy of spending money on accessories versus investing in a lifestyle is silly or irresponsible compared to the approach that white people take. However, a few minutes later she affirms the practice of using clothes and fashion to achieve a sense of beauty and worth by saying, "As soon as my baby is born I'ma have some pink skinny jeans to tell the doctor to put em on". Tatianna should know that putting skinny jeans on a newborn baby is illogical and probably impossible, however, her primary concern seems to be that no child of her looks out of style, even if she did just come out of the womb. Tatianna also begins defending her extensive selection of cosmetic glasses and shoes, ultimately arguing that all of her possessions are important and necessary. Tatianna eventually concludes that people who ask her why she has so much stuff are only asking because they are just jealous of what she has.

When I ask Aliyah about whether black women need to look a certain way in order to be pretty she responds, "Yes, cause when I be like going out with my mom, it be like these girls, they be ghetto- they don't care how they dress, they be looking a hot mess, and look funky...I mean like you could at least put something decent on if you

going out somewhere...throw some decent clothes on like look like something, look worth something.” Aliyah is commenting on the fact that clothes and how someone chooses to dress themselves tends to be an interpretation of that person’s resources and values. As she describes people that do not dress to her standards, she does not seem very understanding or forgiving. Instead she attributes their poor presentation to not caring and being ghetto.

When talking about clothes and presentation, a lot of the girls used to the word ‘decent’ to describe how someone should look at a minimum. When I asked the girls where they liked to shop and what they liked to wear the first word out of everybody’s mouth seemed to be “Aeropostle!” followed by everyone going off on individual tangents about how much they loved Aeropostle and how cute their clothes were. Ultimately, the girls were really adamant about their ability to express themselves through Aeropostle. Other brands that were mentioned included Abercrombie and Fitch, Hot Topic, Macys, Polo, JC Penneys, Kohls, TJ Maxx, and Walmart. None of the other brands were called into question until someone mentioned Walmart. As if they had not heard correctly, one of the girls asked, “You shop at Walmart?”

Whereas at Aeropostle, spaghetti strap tops cost as much as \$34.50 (before tax) and jeans average around \$49.50 (before tax), one can find comparable tops for \$12 (before tax) and comparable jeans for \$12 (before tax) at Wal-Mart. Aeropostle items proudly display the brand while Wal-Mart clothes often lack a brand altogether.

According to Sheryll, black people are motivated to shop in certain stores because they have already been branded by white people. In a one-on-one interview she

comments, “You don’t think of a lot of White people going into Rainbows but who you think of Aeropostle and all of that stuff, you think about white people shopping in those stores and you would want to buy stuff from there because their stuff is really nice and stuff like that”. According to Sheryll, the obsession and dedication to brands like Aeropostle is really an affinity for a brand that has been recognized as ‘predominantly white’ or deemed appropriate for white people. Overall, Sheryll is acknowledging that in her opinion White people set the tone and pace and have the power of influencing what appears to be ‘cool’ and worth buying.

Something else that I picked up on was the pattern of the girls ending their stories by rhetorically stating in disbelief, “your momma let you walk out of the house like that!?” This question alludes to their expectation that their mother’s are responsible and attentive enough to approve and help control what they look like before leaving the house. In addition to implying that when someone looks bad it reflects poorly on the entire family, such a phrase situates the mother as a key factor determining how the girls dress and present themselves. Looking pretty seems to largely circle back around to “nice” clothes and the ability to convey a particular status or level of affluence. The influence and social importance of money is something the girls seemed very aware of. As overall presentation and clothing work to confirm a sense of belonging to a group or social category, hair ties in as an essential element that cannot be neglected or forgotten as it is expected to match and blend with the appearance that one’s outfit has already managed to produce and project.

When asked to discuss what they love about themselves and what they would change about themselves, the following comments were made relating to the body:

“I love my shape, skin color, smile, hair, and the way I put myself, dress, and my accessories, the way I act, personality. I would like to change my eye color and kinda my hips, but I don’t need them”

“I would change my weight because most girls my age are skinny and I would change my skin because I want clear skin”

“Beautiful means that you care about yourself. You don’t pay attention to the people who talk about you. Don’t forget the haters are your biggest fans! When people talk about me I just brush it off and walk away. I love every SINGLE thing about myself! If I had to change anything about myself, I would change my weight, because I’m fat”

“I love my sense of fashion. My outfits always match. I would change my size. That’s all. I love my personality”

“My sense of beauty is being yourself. I love everything about myself. My size, weight, figure, etc. I wouldn’t change anything”

The major findings as a result of discussing body and the relevance of weight, shape, and dress are the following. First, although the girls are largely interested in losing weight, they seemed to be striving for a Curvaceous Body Ideal as opposed to a thin body ideal. Second, many of the girls are able to identify things that they do not like about their bodies, however they do not lose sight of the things that they like about themselves. Third, part of being beautiful is being able to keep yourself up and purchase clothes and brands that make you look like you are worth something.

The economic freedom that these girls are experiencing is very unique. Adrianna’s story of the plaid skirt is interesting because she is admitting that between white people and black people, who buy the same exact clothes, the way Adrianna wears her clothes is acceptable but the way that her white counterpart wears her clothes is not. It is also interesting that many of the girls feel that they can express themselves through brands that traditionally cater to white consumers.

The girls fully expected for inner confidence to manifest itself into how they carry themselves such that confidence was synonymous with beauty. However, material things and possessions seemed to provide the sense of confidence and feeling of advantage that the girls seemed to crave and appreciate.

The girls are very protective of the style they have, perhaps because they are determined to assert a sense of autonomy. There seems to be a personal desire to distinguish between black and white, and dress becomes the grounds for doing it. The girls understand that a large aspect of getting dressed is representation. They have each picked brands that they want to be recognized by and through such a selection, also indicate the tier of consumer culture in which they feel they belong.

## **Chapter Five: “The Darker The Berry”**

**“Let me tell you, there’s nothing wrong with being Black but people try to humiliate you just because of the color you in”**

Up until now, the girls had been asked to either critique other people or share their opinion on an aspect of body image that can be adjusted to the preference of the person being evaluated. It is equally important, if not more important, to also explore the comfort level that the girls have with aspects of their appearance that they cannot readily change. The connotations that may be attached to particular phenotypes, meaning dark skin versus light skin or broad, full features versus narrow, thin features is important to examine and consider. This chapter aims to understand the extent to which the girls are satisfied with their own phenotype and the impact of colorism on their personal sense of belonging.

When my youngest sister, Monet, was about four years old she attended a Montessori school in Florida. One day my mom went to go pick her up from school and stood for a few minutes on the playground as Monet went inside to gather her things. In the meantime, a small white boy, no more than 4 years old, walks up to my mother and says, “It’s blacker than you are”. Unsure what the kid was referring to, my mom did not respond at first. But then the young boy repeated himself, “It’s blacker than you are” he said again. When my mom looked down, she noticed the boy holding a clear cup of dirt. “You mean the soil?” She replies. “It’s blacker than you are”, the boy says for the third

time. “Do you like black people?”, my mother asks him. “No, my mommy says they’re dirty” replies the boy before walking away. This was in 1995.

Discrimination based on skin tone is a problem that has always existed in America. However, what is important to realize is that outside of the black-white paradigm, discrimination based on skin tone happens to black people, by black people. Although the social hierarchy that assigned meaning to skin tone is no longer formally recognized, there is an informal hierarchy that manages to survive through urban legend and popular belief. Once skin tone became the topic of discussion, Aliyah and Tracie emerged as the two people most vocal out of everybody. Not a coincidence is the fact that Aliyah had the darkest skin among her peers while Tracie had the lightest skin. My goal is to share with you the perspectives of Aliyah and Tracie, as well as account for the many perspectives sandwiched in between.

### **Understanding Aliyah**

When I asked the girls, “What if you woke up and you had lighter skin”, Aliyah immediately responded, “Oooooo I’d love that!” “I wanna be light skinnedddd- I wanna be light skinnedddd...I wanna be my momma’s complexion, her complexion is pretty to me”, she continued. Aliyah’ words communicated that she personally felt that light skin was better than her skin, but more importantly her tone seemed to indicate her belief that her dark skin was not only unwanted, but also unfair. The way Aliyah hung on to the words, “light skinnedddd’ and started every phrase with “I wanna”, reminded me of a small child tugging on her mother’s pants, rocking back and forth crying, “I wanna go to

the playyyyyygrrounnndddddd.” Surprised that Aliyah had situated all of this attention on herself and the dissatisfaction she felt toward her skin color, I played into the dynamic by asking, “and what’s your mom’s complexion?” “Like your complexion”, Aliyah responds, pointing to me.

Aliyah continued lamenting, “I don’t like being dark skinned...cause people, they be pickin on you and stuff, they be pickin on your color, like ooooo she too dark and all of that”. When Carrie, someone who I would describe as having a medium skin tone, interjected and announced “there’s nothing wrong with being Black but people try to humiliate you just because of the color you in”, I was impressed and refreshed. I felt that it was quite mature of her to be able to conceptualize what it meant for someone to have darker skin than her and to then empathize with the feeling of injustice that Aliyah was trying to communicate. As she listened to Carrie’s statement, Aliyah released a long winded “Yesssss” as if she was relieved to feel defended and understood.

However, just as quickly as Carrie was able to jump in and support Aliyah, her next statement instantly negated all of the human decency that she managed to restore to Aliyah just moments earlier. Carelessly launching into a story, that was intended to serve as an example of how people get disrespected because of their skin color, Carrie begins, “Ok, this girl is dark, she’s like jet black, she’s like black black, she’s like the pavement black...” Before she can even finish, the room erupts in laughter. Carrie continues, now having to talk over the commotion, “No, I’m not trying to disrespect her or nothing like that, but then yeah, people be like charcoals not supposed to be brought to school, it’s supposed to be on the grill...and they be disrespecting her just because she’s black”.



Within seconds, Carrie had done a complete 360. While trying to explain how women with darker skin are often humiliated simply because their skin is darker, she, herself, hypocritically played into that exact same routine of calling unnecessary and derogatory attention to a person's skin tone just because it's a darker shade. I wonder if she realized what she was doing and I wonder if she consciously chose to give everyone someone to laugh at, at an anonymous person's expense. Audrey Kerr observes that within African American humor, there exists a sophisticated system of evoking laughter to negotiate racism (Kerr 2005). In my opinion, Carrie knew that her dramatic illustration of this random girl's darker complexion was going to provoke laughter. And if she did not, I would imagine that she at the least she knew that the description of her was derogatory and unnecessary. I also wondered if Aliyah herself was laughing or if she felt the sting of humiliation intended for the subject of the story.

Now that an element of humor had been added to the conversation, the girls begin making comments like, "My teacher Ms. Daniel, she said, the darker you are, the sweeter the juice, I was like- that sounds wrong". Continuing with the use of derogatory language, Tiffany remarks, "I don't wanna be dark skinned but I wanna be like a chocolate color and if you get to the point when you just like really really black, like this one boy, he's so black that he's purple, it doesn't even make sense." Tiffany ends her comment shaking her head in dismay, as if the boy that she's referencing has control over his skin color and chose to be "so black that he's purple".

Throughout the girls' discussion of skin tone, their language and terminology, according to JeffriAnne Wilder, preceded them. Wilder's *Revisiting "Color Names and Color Notions": A Contemporary Examination of the Language and Attitudes of Skin*

*Color Among Young Black Women* built on Charles Parish's 1946 study *Color Names and Color Notions* in an effort to discern whether the colorist ideology among African Americans has shifted or changed. Wilder's study produced a list of "40 terms that participants commonly employed to describe themselves and others in their day-to-day lives...nine terms are an exact match to those on Parrish's list" of 25 readily identifiable "color names" from high yellow to chocolate brown (Wilder 2010). Wilder found that "the terms and attitudes associated with light skin tones were generally negative; conversely, the terms and attitudes associated with dark skin tones derogatory", confirming that after 60+ years the sentiments regarding colorism remained largely unchanged, and that in many ways the language associated with colorism and terms used to express and sustain it had remained largely unchanged as well. However, what is most surprising is that within the 5 minute span that the girls had been discussing skin tone, five out of the fifteen words listed within Wilder's study as color names for 'dark' were employed: Black, Chocolate, Super Black, Charcoal, Purple. References to one derogatory terms seemed to trigger a chain reaction, and open the gate for the use of others.

What does it mean that derogatory terms to stigmatize skin color are still being recycled from 1946? What does it mean that derogatory terms are being used at all? The exaggerations created by both Carrie ("black as the pavement black") and Tiffany ("so black that he's purple") evoked considerable laughter from their peers. Furthermore, both Carrie and Tiffany seemed unashamed about making a spectacle of someone's skin color, using the fact that they are lighter and outside of the category of 'dark skinned' as justification and ammunition for referencing them in such a way. Both Carrie and Tiffany

were of a medium complexion, neither light nor dark, and they seemed to experience a quick thrill from the luxury of reinforcing the fact that they are not unlucky enough to be “jet black”.

Essentially, dark skin is being presented as something that is ugly and ridiculous. Not a single positive, or even neutral, comment was uttered concerning darker skin and among the Emily K girls, not a single person ever spoke up to question the validity and integrity of what was being expressed. Darker skinned people were continuously being referenced in relation to inanimate objects: “pavement, charcoal, grill, chocolate”, as if they belong in those categories as an item that is comparable. Ultimately, the name-calling was not just derogatory but also dehumanizing.

### **Understanding Tracie**

Throughout the slanderous remarks made regarding darker skinned people, Tracie remained silent. In fact, it was not until we were in a one-on-one setting that Tracie began sharing with me her frustrations as someone who is light skinned. Once removed from the group, one of the first statements that Tracie made regarding her comfort level with her skin tone was the following, “Just cause I’m light skinned people think of me as I’m supposed to be white, and I’m not”. As she makes this statement, not only is Tracie unhappy about the tendency people have to call her White but she also lets on to her confusion that people are expected to then *act* like a skin color. Tracie explains, “A lot of people pick on me about my skin color and the other day, a boy called me white and I didn’t like that because it’s the way people see me, cause like it wasn’t just him, it’s other

people that think of me as white and I'm not, and it just made me upset because I don't really like that- that term...cause we're all the same, it doesn't matter what skin color you are, we're all the same no matter what". As Tracie expresses herself, her tone remains one of frustration and confusion and almost helplessness. She is making it clear that she does not like being labeled as a color and prefers not to be labeled at all. Tracie never says, "I'm not white- I'm black", she is simply arguing that she is not white. Ultimately, it is not that she feels the need to prove that she is black, however, she is burdened by the persistence of people saying she is white.

A few seconds later, Tracie mutters again, "just because you're lighter, doesn't mean you supposed to be white", as if her mind is in a different place still trying to figure out why people keep acting otherwise. Ultimately, Tracie proves to be experiencing a problem of a completely different nature than Aliyah', but a problem nonetheless.

In spite of these frustrations, when asked to write down what you love about yourself, the first thing that Tracie wrote was, "I love that I'm light skin". When asked to write down a description of her sense of beauty, Tracie provided the following list, "tall, light skinned, pretty brown eyes, smooth skin, medium length hair, good small, dress appropriately, bright white smile, straight or curly hair (combed), pretty nails". During this particular writing assignment, Carrie was the only other person to comment about liking her skin color. When asked "what do you love about yourself", Carrie writes the following, "I love my skin complexion, it's like a coco carmel color. Like I'm not too white or too black". The final mention of complexion during this particular assignment was made by Bethany, who when asked "What would you change about yourself", responded "I would be lighter skinned". Similar to Aliyah, Bethany has a deep brown

complexion. Ultimately, all of these sentiments prove to be consistent with traditional understandings of how skin tone tends to affect African Americans.

### **Other voices**

Group discussions at DSA never yielded a formal discussion on skin tone.

However, it did surface in one instance, somewhat informally. I had asked the girls to share some of their preferences in terms of what they find attractive about black men and one response was “light skinned boy with tattoos”, a preference stated by Diana. After listening to them discuss whether or not the rapper Lil Wayne was light skinned, whether he shoots people, and why he has a tear drop tattooed under his eye, I ask, “So when guys are looking at girls and girls are looking at guys, do you think that complexion matters?”

The following conversation ensued between the girls, in response to this question:

Speaker 1: Yup

Speaker 2: Yup, because if they're like as black as day, you're gonna be like (starts chuckling)

Speaker 3: What's wrong with dark skinned people?

Speaker 4: I know!

Speaker 5: Diana's dark skinned!

Speaker 3: Sometimes dark skinned people look better than light skinned people

Speaker 6: I like light skinned people, I don't know why

Speaker 2: But Diana don't blend into the dark though...I'm talking about people who blend- like Donald

Speaker 7: He blends into the dark, it scared the mess out of me, we were in theater class and he was under the bleachers and all you saw were these little red shoes and we were like what in the world is that? And he was like, 'hello

Adrianna', and we were like 'wwwahhhhhh', and then he stepped out into the light and he was dark...it scared the mess out of me

Ultimately, a lot is being conveyed through this exchange. First, many of the girls acknowledge that skin tone becomes a factor as girls and boys decide who they wish to pursue. Second, being "black as day" is presented as if it is a negative thing, once again with darkness being grossly exaggerated. Before the negative references can continue, Diana assertively asks, "What's wrong with dark skinned people?" The way that she delivered this question communicated several things: a) It is silly to think that something is wrong with dark skinned people b) I am proud to self-identify as dark-skinned and c) if you are going to carry on as if dark skin deserves to have a stigma, you should be prepared to explain why. Of all the girls, Diana, speaker 3 in the exchange above, is the only one to stick up for and confidently defend the idea of having darker skin. As other speakers in the conversation begin to rearticulate their argument, they qualify their statements saying, "But Diana don't blend into the dark though...I'm talking about people who blend- like Donald".

Presenting this caveat seems to imply that it is ok to have dark skin, but not past a certain point. Consistent with the idea of there being boundaries to how dark a person can be, Lorielle comments, "I like being dark skinned but I'm real dark skinned on my face because I had went to the beach and got a tan...so if I would just be a little lighter, that would be fine". Also along these lines, Victoria explains to me in a one-on-one interview that to be black means "to have a rich skin tone that's not like anyone else's. It's actually different, and it's pretty. Some people they just dark, but this is a nice shade of brown. See I don't actually think it's black black because I think black is like, just an insult,

because we're not that dark, but we're actually brown, not black. some people are that color (whispers) I'm sad for them.”

Ultimately, even though several of the girls are willing to accept their actual skin tone, they seem to still be abiding by the sliding scale that deems hues closer to white is ‘good’ and ‘better’ and hues closer to black as ‘ugly’ and ‘unacceptable’.

Although there was a commonly held belief that “light skin was synonymous with beauty”, ultimately light-skinned women were “viewed to be snobbish because of their proximity to whiteness” (Wilder 2010:193). Meanwhile, women with darker skin tones were viewed as “loud, suspicious, unattractive, and less intelligent” (Wilder 2010:195). As a result of a ‘medium’ complexion being recognized as safe and neutral, the experiences of women in the middle are quite different from those of their light and dark counterparts as they are not as affected by the consequences of colorism (Wilder 2010:202). Being that many of the girls fall under the category of ‘medium’, I imagine that this is why some of them did not have very much input.

Through her qualitative study, Wilder was able to capture many contemporary attitudes about skin tone. For example, some women felt that the only true advantage to having darker skin was that nobody could question the idea that you were “truly black” (Wilder 2010:195). Wilder provides an analysis of the input she has collected through her study saying, “Just as light-skinned women fight to prove that they are black enough, many dark-skinned women in this study battle to invalidate controlling images- to prove, for instance, that they are not violent and not ghetto” (Wilder 2010:196). Wilder’s study confirms that the stigmatization associated with darker skin is still very much a part of

public discourse on blackness and beauty in general. “Although it is uncertain whether being medium translates into life experiences that are truly more protected and safe from the challenges of the very light skin or the very dark skin, it is clear from these narratives that feeling brown is much more significant than being dark” (Wilder 2010:201). This serves to explain the sense of entitlement that Carrie and Tiffany were exhibiting as they continued to ‘put-down’ people with darker skin tones. More importantly, “what is learned from [Wilder’s] narratives is that in the midst of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, color plays an integral role in shaping the life experiences” and create an impact beyond the realm of race, class, and gender (Wilder 2010:202).

According to Audrey Kerr, “our everyday processes of socialization absolutely require an acknowledgment of some agreed upon notion of ‘average’” (Kerr 2005:280). Even Bridgett, who was determined to convince me that she did not care about any of the preferences or hierarchies, eventually began to draw the line and categorize what was acceptable versus unacceptable. For example, when I asked Bridgett how she would feel about herself if she suddenly gained twenty pounds, her response was, “It’d all depend on how I looked to a certain degree, if I was looking tore up- like I just came from a crackhouse or something I would try to do something about it, but if I looked alright then I would just walk out like ‘I don’t care’. When I asked her whether they looked forward to certain brands, Bridgett responded, “Some people do, I don’t really, but some people do because they wanna be in style and fit in with everybody but then some people don’t because they don’t really care what people think about them”. Bridgett was the only one that thought her hair would still be pretty if she could not get a perm. When I asked, “someone who feels like they have big hips tell me if you like them or not”, Bridgett



responded, “ I don’t really care- I really don’t, cause like if they weren’t there I’d still be myself...like just cause they here don’t mean nothing”. When asked to respond to the hypothetical scenario, “What if you woke up and you had lighter skin”, Bridgett’s response was “I honestly, I really don’t care, if I came up lighter, I’d just be lighter.

Yet, when I asked her to tell me about the prettiest person that she knew, she told me about her friend and gave the following explanation, “She has the right skin complexion, like can’t nobody tell her she’s too light or too dark...she has pretty hair, like it’s long so can’t nobody call her bald headed...and she’s got like a good personality”. In spite of her denial and refusal to label beauty, she had in her head all along an ideal.

Skin tone is not the only feature that is commonly evaluated but cannot readily be changed. According to Goering, “Nose and lip formation constitutes an important part of the body-image of blacks” (Goering 1972). Generally associated with the African American phenotype are features such as full lips and broad noses. I was not expecting the girls to have opinion on details as seemingly insignificant as the size of one’s nose and lips, however, since they did I feel that it is worth including. During the slideshow activity conducted in the very first Girl Talk session, the girls were asked to observe images of a variety of African American and record their comments on a designated worksheet.

There were several comments disapproving of big features, particularly lips. Many of the girls wrote down comments such as “fish lips”, “pretty lips”, “I love her

lips”, “big nose”, “big lips, big nose”, “I hate they’re hair and one has a big nose”, “not big lips or nose”, and “big lips” (appeared on six different work sheets).

On another occasion, Tracie attempted to tell me about a friend of hers and began with “Like my friend, like her lips are kind of a little bit big and she got a big nose but I still see her as pretty...” making it known that generally speaking big lips and a big nose are viewed as unattractive but that this person in particular had proven to be an anomaly. Based on Goering’s research, by 1970 a greater percentage of black people self-identified as having narrow features (nose, lip) and less claimed to have broad features (Goering 1972).

When asked to describe to me the prettiest person she knew, Sheryll began describing her friend Marissa saying, “she’s short and has hair that’s this long, and she’s white and she has like small eyes and small everything pretty much.” This statement may seem insignificant; however, just about any time the group collectively evaluated appearance Sheryll would comment on the size of a nose as either acceptable or unacceptable. Even when asked what she would find attractive about men, Sheryll responded “They have a nice nose and eyes”. Finally I asked, “Do you think most 7<sup>th</sup> graders think they’re beautiful”, to which Sheryll responds, “Some people have big noses”. Sheryll was the only one out of both groups consistently commenting on the size of people’s features as attractive or unattractive. Although neither she nor anybody else periodically commenting on the width and fullness of people’s features never explained why larger features were problematic, never once did anybody, for any reason criticize a person or picture for possessing small features.

The major findings as a result of discussing phenotype are the following. Skin tone remains an aspect of beauty that is rewarding for some and hurtful others. More specifically, there remains a disproportionate amount of negative, derogatory attention placed on darker skin. Although frustrations do exist for black women with lighter skin, they are generally not of the same caliber and fail to demonstrate the same degree of belittlement experienced by women of darker complexions. Overall, prejudices reached based on skin tone generally related to character traits, specifically and did not aim to reflect disparities in lifestyle and socioeconomic status. Medium emerged as the preferred skin tone and was viewed as ideal due to the fact that it was unaffiliated with negative connotations.

## Chapter Six: Being Black AND Beautiful

### “Yeah, Black is beautiful”

Engaging beauty ideals held by the black community as well as the white community, black adolescent girls continue to work towards self definition.

With regard to hair, straightness and ease of management are elevated as primary concerns for the girls and an important aspect of how they describe hair that is desirable. “White girl hair” became the term most often associated with their notion of ‘pretty’ hair. Contrary to pretty hair is nappy hair, a concept the girls use to describe the kinky, natural curl pattern that they all have as women of African descent. Not only do they often describe hair that is not straight by using words such as ‘ugly’ and ‘hot mess’, reaffirming their narrow definition of pretty hair, but they also explain that having their hair ‘done’, or styled to their liking, heavily factors into the moments when they feel most beautiful as well as the moments when they feel least beautiful.

The girls idealize a grade of hair that they do not believe black people naturally have. Their solution is to invest in hair care and hair straightening beauty regimens to achieve the straight, pretty hair that they consider ideal. Ultimately, the same perception of hair as an important element of presentation and womanhood that existed in the 1920s during the politics of respectability, still persists today. The girls’ understanding of the term ‘nappy’ seems to also be strikingly similar to notions of nappy hair that existed in the 1920s when straightening and treatments became common practices. It appears that

black women today are motivated to straighten their hair for the same reasons as black women almost 100 years ago. Nappy, a word readily associated with ideas of black hair also seems to have retained its meaning- untrained and ungroomed. Unfortunately, as the appearance of black hair was successfully changed and transformed through hair care, a distinction was made between nappy hair and 'good' hair, where nappy was still synonymous with black. Despite the fact that the texture of black hair changed, the idea of black hair as nappy and unrefined and unacceptable stayed the same, such that as black hair did become shiny and flowy, words unrelated to the idea of 'black hair' were used to describe it. Today that term has evolved into the reference 'white girl hair'.

Using the term 'white girl hair' to describe the hair of African American women is a bit mind-boggling. Why would black women not claim the evolution of their hair as 'black girl hair' or just 'styled hair'? And why would they not allow the term 'nappy' to evolve with the presentation of black hair, such that it was an encompassing word for all styles and not one only capable of describing a type of black hair that most women are not proud of? Furthermore, the casual use of the term 'white girl hair' as an honest effort to describe the ideal appearance of a black woman's hair seems to demonstrate the deliberate preference of young black girls to mirror and establish whiteness as their beauty ideal.

Ultimately, just as it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for the girls today, straight hair seems to function as a symbol of sophistication, privilege and respectability. It is a hair style that you have to work to obtain, such that a perceived inability to obtain it seems to be a reflection of one's limited capacity as a person and as a woman. Although the girls questioned why people from other ethnic backgrounds had different hair, they never

seemed to question why so many black women wore their hair straight and down. Surrounded by black women who also have straight, processed hair, it is possible that it never seriously occurred to the girls to wear their hair any other way.

It is important to realize that even though the specific term ‘white girl hair’ appears to be generational, the principle of rewarding preferred hair with new terminology such as ‘good hair’ has existed within the black community for decades and is not a practice that the girls developed on their own. Instead, girls seem to be evaluating hair purely based on what they are accustomed to. The farther away the aesthetic appearance of hair was from straight, the less that they liked or supported it. (When viewing the slideshow, they made one exception for unstraight hair being beautiful but justified the appropriateness of the appearance of a woman with a darker complexion, full lips, a broad nose, and a short boy cut saying ‘that’s how they do in Africa’). I do not think they grasp the concept of hair as an entity that can be charged with social meaning. Instead, it seems to be recognized as a ‘natural’ standard that they enjoy being able to conform to successfully. Several of the girls got excited about perming and straightening their hair because they recognize it as a standard of beauty that they can realize and attain.

With regard to the appearance of the body, the girls demonstrated eagerness to lose weight and reluctance to gain weight. Although many were clear that they did not want to be ‘too skinny’, there was a tendency for the girls to remain very conscious of weight as something that needs to constantly be evaluated and reevaluated relative to the sizes of the people around them. For example, some girls admitted their tendency to conceptualize weight in terms of sizes such as small, medium, and large and being

comfortable with themselves so long as they were not a visual outlier. There was not an obsession with weight, however there was a preoccupation with weight such that a clear level of anxiety and dissatisfaction was vocalized, proving the girls to be far from unaffected or indifferent. Previous research that indicates that black women do not typically struggle with weight concerns, are also inaccurate about the harm that black girls consider doing to themselves once desperately trying to lose weight. Because apprehension about weight has traditionally been identified as an issue pertinent to the white community, my findings suggest that within a second arena (in addition to hair), the girls are adhering to standards set to symbolize ideal whiteness.

Losing weight and an interest in being skinny, however did not mean that the girls wanted to appear 'straight up and down'. Their actual weight and the shapeliness of their actual body emerged as two separate concerns, very much independent of one another. Contrary to gaining weight, gaining curves such as hips or a noticeable butt was viewed positively and understood to be valuable in terms of attracting men. The curvaceous body ideal of being thin and shapely simultaneously, describes the ideal that the girls seemed most interested in.

Just as the girls diverged from the implications of white society with regard to body figure, they also sought to set themselves apart in terms of dress, vocalizing the distinct differences that distinguish white people as people who cannot dress and black people as people who can. There was a lot of criticism in terms of how white people dress, and their tendency to be 'tacky and wacky'. However, the girls expressed allegiance to brands like Aeropostle and Abercrombie and Fitch, brand name clothes traditionally worn by white people. Dressing and making purchases of items that can be

worn and displayed as fashionable seemed to provide the girls with a sense of beauty and worth. Even though there were a wide range of brands that they all wore, the girls had reasons for deciding to shop where they did and realized that brands often reflect the degree of someone's privilege. The purpose of wearing clothes seemed to be for the external recognition of having a certain style or having the ability to shop in certain stores. Ultimately, when it comes to dress and the appearance of the body, the girls seem to have a beauty ideal that is actually a combination of ideals representing both the black and white community.

With regard to skin tone, there proved to be a negative connotation attached to both light skin and dark skin. The girls with the lightest and darkest skin expressed frustration that they get picked on by both black people and white people. In some instances they were picked on during the actual Girl Talk session. Within the group discussions about skin, there appeared to be the belief that darker skin was less attractive and less desirable than lighter skin. Although dark and light skin were both recognized as outliers, there was more negative attention and derogatory references attached to dark skin. The most offensive assertion that seemed to be attached to light people was suggesting that they were virtually the same as white people. Although some girls expressed a desire to be lighter, relative to their actual complexion, very few of the girls asserted that they actually wanted to be 'light-skinned'. Although dark skin was never discussed as an indicator of low social status or a lack of intellect, it was discussed as an inhibitor of beauty. Several of the girls felt comfortable making dehumanizing remarks and participating in the sustainment of derogatory references pertaining to skin color.



So what will it be...whiteness or blackness? One may feel inclined to say that the girls are ultimately idealizing white beauty. However, according to Dia Sekayi, “while aware of Eurocentric standards of beauty”, black women exhibit resistance to Eurocentric beauty ideals (Sekayi 2003:473). She finds that instead of adhering to the observed Eurocentric beauty ideal, black women “hold fast to a more African-centered model of beauty that encompasses both tangible and intangible characteristics” (Sekayi 2003:473). Ultimately, Sekayi is referring to black women’s allegiance to the afrocentric ideal and their supposed protection from white beauty standards and ideals as a result of their flexible attitude towards beauty. The “afrocentric aesthetic accents self-expression in multiple domains, rather than relying exclusively on physical appearance, it is a more egalitarian standard—one that is attainable by anyone with the use of imagination and self-knowledge” (Lovejoy 2001:250).

Often this afrocentric ideal is interpreted as a buffer for black women striving to grapple with issues of body image and beauty, however as a result of my research and findings, I disagree.

Overall, the girls did exhibit a degree of allegiance towards an afrocentric ideal. For example, when I asked “What does it mean to be beautiful”, I received terse answers such as “to have a good spirit” and “to have a good attitude and a good sense of self confidence and just to be very positive.” However, I also received more expansive responses such as Victoria’s explanation:

To have confidence and not being over confident but just being confident enough that you take pride...like just waking up and getting started, like I think pretty doesn’t have to mean your in like commercials, it could be anybody- how you are, or your personality can be pretty. Because some people’s personalities makes

them not pretty and they could be the prettiest people in the world and they have ugly personalities which makes them an ugly person. But then some of the ugliest people, they have like the prettiest personalities that you wish you could match...it's rare that you find a pretty face with a pretty personality...so pretty is what's on the inside as well as the outside.

Next Bridgett responded saying, "I think pretty is knowing who you are and caring about things other than looking pretty. Like acting like you really care about things other than what society wants you to care about. Like, looking good- it really doesn't matter to a certain degree...it's just like how you act and how people see you and stuff like that". Overall, amongst the girls there was a consensus that being beautiful required someone to also be multidimensional. At the most basic level, the girls expected for anyone considered beautiful to exhibit a balance between what was on the inside and what was on the outside.

When asked about the existence of a standard to look a certain way, a couple of the girls expressed strong resistance to the notion of conforming. Victoria spoke up saying, "I don't like pressuring myself to look a certain way, but like some styles I think are cute so I'll try to put it in my own way and not act exactly like that, but I'll try to put it in my own way...I think its wrong to have yourself pressured into looking a certain way because beauty comes from within and then if you show it within then you can show it outside too". This insight was then followed by Bridgett's comment, "yeah, I think that the world tries to make black people, in particular, look a certain way. It's like, if you don't look like this, you're ugly...I don't think it's right for society to do that because they lower people's self esteem doing that, cause they like have people on commercials and on TV looking like that and they just be like, wow I wanna look like that. But then

they be so upset because they can't look like that. I don't think its right." Meanwhile, other girls such as Tracie demonstrated her awareness that standards could be counterproductive by criticizing shows like America's Next Top Model for giving a false impression of body image and beauty.

While I am not trying to say that the girls are not capable of resisting a Eurocentric Beauty Ideal, I do not think that black adolescent women strive for an afrocentric ideal *over* or in lieu of the Eurocentric ideal. I argue this based on the fact that while labeled an 'ideal' the afrocentric aesthetic ultimately describes an attitude, not an ideal. Furthermore, the afrocentric ideal is not something that black adolescent women strive for, but instead a description of what they have been raised to embody. As a consequence, although demonstrating an appreciation for multidimensional beauty is a noteworthy characteristic, possessing a flexible attitude toward beauty, it is not a buffer that prevents the existence of a standard of beauty.

What the girls have demonstrated is that, contrary to Mikki Taylor's belief, a standard of beauty does exist for black women. According to the girls at Emily K and DSA, the ideal woman would possess the following characteristics: medium complexion, long straight hair, a narrow nose, moderate size lips, a nice smile, big hips, and a noticeable butt. Regardless of whether the girls wanted such a standard or even value such a standard, the reality stands that once a standard is in place, it is natural to begin reacting to it.

Although the standard of beauty embraced by these young black girls combines both white ideals and black standards, however the lens they use to evaluate whether

something is desirable depends on the specific balance struck between white ideals and black standards. For example, we see that when evaluating hair, it is more common to inflate the importance of the white ideal while the importance of a counter ideal is deflated. However, when considering weight, the importance of certain black standards such as a curvaceous physique may become inflated while the significance of white ideals about shape are deflated. The balance of mainstream versus counter culture and white versus black are constantly being negotiated, and depending on a woman's social influences. Throughout the ethnographic chapters, the social influences that the girls encounter are quite visible. For example, a mother's guidance and stamp of approval are expected to intervene as young black girls get dressed to leave the house. Belonging to a certain social class means that shopping at Wal-Mart is no longer acceptable. Belonging to an era of consumerism, where kids and adolescents have access to endless buying power, creates as a form of agency specific to the younger generation. As if it were easier to believe that white ideals are more reliable and productive toward achieving a degree of social mobility, the girls heavily relied on white ideals to demonstrate and communicate to the people around them that they had achieved a certain status. While, I never got the impression that these girls wanted to *be* like white girls, the girls displayed evidence of having been socialized to expect black people to also live up to white social standards and expectations, buying into the overall strategy of respectability.

Attaining 'respectability' means being viewed in such a way that people more privileged than you, feel that you are worthy of inclusion. The desire for inclusion stems from the idea that worth is reflected in what you have and what you have access to. People feel valued as a result of feeling validated and appreciated. People feel beauty as a

result of feeling valued; however being beautiful means remaining confident no matter what. For black adolescent women, Beauty is not just a feeling, but an equation...confidence + value = beauty. The politics of respectability argue that by refining one's outward appearance and presentation, she will acquire more respect and recognition and therefore more value, thus contributing to her sense of beauty. What is important to realize however, is that the politics of respectability requires a level of economic proficiency, as in a lot of ways appearance literally becomes an investment. Although the terms 'politics of respectability' never surfaced during conversation with the girls at Emily K or DSA, I got the impression that they understood exactly what it was. Overall, the girls were very conscious of the concept of proving themselves through their appearance. When I asked Taylor what it meant to be Black she provided the following explanation:

I think what it means to be black is to be strong and stuff like that because you know we went through a lot to get where we are...so I think you have to be strong, independent, and smart and like you'll always have to be careful with what you do because other people- they look and they have a perspective of you already when they see you so you gotta prove them wrong and stuff.

In a lot of ways it appears that the girls are consciously prepared to participate in the politics, even if they do not realize how long the struggle has persisted. Being that their generation has not experienced a movement of political rebellion, it is probably hard for them to imagine rallying for inclusion, outside of simply doing their part as an individual.

In terms of racial-esteem, all of the girls demonstrated a positive understanding of what it meant to be Black. When asked in a one-on-one setting, “What does it mean to be Black?” I received the following responses, “Beautiful”, “To be a strong, independent woman”, “I think it’s strength too”, and “Yeah, black is beautiful, black means like you’re beautiful and it means that you don’t really care- some people care about how they look but we don’t really care how we look, we just do what we need to do and keep going.”

Those that did not equate ‘Black’ to an attribute, described being black as simply possessing a particular skin tone. For example, Victoria responded, “To have a tone of skin that’s not like anyone else’s. It’s actually different, and it’s pretty”. Although a couple of girls stumbled through their answers, as if they had never heard such a question before, ultimately nobody provided any negative thoughts or remarks.

According to research conducted by Lori Smith, Ann Burlew, and David Lundgren, “satisfaction with overall physical appearance and Black consciousness appear to have a moderate relationship to each other” (Smith 1991:280). However, it is unclear whether or not black consciousness denotes the degree of immersion within the black community versus a general awareness about the black community and related issues. If you recognize the Black Power Movement as only a brief interruption, an anomaly to the norm, one must recognize that the line between white standards and black standards has been blurred in many respects. Perhaps the public memory of the black power movement and the romantic notions of what it accomplished are actually doing a disservice to our ability to understand the history of the patterns and preferences expressed by girls today.

As we discussed earlier, there are several different interpretations of how the body can and does function in relation to the rest of society. As a result of meeting and interacting with the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants of Girl Talk, I have identified Douglas' definition of body as the idea best describing the relationship between society and the bodies of these young women. Recalling from before, Douglas asserts that, each body "is a physical entity but also is a representation; it is a medium of expression but one that is controlled and restricted by the social system" (Van Wolputte 2004:253). Western culture, as Koo describes, expect the body to function "as an icon of social values by focusing on the symbolic nature of the body as a conduit of social meaning" (Koo 2004:298). However, when evaluating how these girls relate to issues of body image and beauty and participate in certain trends and traditions, it is important to recognize that in a lot of ways their expression is controlled and restricted by the standards and stigmas that precede them. I do not think the girls recognize their bodies as something political, something that they have complete control over. At this point, the girls seem more consumed with using their bodies as a form of expression to prove themselves and their worth. Hair and dress particularly seem to really impact whether the girls feel that they are worthy of attention and their confidence in deserving affirmation.

Meaning has been previously constructed and assigned to many facets of beauty, unbeknownst to them. As they transitioned into adolescents and become more active participants in beauty culture, it is important to remember their limited perspective on the social implications of things that otherwise seem normal and trivial to them in their everyday lives.

The girls are not demonstrating self-hate, but instead the fact that they are caught up in a larger struggle to define oneself without relying on definitions that preceded their efforts. If the beauty standard is going to change, it is beyond these girls to figure out how. However, as adolescents, now would be a great time to socialize them differently.



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