

When the Question of Dreadlocks Leads The Transatlantic Slave Trade and

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Réfléchissant sur son enfance et la notion de « cheveux » dans les communautés afro-américaines, l'auteure as-

associate my hair, somewhat modeling my innocent admiration of Mickey, with those young teens

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sure que l'héritage de l'esclavage pour les Africaines de la diaspora a eu un impact sur leur vie de tous les jours. Elle ajoute que l'impact de l'éducation à l'occidentale, surtout les privilèges rattachés à la beauté, menacent la survie de l'héritage africain.

Hair was an important issue in my family. At first, my hair was something that had to be “tended to” like tending to a garden. My grandmother and then my mother had this task of forcing “uncontrollable” hair to conform to two plaits arranged one on each side of my head. In school pictures, with the white blouse tucked away neatly within the blue sashes of my uniform, my braids make me appear as some misguided Mickey Mouse, with “ears” phallic like, pointing downward toward the side of my face, instead of rounded-off like the ears of Mickey Mouse.

In fact, Mickey Mouse was my favorite Walt Disney character, although I never understood his connection to Disney nor did I suspect that my faithful attention to the Mickey Mouse show or my insistence on all things Mickey would result in the mega-million dollar Disney circus industry of today. I did not

who today diet or install hair on their heads in order to emulate Barbie. Who, at that young age, suspects political, indeed, cultural sabotage?

My grandmother's hair was long and wavy. The colour of her skin was creamy yellow. Early on, I understood that she and my grandfather journeyed to Chicago from New Orleans. Actually, my grandfather came first and then sometime afterward sent for my grandmother. The darker hue of my grandfather's skin presented a dilemma in my mental sorting out of what constituted New Orleans. His hair, wavy too, was more similar to mine rather than my grandmother's easy to comb hair. However, children did not voice their contemplations, particularly when taught to mind their schoolwork or their daily chores. For a while, I associated my grandmother's hair with two words: New Orleans. Later when I came to understand that my grandfather was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, this information made me to wonder how they met. Which of the two initiated the relationship? What was said or experienced to make them leave family and home and never look back. Which of the two—in New Orleans? New Orleans. The

birthplace, I later discovered, of legalized segregation, Jim Crow.

From within our home, hovering within the rooms of my grandparents' home came an ugly question with eyes and voice, seeking my attention. This basement flat my grandfather tended as janitor, was my home for the first eleven years of my life. If asked if it were a good life, I would have answered affirmatively then because I got to live the life of an only child, an oldest grandchild. I was free to spend my time reading. My grandfather never let a book reach the furnace fires. When read, I was not a sickly little girl but the lucky girl in Silas Marner of the “ghostwriter” of Agatha Christie novels. Floating with Jim and Huck on our raft and venturing with Hemingway on planes that flew us to Europe, I pretended not to see the eyes or hear the voice of the question, for to respond to the voice with eyes and voice of my own would change everything good forever. So it seemed natural, the order of things good that I had to go to the living room in the evening to talk to my grandfather after spending daytime hours in the kitchen with my grandmother. Alternatively, I would sit with my grandmother in the backyard until the stars were visible and the neighbours were quiet. At night, I said good night to my grandfather already asleep in a back room bedroom, good night to two uncles in their rooms, before my grandmother prepared me to sleep in her front bedroom.

The Great Depression. 1929. My grandmother, telling how she stood in the lines designated for whites in Chicago in order to receive food rations for her children, is preparing to

to Knowledge and Empowerment Its Legacy of Westernized Education

“press” my hair. She had one son already, she said, and later that year, she bore my mother. I could not associate the political and the cultural implications of the narrative to anything I was aware of then, even though I could feel the presence of the eyes and the voice of the question wrap around my waist. I still had not heard of Martin Luther King, and the South where my grandparents came from seemed very far away. Nor was I aware of the racially charged nature of Chicago, the city where I was born. When my grandmother indicated she was ready, I sat me down on the stool near the stove in the kitchen and tried to sit as straight as possible while she ran the hot iron through my hair, wondering as I smelled the burning hair, how it would be possible for her to make my hair wavy and long like her hair. The magical erasure of tight curly hair followed by grandmother’s silence dissipated the exuberance of her accomplishing Mickey Mouse downward ears. I could not help but notice the encroaching gray in my grandmother’s hair, and the smell of burning hair mingling with the eyes and voice.

During those years of living with my grandparents, I was never made to feel inferior because of my brown skin and hair like my grandfather’s. The hovering eyes and voice, mean-spirited, would not let ago of my waist and move away but became increasing spiteful. Aside from white nuns and priests at my elementary school and a few storekeepers on sixty-first street, I had little contact or first-hand knowledge about white people. I could always tell when my grandmother was speaking to a white

person on the phone for her voice underwent a transformation that signaled everyone was to keep quiet for the duration of the phone call. However, afterward, her voice, returning to its usual tenor, sang out a “Lord have mercy,” acknowledging the other voice as a mere performance. The trick of my grandmother’s performance was not in the performance itself but in knowing that the white caller (a bill collector or landlord) actually believed the performance to represent my grandmother’s acceptance of her racial and economic inferiority. It was forthright, brave, and courageous; it was talking back. On the one hand, witnessing my grandmother’s performance, I could see nothing askew between it and the Chicago reality of spatial distance between whites and African Americans. It was reality, natural and com-

playing” white “housewives” and household appliances entered our basement flat on the Southside of Chicago, with the purpose of taking my grandmother’s mind away from home. When I read, I envisioned myself an active agent in the drama of the narrative. However, comments that passed between my grandmother and mother about how white people “had it good,” focused on the women who grandmother regarded as beautiful and smart, with “clear” skin and “fine” hair. And I am there, this little black girl, witnessing how the clear skin and fine hair was diminishing my grandmother’s brave, courageous demeanor or how else could white culture be permitted to come in our home and fashion a standard of aesthetics, bringing along with it imposing and truly ugly answers to my silent questions.

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forting. However, left to grapple with my grandmother’s telephone “performance” and her faithful attention to the daytime soap operas, I was struggling to just to take in air.

Raised in the 1950s, the purchase of televisions brought the white world to our home. In my grandparents’ home, two television sets stayed on most all day. More than anything on television during those days, the invasive nature of daytime-soap operas and accompanying commercials “dis-

In *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, bell hooks writes, “television was the medium used to colonize the black mind ... socializing black folks to passively accept white supremacist thinking” (32). Uncritical black viewers “were indoctrinated by passively absorbing the values of the dominant white culture” (32-33). Hooks declares, “those values were reinforced by a racially integrated educational structure whose values and principles were grounded

in the logic of white supremacy” (33). While our neighbourhood Catholic elementary school was not “integrated” by white children, in the ’50s and early ’60s, it served to enforce the “values and principles” of white culture. To consider the legacies of transatlantic slavery is to recognize how western education for many women in the African Diaspora is detrimental to our sense of diaspora identity.

One of my earliest school memories begins in third grade with my

grappling still with the very real implications of hair and skin colour here in the United States. However, I have come to recognize that the question of African Diaspora identity for black women is a far more complicated issue that cannot be limited to women in the diaspora. For while we here in the US are in the process of re-discovering our cultural identity, in Africa, some women are discovering the West. Recently, I had an opportunity to spend ten months

servation about education in Zambia where “holding more things European in high esteem” (65), was the norm. Now I understood. Most Ethiopians had come to believe their heritage rests somewhere outside of Africa. With this revelation, I recognized something familiar. In the Ethiopia as in the U.S., education meant accepting and further validating knowledge pertaining to western civilization.

In the U.S., we take for granted knowledge about the continent of Africa. We write and lecture about “African heritage,” assuming we are on the same page, the same wavelength with African people, as if they were an homogenous grouping of people, under the same red, green, and yellow flag. Perhaps, it is our fantasy, a wished-for-desire, like that of the “American dream,” all the while forgetting how African countries toiled under European colonialism, and this toiling included a mental toiling of African minds that to survive required an acquisition of the European mind. Thus, I wondered what this administrator or any of the faculty in this rural university in Ethiopia would make of my dreads. Two years before, I decided to no longer purchase a box of relaxer. I wanted nothing more to do with the business of trying to conform to a prescribed “norm” of how hair should look and fee. I wanted to be free to run my fingers through a texture of hair that was normal for me. I assumed that Africans, of all people, would recognize in my dreads the desire to just be.

I was soon to discover that Africans, in this case, Ethiopians, had little knowledge about African Americans except what filtered through Africa TV where black Americans wave their hands in the air as they rap and dance across the television screen. Consequently, I was surprised and increasingly frustrated when Ethiopians would blatantly point at my hair and call out “Rasta” or “Jamaica.” If I could, I would respond by trying to tell them I was not a Rastafarian,

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recognition of the privileges garnered to children who looked like white children on the Mickey Mouse show. White nuns always seated these children in the front row of seats. In addition to light skin, the girls sported bangs and long, brown ponytails that hung down the length of their backs. These children appeared to receive private lessons from the nuns who made sure they excelled in every subject while darker children looked on in awe. Their world was clearly not ours and even their language among themselves in the classroom or at play seemed simply foreign to us. Thus, when a darker skinned girl ventured close to one of these girls, it was always inevitable that the darker hand stroked the girl’s hair and the dark voice would exclaim “fine,” “fine, good hair.” I understood how “fine” hair was not only something desirable but a rejection of all the countless other alternatives that represented our hair: culture, heritage. “Fine” hair represents the “color caste system” that, as hooks writes, “valued fair skin over darker complexions, straight hair over curly” (42). Saturating my surroundings, the eyes and voice made ready to absorb me.

Like most African Americans, I am

teaching in Africa. After arriving in Ethiopia to begin teaching, I was issued an ID-card application. Seated across from the university vice-president, I proceeded to fill out the application and wrote “*African American*” in the space next to the word “nationality.” I noticed the vice-president’s puzzled look. I could have written *America*. Wanting to appeal to his African identity, I mentioned that I was born and raised in Chicago and that I was African American. I wanted to be known as an African American. I wanted him to understand that I identified with those aspects of my African heritage, even while it was clear to the administrator that I arrived in Ethiopia from the United States. For all of that, his face remained with its quizzical look. He assumed the posture of someone willing to permit the other the error of misunderstanding. I, too, let the matter stand.

What was it that I did not understand? I recalled the campus bookstore I was shown the week before. Of some five shelves of books under the label “English,” I saw only one African author’s book, *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe. Then I recalled reading John Chileshe’s ob-

but I was an African American. They shared the same quizzical look as the administrator. "African American," they would repeat, and look as if they were trying hard to place my origin. "African American," I would repeat. "Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson," "Ichy, ichy!" However, behind my back, I heard "big money," and everything linked in their minds with American culture. While the global market has made Ethiopians aware of Denzel, and the Michaels, even King and Malcolm, and of course, the rappers, they had no idea about a Sojourner Truth, a bell hooks, a Cornel West, a W. E. B. Dubois. Their education, like the education of Africans in the Diaspora, encouraged the recognition of Western culture as the origin of civilization, minus the influence of enslaved Africans whose contributions to American culture ironically speaks of the survival of African heritage. We are all inheritors of that heritage.

However, in Ethiopia, I came to understand Ngugi's observation that western culture will use "each and every myth disguised as education, history, philosophy, religion, aesthetics, to bolster its hegemony on the one hand; and to scatter, confuse and even lead astray the entire resistance hegemony of the other sectors" (29). My dreads, originating in the natural gesture of freedom for escaped Africans who revolted from the plantations of the Americas and as a result came to symbolize for white the "dreaded" reminder of the rejection of white "civilization," served as comic relief, allowing Ethiopians a momentary call to laugh away the day-to-day struggle for survival. The symbol of my freedom and empowerment, my dreads made me a spectacle, particularly among the women disguised the reality of the most revered and respected members of the community, priests, and monks, living deep in the woods—with dreadlocks.

On the other hand, the young Ethiopian women have accepted the concept of a "modern" woman to represent the American and Euro-

pean Caucasian woman. The lure of westernized beauty parlours along Bole Avenue in Addis Ababa, galvanize Ethiopian middle-class women with money to emulate the well-groomed, blond woman of the "modern" world whose face and hair was plastered along the salon windows. After several months in the city, it was no longer a shock to witness these young women flipping long, relaxed, dyed yellow hair over their shoulders. Along with the increasing number of beauty salons, the stores on Bole Avenue featured a section on dye creams and relaxers manufactured by American and European companies. I wondered as I looked on at the women wearing braids, laughing and eyeing what seemed to them my strange hair, I wondered what they thought of the "modern" Ethiopian woman whose option to join the Mickey Mouse circus otherwise known as globalization, pulls them further away from contemplation home and heritage of the first civilizations.

I have come some ways down the road from the stool by the kitchen stove. I can no longer smell the frying of my hair. Home, too, is a place I learn to remember as well as remember to learn. At the grocery store, I pass the shelves were I used to spend time contemplating the labels on boxes of hair relaxer, and I think how hair is still an important issue, reflecting more than a crisis of aesthetic values. While I feel empowered with knowledge about my African heritage and feel free to continue to explore ways to connect to others in the diaspora, I worry that for the African diaspora the idea of connecting to anything African will be a laughable notion. And my dreads—I am keeping them!

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Her research involves the recovery of resistance traditions among African women in the Diaspora. She is particularly interested in the tradition of women griots (griottes) represented in African American and African Caribbean literatures. She is currently completing a book-length project entitled: Griottes in the Americas: Representations of African American and African Caribbean Women Storytellers.

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