The Haunted Happiness of Racialised Beauty: A Performative Theoretical View

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Abstract

This chapter concerns the racialised meanings and politics of black women's embrace of hair weaves and wigs as technologies of feminine beautification, and feelings of happiness therein. Based on interviews with 18 young Nigerian women who dress and feel this way, the chapter seeks to decentre easy and ready readings of them as subjects who are wanting or trying to be 'white.' Instead it makes a case for understanding and allowing that weaves and wigs have become technologies of *blackness*, albeit haunted as such by the violence of the very notion of race as well as ongoing histories of anti-black racism. The argument is premised on a theoretical understanding of blackness as a performatively constituted category of being, that is to say, a material and cultural construct that is made in the repeated doing, inscribing and embodying of it, such that it cannot be fixed but rather can be, and is, fashioned in multiple and changing ways.

Key words: beauty; femininity; blackness; haunting; happiness; performativity

Picture a black African woman in an African city such as Lagos or Johannesburg, stepping out and feeling fabulous in a weave or wig longer, straighter, bouncier, than the hair that grows from her scalp, with a head of hair afforded to her not by 'nature' then, but rather the market. In everyday urban African life today, the sight of women with such hair is highly common and unremarkable. Weaves and wigs populate the cityscape; materially and in media images, they are everywhere. One of the young Nigerian women in the research upon which this chapter is based, Kim, explained to me that the weave was simply the latest hairstyle to have 'rolled around' to Nigeria from the black diaspora.[1] She offered a timeline of the cultural history to which she was referring, starting from the 1970s when, in her words, 'it was all about the afro,' then chemical hair straightening in the 1990s, and then the 2000s, when the trend for 'fake, like obviously fake [hair]' had arrived. When and whatever its exact provenance in Nigeria, since it got there 'fake hair' has remained decidedly in fashion. Chika, another of the research participants, emphasised that it is '*just* fashion,' in fact (original emphasis). By this she meant: 'it's not that serious, it's hair on your head. I wish people would stop making [it] like a political thing, you know. It's a personal thing.'

The politicising of weaves, and similarly wigs, that not only Chika but other women in my research sought to reject has to do with race, with 'blackness' versus 'whiteness' more specifically – a discursive opposition that, in African contexts, overlaps closely but not completely with constructs of 'Africanness' versus 'Westernness.'[2] The women were responding to a certain

[1] All the research participants' names are pseudonyms.

[2] This articulation is close rather than total because in Africa, we also find othering discourses of 'black Westernness.' An example related to the theme of the chapter is that in some of the recurring moral panics

popular view that if a black woman appears with hair markedly different than her own, it means by definition that she is turning away from her 'blackness' and instead orienting towards and desiring 'whiteness' – white looks and beauty standards. This view of various aspects of black women's beauty practice is now at least 100 years old (Thomas, 2008). It was ramped up and also especially psychologised by 1960s black nationalist movements in America, Africa and elsewhere, which promoted black people's stylisation in what were deemed 'natural' and 'Afrocentric' looks as a matter and sign of 'black pride,' and anything to the contrary as 'artifice' and indicative of not only a lack of pride but, in fact, 'self-hatred' (Mercer, 1987; Tate, 2009). These black nationalist logics collude with patriarchal ones to render Black women's bodies and dress practices 'objects of supersurveillance from within Blackness itself' (Tate 2017, p. 202). Rejecting any such pathologising and policing of those who embrace weaves and wigs, like herself, another of my research participants, Adaeze, said: 'I don't think anybody dis-*likes their natural selves*, I think they're just having fun' (original emphasis).

However sincerely or profoundly a woman like Adaeze might see and experience her hair practice as 'just fun,' or 'just fashion' to recall the related defensive cry of Chika, the issue is of course more complicated. Regardless of individual understanding, intent or desire, the fact is that black hair practice is shaped by and embroiled in power relations that long precede and far outstrip the individual. As Kobena Mercer puts it, 'all black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both personal and political 'meaning' and significance' (1987, 37). If black nationalism is one such force, even greater is the anti-black racism to which it is a response, in which blackness, including 'black hair,' is construed as 'ugly' and, for women, 'unfeminine.' Also political, in any case, are the notions of 'fashion' and 'fun' to which the women in my research sought to take apolitical recourse. We see this if, for instance, we ask after the material and ideological constitution and conditions of such 'happy objects' (Ahmed, 2010) as 'fashion' or 'fun,' or ask which kinds of subjects get to have or enjoy them not only practically but also morally and even proprietarily. Take 'fashion': changing practices of adorning, beautifying, clothing and displaying the body as an act of reflexive and aestheticised self-making and distinction (Craik, 1993). At different times, in many places around the world, the sight of young women in new fashions provokes moral panic because, seemingly daring and desiring to be different, the women are seen as a threat to the normative social order (e.g. see Bakare-Yusuf, 2011; Conor, 2004; Hansen, 2004; Weinbaum et al., 2008).

With all the above in view, we see that the black African woman happily dressing up and presenting herself in a weave or wig is a highly important, instructive and also complex figure to think about critically. Her beauty and fashion practices very much matter, located as both she and they are at the confluence of multiple, variously reinforcing and opposing structures, contexts, enactments and ideologies of power, the most obvious and dominant being those of global white supremacy and imperialism, local and other patriarchies, and consumer capitalism. More broadly construed, the point here is that fashion and beauty are crucial and legitimate areas for critical scholarly enquiry. By no means are they frivolous concerns. As significant bodies of feminist and other critical scholarship attest, fashion and beauty comprise a rich and complex empirical terrain, and they offer analytically productive and also methodologically tangible entry points to consider

in different parts of the continent about new youth cultures and fashions – of hair, clothing, music and dance – the styles in contestation have been associated with black America and the Caribbean, 'the Afro' say, or 'dreadlocs,' and have been targeted on this basis as 'not African' and therefore inauthentic and undesirable for Africans (e.g. Ivaska, 2011).

how both power and resistance work and materialise on and through bodies, as well as in subjects' inner lives.

This chapter is concerned with the inner workings and politics of beauty. Taking as its central object the passionate attachments to weaves and wigs of the young, class-privileged Nigerian women in my research, the chapter starts at what is a relatively rare ethnographic place in feminist studies of beauty, namely with women who *actually felt beautiful*, women in whose subjective apprehension and experience beauty is present, not absent, deferred or unattainable. That the women in question are black adds to the significance, and relative rarity, of this starting point, black women being both relatively overlooked in the literature, and imagined or broached even less than others as bearers of what I will call 'beauty happiness,' that is, happiness with and produced recursively by one's looks. Overwhelmingly, the black women whom we find in the literature are located in the black diaspora, which is to say, in societies in which they are clearly racially othered and devalued. By contrast, the women in the research in question in this chapter are Nigerians in Nigeria. Inarguably this plays a major if not decisive role in their reported ability and surety to attain black beauty and the happiness thereof: they are black women in a society in which blackness is not only normative but beautiful. But also utterly central to the production of the women's embodied sense of self as black and beautiful, I will show, are their weaves and wigs.

Taking this seriously, the chapter proceeds from a second starting point that is also not very common in feminist beauty studies, of a theoretical nature this time. Derived wholly from the work of the black feminist beauty scholar Shirley Anne Tate (2009, 2012), the theoretical premise is that racialised beauty is performative, that is, made in the repeated and sustained doing and citation and recursivity of it. This is a radical, even potentially unsettling theoretical position with which to broach the racial politics of beauty because it means that we set aside any notion that there are distinct, authentic, singular, fixed or fixable things in the world such as 'black beauty,' 'white beauty,' 'brown beauty,' and so on. There is only how racialised subjects do and produce and embody their racialised (and otherwise constituted) beauty in practice, meaning that said beauty, 'black beauty' for example, is always massively multiple, changing and contested. Weaves and wigs are quite evidently *one way* in which very many black women across the world perform and present their black beauty, and normative femininity, and have been for decades now, if not longer. There is a veritable, global, black feminine culture of their use (Dosekun, 2020; Rowe, 2019; Thompson 2009). As such, rather than continuing to see and treat weaves and wigs as outside of or antithetical to blackness, the theoretical position is that, in and through their common and habitual use by black women, these hair and beauty technologies enter into the production and embodiment of this racialised category. They become technologies of blackness.[3]

By way of close attention to my research participants' subjective and deeply felt accounts of their wearing of weaves and wigs, the more specific argument that I seek to make in this chapter is that as black technologies these things are 'haunted.' Drawing on Avery Gordon (2008) and Ayo Coly (2019), I mean haunted in the sense of tinged and trailed by forms of violence and injustice that may appear or feel over, or elsewhere, or other people's problem, that may even be happily declared as such by the subjects that they co-produce, yet in actuality are not. Rather the violence continues to unfold in and animate the here and now, not least through the technologies in question. The subjects that such technologies produce are thus fashioning lives and selves with and amidst repressed or perhaps unrecognised historical baggage, and in doing so they are also carrying this load forward and contributing to giving it life anew. At its most fundamental, the 'unresolved social violence' (Gordon 2008, xvi) that haunts weaves and wigs as technologies of

[3] To be quite clear, the suggestion here is not that weaves and wigs are only or exclusive black technologies of self. They may be and in practice of course they are also used by other kinds of racialised subjects.

black beauty and femininity is the modern racist, white supremacist construction of race itself, to the extent that this renders 'blackness' always either negative (again, 'ugly' and so on) or responding or reacting to such devaluations, to instead affirm and celebrate blackness. A naturalised if painful and hard to voice sense of their own 'black hair' as lacking was at the root of my research participants' orientation and passionate attachment to the hair technologies, as I will show. Thus, I argue, the black beauty and beauty happiness that the women reported experiencing and feeling by donning weaves and wigs was haunted by and reinscribed a certain, historically prior and still also unfolding black beauty '*un*-happiness.' This is not to say that the women were therefore actually or finally unhappy about their looks. Rather my contention is that their beauty unhappiness was part and parcel of their beauty happiness.

The chapter proceeds as follows: in the first section of the discussion below, I offer a brief and schematic discussion of some of the ways in which beauty, its affective and felt dimensions especially, has been theorised in relation to subjectivity in feminist scholarship. Following this I summarise a number of moves to decentre 'whiteness' from the analytic frame that can be found in some feminist scholarship on women of colour's beauty practice. I use the discussion in both these sections to continue to outline the theoretical understanding of beauty as a performative technology of gendered-racialised self-making on which the research and arguments in this chapter are based. I then turn to this research in the second half of the chapter. Very briefly, the empirical material that I present derives from a larger project concerned with the kinds of feminine subjectivities that a set of young, class privileged Nigerian women were performatively constituting in and through what I call their 'spectacularly feminine style' of appearance: a style characterised by the use of such elements as false nails, false eyelashes and immaculate makeup, in addition to long hair extensions. Based on in-depth interviews with 18 such women about their beauty and fashion practice in 2013, I argue that they see and are attempting to fashion or produce themselves as cosmopolitan 'postfeminist' subjects, or what I call 'already individually empowered' (see Dosekun, 2020 for a fuller discussion).

Beauty, Feelings and Subjectivity

That beauty 'matters' (Brand, 1999) and does things in women's lives – across their myriad intersectionalities – is obvious, as is the fact that it is imbued with power relations. As Craig puts it, beauty is a highly gendered construct 'claimed by the victors of struggles over human worth… used by those at the top of social hierarchies to assert superiority over groups they deem inferior' (2021, p. 3). Hence as already briefly discussed earlier in the chapter in relation to black women specifically, we find women's beauty rendered a matter and site of nationalist concern, assertion and investment, made to represent a larger imagined and moralised collective. This is perhaps no better exemplified by the fact of national and international beauty pageants (e.g. see Balogun, 2020; Banet-Weiser, 1999; Ochoa, 2014; Parameswaran, 2004). Beauty matters in and for everyday life, too. Because beauty is defined, appraised and valued socially and culturally, for the woman deemed to possess it it functions as an intersubjective and interactional resource, and a source and sign of distinction. It can lead to preferential treatment, more respect from others, social mobility through improved employment and heterosexual marriage prospects, and so on. For such reasons, beauty has been widely conceptualised and treated within feminist, sociological and other scholarship as a form of capital – as 'aesthetic capital,' 'bodily capital,' 'racial capital,' 'symbolic capital,' for example (e.g. see Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2021; Jha 2016).

Noting that there is a strongly visceral and affective aspect to how people perceive and respond to beauty, Jarrín (2017) has proposed recently that we can also understand and broach it

as 'affective capital.' The suggestion here is that positive affects accrue and stick to, and are circulated by 'beautiful people,' and for these people have both exchange-value in the social world and subjective or internal use-value. The exchange-value of beauty as affective capital is due to the fact that the beautiful subject can parlay into other forms of capital the positive or good feelings that its beauty arouses in others. The affective use-value of beauty are the happy or positive feelings that the subject's beauty engenders for itself; it is what I earlier termed 'beauty happiness.'[4] Figueroa (2013) argues that it is, in fact, much more as an internal feeling than external bodily property that women most deeply experience and confirm their own beauty (or perceived or believed lack thereof). They 'see' or 'know' that they are beautiful if or when they *feel* it – which may not always correspond with other sources of knowledge that they have on the matter, such as what others see or say, or what the mirror reflects.

Speaking in a different way to the idea that beauty comprises subjective feeling(s) is a fair amount of feminist beauty scholarship that suggests that women desire and work at beauty more for their own sense of self, including their sense of self-worth, than to satisfy or attract external gazes. According to the literature, what women want from beauty is to come to see, feel, experience, and produce their selves as 'normal' (e.g. Davis, 1995), emotionally 'restored' (e.g. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006), 'not shameful' (Saraswati, 2012), 'feminine' (e.g. Vartabedian, 2016), 'modern' (e.g. Thomas, 2008, 2020), 'confident' and 'empowered' (e.g. Dosekun, 2020), and so on. These are but some of the normative promises of feminine beauty; certainly we find these and more in the marketing of beauty products and services in consumer culture. Distilled to a word, we could say, again, that the subjective promise of beauty is of 'happiness.' It follows that we can understand the various practices in which women engage to render themselves beautiful 'as a series of techniques brought to bear on the production of [happy] selves and [happy] sentiments' (Nguyen, 2010 p. 362). Or to put it in Foucauldian terms, we can understand beauty as a technology of self: it comprises myriad discursive, material and affective tools and techniques which the embodied subject adopts or takes on as an act of self-making, to try to make or produce itself as a certain type of subject, including to feel accordingly. Thus beauty (or more precisely where the subject sees and situates itself relative to beauty) enters into the subject's sense of embodied selfhood or subjectivity. In all this it is also an act of creativity.

Conceptualising beauty as such, and more broadly working with a Foucauldian understanding of power as producing or engendering subjects and subjectivities, allows us to sidestep binaristic questions and answers about whether, for women, beauty is a matter of structure or agency, cultural imposition or personal choice, objectification or subjecthood, and so on. These were some of the major preoccupations in the early feminist literature on beauty (see Craig, 2006 for a brief overview). Technologies of self are social, cultural and historical; they are not practices that individuals invent for themselves (Foucault 1988). But they are not forced upon people or rendered compulsory by society and culture. Rather they are proposed, on offer, available, some highly normatively and hegemonically so. This means that people are able to exercise choice in taking them up or refusing to. The choice is not simply free and unfettered, though; it is variously conditioned, situated and so on, as well as propelled by all kinds of internal feelings and desires. Even in its most visceral instantiations, registered in and through the body before reflection or language, what draws or delights the subject as 'beautiful,' what may or may not be to its taste, is neither 'natural' or universal nor, alternatively, simply individual or idiosyncratic. It is 'embedded

[4] Also making the point, conversely, is the contention by Coleman and Figueroa (2010) that for girls and women, the perceived lack of beauty *hurts*.

in a longer history and a social context that give meaning to the senses beyond the individual' (Jarrín 2017, p. 12).

Decentring Whiteness from 'Beauty'

According to hooks: 'Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the social and political context in which the custom of black folks straightening our hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group's appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred and/or low self-esteem' (2001, p. 112). It is with this same kind of eye that, looking at a magazine cover image of the black singer Diana Ross posed naked with an extra-long jet black weave, hooks presumes to be able to read Ross' internal state, claiming: 'The longing that is most visible in this cover is that of the black woman to embody and be encircled by whiteness, personified by the possession of long straight hair' (1992, p. 71). Interviewing black women in Canada on why they straighten their hair or wear weaves, Thompson (2009) hears a number of layered reasons, including that they are concerned about their employability in their white-dominated social context. Yet in her conclusion she returns to what I earlier called a 'common sense' about black beauty pathology, writing that black women continuing to style their hair in these ways 'stunts [their] potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred' (2009, p. 855).

As Tate puts it:

> there is a myth which still circulates in feminist writing on beauty [which is that] all 'Black women want to be white' because white beauty is iconic. As such black women are reproduced [in this writing] as possessors of damaged psyches, as pathological (2012, p. 195).

In fact, it is not only in relation to Black women that we find the foregoing kind of 'myth' in feminist discourse. It is applied to *all women of colour*, including those located outside the Western world, when their beauty practice is deemed to involve the modification of what are deemed racially or ethnically marked body parts in line with, or in the direction of, what is alternately deemed white. For instance, Lee provides a trenchant critique of how Korean women's engagement in what is known colloquially as 'double eyelid surgery' was framed in American popular feminist discourse as a sign of these (and it seems fair to presume all East Asian) women's 'desire to appear more "Western" or "white,"' and thus a sign of their 'acquiescence not only to patriarchal oppression but to racial oppression as well' (2016, p. 3-4).

Lee (2016) is among a handful of feminist scholars, most women of colour themselves, who have sought to problematise and move past what they argue is an over-privileging of 'whiteness' in feminist scholarly approaches to and analyses of women of colour's beauty practice. More broadly and fundamentally, the move is to decentre whiteness from 'beauty' itself, or to 'decolonise' the field of feminist beauty studies as Tate (2016) frames it. It is vitally necessary, and highly ideological, for a number of reasons. One is to allow more complex, nuanced and closely contextualised understandings of the beauty practice(s) in question to emerge, not least as is almost certain to be expressed or experienced by the beauty practitioners themselves. Consider the example of Thompson (2009) referenced above, in which the self-accounting of a set of black women about their hair practice appears to have been overridden by the scholar's *a priori* theoretical view of what is really going on. Related, and most crucial I would argue, is that decentring whiteness from beauty studies would mean not only ceasing to imagine and position women of colour as psychically damaged and abjected subjects but also recognising, respecting and grappling

analytically with the fact, extent, intricacy and situatedness of their subjectivity, agency, desire and so on. To decentre whiteness from our understandings of how and why women of colour do and desire beauty in the myriad ways that they do is also to resist essentialist and disciplinary claims about these subjects' 'racial (in)authenticity,' which actually serve white dominance in the end by normatively 'containing the other' (Vats and Nishime, 2013). It also means resisting and debunking what is ultimately a white supremacist conceit that 'everybody wants to be white'!

A number of empirical, methodological, analytic and theoretical moves to decentre whiteness from feminist beauty studies can be found in the literature. One is to insist on putting the beauty practices or standards in question in very long historical view, such as in contentions that, in different parts of Africa and Asia, cultural preferences for fair skin predate and have contextual meanings and logics apart from white Western hegemony, such that a practice like skin lightening today cannot be reduced to the latter (e.g. Kullrich, 2022; Thomas, 2020). Another is to take an intersectional analytic perspective that is attuned to the entanglement of more than gender and race. Craig (2006), for instance, argues that historically in black America, the practice of hair straightening was about what some within the community deemed collective 'respectability' and 'uplift.'[5] Other scholars have argued similarly that women of colour's pursuit of various new beauty aesthetics, practices and technologies associated with whiteness can be understood in terms of their wish to move in the direction of the privileged structural conditions with which whiteness is associated, which is not the same at all as desiring whiteness in or for itself. In fact, it poses a challenge to whiteness by denaturalising and seeking to arrogate its privileges, if not challenging the underlying social structure *per se* (e.g. Jarrín, 2017; Saraswati, 2012; Thomas, 2008). Such beauty practices must therefore also be understood as an agentic and creative response to racist and other structural exclusions and injustices, as an attempt to move away from these conditions.

Whiteness is also decentred in the literature via consideration of the fact that, of course, there are always 'multiple standards of beauty in circulation' (Craig 2006, p. 160), and beauty is not the exclusive province or property of 'white people.' Saraswati (2012) provides a particularly instructive example of this in her research with Indonesian women who lighten their skin, in the finding that the lighter tone or shade that the women find most desirable, and aspire to, is not that of Europeans but rather the Japanese. This example also speaks to the potential value of ethnographic approaches to gendered-racialised beauty practice, to try to glean more nuance than may be possible from reading certain practices from the surface, from the mere look of them. Tate (2016) argues in similar vein that black women (and men) who engage in the practice of skin-lightening are oriented to light-skinned blackness rather than whiteness, which is to say a *black* beauty ideal. Kullrich (2023) argues, likewise, that the aim for Indian women who also engage in skin lightening is to shift shades *within* 'Indianness,' not to leave this embodied category of being altogether. Both scholars recognise that the respective black and Indian beauty ideals to which the 'shade-shifters' aspire are colourist, exclusionary, and symbolically violent, and very much have a political economy. As such, they argue that shade-shifting also comprises an act of critique and resistance of internal hierarchies and power structures within the communities in question.

In my view, by starting from questions of the very ontology of racialised subjects, bodies and practices in relation to beauty, Tate (2009, 2012, 2016) offers the most thoroughgoing, generative and also radical theoretical intervention to date to decentre whiteness in feminist beauty studies. Arguably some of the conclusions to which her theory lead her are controversial, even discomfiting, around black skin-lightening practice especially, which may perhaps explain why her positions have not been taken up more widely in feminist beauty studies in general, and by black feminists more particularly. Centred on black women, Tate (2009) contends that if we understand race as performative, that is, a discursive cultural fiction that comes to be made in the reiterative doing and embodying of it, then as I have already suggested earlier in the chapter, *any* beauty

[5] In this particular example, the beauty practices to which Craig (2006) is referring are not limited to women; black men partook of them too.

practice in which black women engage systematically and continuously, and the resultant aesthetics and looks, become black. Black women's use and embodiment of the beauty technologies, looks and so on makes them black. This theoretical view leads us to see black women who embrace weaves or wigs, for instance, not as desiring or striving for whiteness or white beauty or even a whitening of blackness, but rather making the various hair styles and looks that the beauty technologies afford racially mobile by affixing them to and associating them with their racialised bodies and subjectivities (Tate 2009, p. 130). A black woman in a weave or wig that looks or feels nothing like her own hair is making the alternate look her own in short, and in the process is expanding the ways in which black beauty, femininity and subjectivity are or may be fashioned, embodied and also conceived.

The 'Happy' Case for Weaves and Wigs

An important finding in feminist beauty studies is that, however women may see or understand 'beauty,' they tend to experience it as more absent, difficult, uncertain and/or fleeting than present, possible, assured or sustained for themselves, personally. Subjectively, beauty tends to reside elsewhere: it is 'other women' who possess it perhaps (e.g. Evans and Riley, 2013), or maybe it is a past memory or future hope (e.g. Coleman and Figueroa, 2010). For black and other women of colour, feelings and experiences of distance or exclusion from beauty may revolve precisely or especially around race and racism, because they find themselves positioned by white supremacist discourses and representations as already and always outside the category or possibility of beauty. This is a major theme in ethnographic research by Tate (2009) and Figueroa (2013) on black and mixed race women's experiences of beauty in the United Kingdom and Mexico, respectively, for instance. It follows that these scholars hear much talk from their research participants of shame, pain, anger and other negative and painful feelings.

By contrast, the affective tone of my research interviews in Lagos was almost unremittingly happy and upbeat. The women with whom I spoke reported that they habitually attained and embodied feminine beauty, and knew how to continue to do so. They also reported that their attainment and embodiment of this beauty made them feel self-confident and empowered. Bisi, for instance, said: 'When I dress up, I feel like I glow and I'm happy and I'm comfortable and I'm confident. Wherever I go, nobody can put me down.' Passionately, Sharon shared: 'I love to look all glammed up. I love the glam look. I just love it.' A third woman, Adaeze, explained that she worked on beautifying and dressing herself up every day, above all to see and please herself: 'Even if I'm at home, I wanna look a certain way, it's not even about – it's not about how other people perceive me, it's for me. It's like looking good makes me feel good.'

I argue that one reason why the women found feminine beauty to be so much within reach was because of the nature of their particular style of it, and the ensuing route to it. Their beauty practice and aesthetic were not of the 'natural' variety. To the contrary, their practice and aesthetic were highly, intricately and laboriously worked upon. Many steps, tools and products were involved to produce the women's spectacularly feminine look, as well as much skill, time, expense and even reflexive self-management (see Dosekun 2020). As I suggested above, that the women were situated in Nigeria was also necessarily a factor in their subjective experience and feeling of attaining beauty, if probably one that they took for granted. They squarely inhabited the racial bodily norms of the society, and around them, in everyday Nigerian life including media, examples and images of black feminine beauty abound. In favouring weaves and wigs for their hair styling, the women were also on trend. A few even spoke of how they had been oriented or encouraged

to take up the trend by others such as friends or colleagues, as well as by factors such as workplace dress norms.

It was for the totality of their elaborate beauty and dress regime, from head to toe, that the women reported seeing and sensing themselves as beautiful. Their weaves and wigs were utterly central, though. Diane singled out the weave that she had worn at her 21st birthday party as the cause of what she remembered as her 'awesome' appearance that evening:

> Diane: I knew I was looking nice, believe me, cause everybody was telling me I was looking awesome.
> Simidele: (*laughs*) Because of the hair or the whole package?
> Diane: No, the hair! The hair just gives you a different look.

Sharon also attested to the almost magically beautifying and transformative properties of the weave. Recalling a time when she had worn a 32-inch weave, which reached down to her bottom, she described the hair and her experience of being in and with it as follows: 'it's fabulous, it's sleek, it's gorgeous. You walk down the road, and it transforms [you].' I asked Sharon if wearing a weave also felt a certain way, explaining that 'a lot of [the other women] I've interviewed have said, like, 'oh I just like, I just like the way it *feels*, or I just feel that with long hair –.' She interjected reflectively:

> Em it's bouncy. It looks very beautiful and it's very *soft*, which is different from what, you know, our natural hair as African women, or as *Nigerian* actually, er, you know, comes out. So it's different. It's sleek, it's long, it's soft, it's bouncy, it's very good to look at (original emphases).

Sharon was a local celebrity who was frequently visible in mainstream and social media in Nigeria. She explained to me that the implication of this visibility for her beauty and fashion practice was that she was more or less obliged to continuously change her look. She was almost always in a weave or wig, she said, but what she could not do was appear in the same particular one, or in same style of the hair, for too long:

> You have to keep changing all the time. So half the time – I experiment a lot. I mean that – I've also had periods where I'm just straight on, you know, long locks, curly, waves, straight, bangs. I've done it all. And I also had a pixie cut last year, which was, I thought, was different. [6]

While not for the professional reasons that Sharon gave, most of the other research participants also reported playing and experimenting with different styles of weaves and wigs (and braids to a lesser extent). As they represented it, playing with their looks in this way afforded them a sense of creativity, fun, flexibility, and empowered, reflexive and agentic self-making. All this folded back into how and why they experienced weaves and wigs as happy-making beauty technologies. Alero, for instance, spoke of changing her weaves as often as every one or two weeks. She explained that she did so as boredom with her looks set in pretty quickly. Thus changing her hairstyles helped her to pre-empt or extricate herself from a negative affective state. Pointing to the weave she had on during the interview, she said: Like now my hair is blonde, last month it was black, and the month before that it was red. Kim was of a similar persuasion. She said: 'My hair is a constant source of amusement to me. . . . I will put in a short weave today, do it black tomorrow, do it in blonde, do it in red.' I cited Adaeze in the introduction to the chapter stating emphatically that

[6] She was referring here to a pixie-cut weave or wig, she did not specify which.

weaves and wigs were 'just fun' for black women as opposed to psychologically fraught. Reasoning like Kim and Alero above, she continued, impassioned:

> If you have your natural hair you can't do fun stuff, let's be honest. You can't do—like today I wanna have it straight, or I want it to be red and I wanna have a bang, and whatever. You can't do that. There's nothing wrong with that, but there's some people that want to [i.e. want to do all the 'fun stuff], so why shouldn't they be allowed to?

In Adaeze's almost dizzying whip through what are just some of the very many options for playful, clearly consumerist, beautifying, styling and restyling that weaves and wigs afford black women, their 'natural hair' (referring here to chemically unstraightened 'kinky' hair) is rendered singular and also stylistically static and non-pliant by contrast, and therefore rather boring for those who want more.[7] Black women who adhere passionately to the contemporary 'natural hair movement,' or 'team natural' as some call it, would surely dispute this! (e.g. see Rowe, 2021). Yet that natural hair is boring was 'fact' in Adaeze's embodied experience of it. She reported that underneath the weaves and wigs that she habitually wore, her own hair was natural. When I asked her if she ever wore this hair out, she replied: '*rarely*, [and] if I do it's like in an updo' (original emphasis). 'What can you do with it other than pack it [into an updo]?' another woman, Kim, asked rhetorically of natural hair, not only echoing Adaeze's claim that this type of hair simply does not lend itself to much but citing the same one possible hairstyle! Her natural hair, she said, was 'too tedious.'

Haunted by Black Beauty Unhappiness

Being commodities available in myriad fashions and with myriad options – of colour, curl type, length, even putative 'nationality' in the case of so-called human hair[8] – it is obvious that weaves and wigs afford women who wear them – all women, not just black ones (see Berry 2008) – the possibility to play and appear with many, many more looks than would ever be physically possible with their own hair, and to cycle through the looks at pace, moreover. Arguably the stated views and feelings of women like Adaeze and Kim that their own hair is boring, static and unamenable are at least to some extent effects of just how much more weaves and wigs can do, together with the fact that the women were in the habit of exercising the commodity option. I heard the same kind of thing in several other ways over the course of the 18 interviews that I conducted in Lagos, that the experience of wearing weaves and wigs (re)produced a deeply embodied apprehension of these technologies as simply more beautiful and beautifying than one's own hair, whether one's hair was chemically straightened or unstraightened. In short, weaves and wigs contributed significantly to producing the women's sense and experience of their own hair as 'less good' – or actively 'bad' in some cases. In this way, the technologies were also reiteratively (re)produced as 'solutions' to the women's putative hair and beauty 'problems' and 'needs,' which, it must be noted, is exactly how they are marketed and sold. The quite literal promise of the hair technologies to the consumer is to cover things up.

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[7] Historically and ordinarily in black beauty culture, 'natural hair' refers to chemically unprocessed afro hair as I say in the body of the discussion here. However, in my interviews, a number of the women referred to their chemically processed as 'natural.' I argue in my larger work (Dosekun, 2020) that this discursive expansion of the category of the 'natural' is produced by the dominant trend for weaves, i.e. in contradistinction to the weave, 'natural' becomes the hair that grows from one's scalp, regardless of what has or has not been done to it chemically.

[8] The reference to nationality is that so-called human hair is often branded, packaged and sold in terms of the putative national – and therefore ethno-racial—origins of the people from whose heads it derives. For instance, in my research, the participants made reference to 'Brazilian,' 'Malaysian,' and 'Vietnamese' hair, among others.

The less than ideal aspects, or outright 'problems,' with their own hair of which the women spoke were many and, as heard across the interviews as a whole, somewhat contradicting. Relative to weaves and wigs, the women said variously that their own hair was: 'just not as nice,' 'shorter,' 'not long enough,' 'so thick it was difficult to manage,' 'not thick enough,' '*very* thin,' 'so flat on the head.' One woman struggled to articulate how and why her own hair just made her 'a little uncomfortable.' Recall Sharon, the celebrity whom I cited at some length in the preceding section of the discussion, who gushed over the qualities of her weaves as she experienced them ('bouncy,' 'smooth,' etc), next to which she described and othered black women's 'natural hair' in somewhat inscrutable terms: 'different.' Folake said ruefully that perhaps she would stop wearing weaves so much if her own hair were less thin: 'what I really like, what I would really want is a really – I would like my hair to be fuller. Fuller and longer.' While it may have been Folake's hope and expectation that with 'better hair' she would no longer have to rely on weaves, from what Tobi described of her own hair before she had gotten into the habit of wearing weaves, she had been endowed with the kind of thing that Folake desired: hair that was 'like really long' and 'kinda thick.' Tobi did not say it directly but the allusion was clear: her frequent wearing of weaves had caused damage to her own hair; her hair was no longer as thick and long as it had been previously. Tobi co-presented a television show. In her account, it was the gendered beauty and appearance expectations of this role that had oriented her to weaves in the first place: 'I started fixing [weaves] regularly, you know, cause of work you have to look fly and [our] hair is harder to manage… cause our hair is frizzy and everything.' She did not problematise or denaturalise at all that 'our hair' was less 'fly' and so on, she stated it as fact.

Sade also shared that she had experienced damage to her own hair in her pursuit of both beauty and a so-called professional look. As it so happened, Sade also had an on-screen role in television, like Tobi. She recalled that she had had an afro when she first started in this post but she had not been allowed to appear on air with it. Also much like Tobi, her explanation of the reason why was matter of fact: 'because it's not exactly the standard.' Sade went on to tell me that, in working her way through different kinds of hairstyles to solve the 'problem' of her afro that she had suffered from traction alopecia, losing some hair along her hairline. To cover this up, she had arrived at wigs. Also like Tobi, in her recounting to me of her experience, Sade did not question or problematise in the slightest the appearance demands and norms of her work, or that the fact that these had set her on a path to hair loss. Nor did she express sad or negative feelings over the loss, which we could reasonably expect a young woman in her early 30s to feel. She did not even linger over it in the interview. Rather Sade moved on promptly and voiced what struck and even shocked me in the interview as a *hyper-celebratory* recuperation of her hair journey, her hair loss included, insisting on her continued attainment, embodiment and enjoyment of beauty, fashionability and the happiness that these things produce:

> Sade: So now I just have a two-second salon in my house, and I have ten wigs.
> Simi: Yeah, I was gonna say, and you have variety probably.
> Sade: *(affecting an African-American accent) Ah girl! (returning to her regular accent)* Like in one day I can actually have three hairdos, and I don't care *(claps her hands*) because this is, that's how I feel.

What weaves and wigs also promised to cover up, I argue, were the women's various bad or unhappy feelings about their own hair. At base, the feeling was that their hair was lacking relative to some unspoken, somewhat spectral 'standard,' hence the best thing to do was to put it away, out of view, tucked under a weave or wig. In practice though, the hair technologies could not meet the latter promise fully or satisfactorily. For one thing, weaves and wigs can be worn only temporarily: at some point they simply have to come off, and there one's own hair would be,

possibly even in a degraded state as in both Tobi and Sade's reported experience. At best weaves and wigs might defer one's bad hair feelings until another day. A second reason why the beauty technologies could not fully resolve the women's relative unhappiness with or about their own hair is that, as I have been arguing and seeking to illustrate with the last few excerpts from the interviews cited above, the hair technologies and the women's happy experience of wearing them (re)animated and amplified their sense of their own hair as comparatively deficient. Most importantly, weaves and wigs did and could not solve the women's various bad hair feelings because they do and can not get at the root of them. The bad feelings are historical and social, hence shared and systemic. They comprise a gendered, transnational black structure of feeling, produced by long and deep histories of anti-black racism, that 'black hair' is indeed not good enough for feminine beauty, if not plain bad or antithetical to it, such that black beauty and femininity must be done differently, other black hair technologies must be deployed.

For having heard all the foregoing from the women in my research about their weaves and wigs relative to their own hair, I proposed in my earlier work that we can conceptualise the former as 'unhappy' technologies of black beauty, femininity and embodied subjectivity (Dosekun, 2015, 2020). I did so drawing on Ahmed, who conceptualises unhappy objects as things that 'embody the persistence of histories that cannot be wished away by happiness' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 159). By conceptualising weaves and wigs in these terms, I argued that we could keep two crucial things in view at once: one, centuries of white supremacist symbolic, material and other violence against black people that *per force* enters into the ongoing conditions and constitution of blackness; two, the fact that despite this violence, black women (and other black people) are and remain subjects with desires, agency, subjectivity reflexivity and more, subjects who continue to fashion lives and selves as best as they can.

On reflection, I think that in this conceptual proposition the 'happiness' that the women in my research spoke of feeling, experiencing and enjoying when they donned their weaves and wigs, touched the hair, felt its heft and movement against their bodies, caught a glimpse of their beautified/beautiful selves in the mirror, imagined how they looked, and so on, fell out of view. As the women spoke to me of all these things in the interviews, their pleasure was palpable. To persist with a view of weaves and wigs as unhappy technologies of black beauty and femininity is, I think, to ignore or fail to respect and take this seriously, which is also to commit yet another kind of racialised violence against black women – a scholarly and theoretical one, this time. Hence it is that I propose, now, that we might better understand the hair and beauty technologies, and the subjects that they produce, as *haunted* rather than simply unhappy, that is to say, 'vexed by the phantoms of modernity's violence' (2008, 19), 'tied to historical and social effects' (2008, p. 210). If subjects are haunted, it is not that they are simply or univocally or ineluctably 'oppressed,' 'traumatised,' or again 'unhappy' and so on, or that they do or cannot live on. It is to say, quite simply, that 'life is complicated' (Gordon, 2008, 3), and lived in and with and despite various histories and hurts. The fact is that under past, present and continued violent social conditions, the various things that people may find do or might make for at least some happiness, may often be, maybe cannot but be, entangled deeply and necessarily with some unhappy spectre.

Conclusion

Black urban African women today 'care about wearing stylish weaves [and wigs] for the complexly layered, and simple, joys of dressing up: to demonstrate their engagement in… city, national, and global circuits of style; to look smart for others and for themselves; to feel good' (Faria and Jones, 2020, p. 95). This chapter has focused on the most intimate layer of this care for

a set of young women in Lagos, attending to how 'beauty,' and also 'happiness' because of beauty, looks and feels to them. Honing in on what might seem like very small, hyper-subjective or even shallow things to be of critical sociological concern, pertaining to African women moreover, the chapter has sought to show that in fact they matter greatly. The most macro and longstanding of modern social structures and forces are implicated, including as these are mediated in and by everyday life and institutions, interpersonal relationships, and across transnational cultural communities and circuits. This notwithstanding, the chapter has not told, nor sought to tell, an easy and familiar story about power as determinant, which, in this case, would be a story of white and male dominance, such as that 'black women want to be white because this is what is beautiful.' Nor, alternately, has it been a celebratory story of 'resistance,' of something like radical black authenticity, alterity and refusal. Proceeding from a theoretical view of both beauty and subjectivity as performatively produced and also productive, and via a close reading of what the women in my research actually had to say for themselves, the argument that the chapter has sought to flesh out is about how subjects may not only live on with conditions that they may think, feel or wish, are behind them, or no longer matter, but try actively, even passionately, to take up and rework the term and logics of these conditions, so as to make them mean, look and feel differently in the present and, perhaps, the future. The argument is about how subjects, black women in this case, may live actively, and again even passionately, with ghosts.

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