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Beauty & Reparations

"Pretty privilege" refers to preferential treatment based on a person's attractiveness. Those considered attractive or within the current beauty convention even find themselves less likely to be convicted and receive lighter sentences when they are. In the West, complex, historically driven social conditioning around the social construction of beauty make it so "we unconsciously perceive attractive people as smarter, healthier and more competent, trustworthy" (Thomas 2020). Today's beauty conventions are largely shaped by the process of ethnogenesis during slavery in the Americas. Alongside creating notions of race, colonists gave enslaved Africans negative signifiers to solidify their subjugation. This included writing off the African body as Other and as ugly, relegated to both outside the convention and within the lower ranks of it. Rampant sexualization of the African woman was not a testament to whether they were considered beautiful, although many colonists fetishized them. During enslavement, the African-as-subhuman could not be considered attractive, though seductive in their exoticism. After emancipation and into the 20th and 21st centuries, this discrimination continued under many forms, the debt of unworthiness carried over from generation to generation. Looking at reparations through the lens of beauty, we see many strides have been made on behalf of African Americans empowering themselves physically. Through excavation, we have learned about African adornment and its significance to identity and hair care practices of the enslaved. We see natural Black hair resurging. However, there has been little reflection on the role imperialist nations had in the denigration of the black body. Historical

archaeological research has been essential in identifying the overarching imperialist structure as the debtor to that burden and will continue to be as it uncovers more evidence of the lives of the enslaved.

The concept of beauty in the Americas is intrinsically tied to the slave trade. When activists say, "the personal is political", they are saying our preferences not organic, but largely informed by our societies. While this can be argued, the construction of race and ethnicity in the New World developed alongside notions of humanity and beauty (which are intrinsically tied). During slavery, attitudes amongst Europeans toward miscegenation were consistently negative. Using Eugenics as a framework, the *Übermensch* has superior qualities, including being beautiful, which makes him ideal for mating with women who also fall into the top tier. These qualities, amongst other things, relied heavily on European culture and appearance. To the settlers just beginning to formulate these concepts of race and beauty, miscegenation was so egregious because, according to Eugenics, African people are of subhuman quality and thereby, ugly. For a white person to have children with a black person would essentially be tainting the white race, they would be mutants with both European (beautiful) and Black (ugly) features, and those children would never find solace in the world. In 1866, before the end of slavery in Brazil, a public health official at the time claimed: "In Brazil, the great race—that has assimilated and distilled the other two races, which are only undesirable due to their uncultured condition and ugliness—is the white race" (Jarrín 29) In Disfigurement as a consequence of deadly slave labor often contributed to the stereotype of black ugliness. These disfigurements were a measure of control: it warned the slave worse could happen, and it relegated the slave to an undesirable physical state. In "Slave Hair and African American Culture

in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries", Shane White and Graham White write "Throughout the centuries of their enslavement the bodies of African and African American slaves were surfaces on which were inscribed the signs of inferior status." (White and White 48) Frightening ugliness was attributed to and carved upon the bodies enslaved Africans to maintain their subjugation, however, this was a form of psychological control of both white and black people. Colonizers frequently raped or engaged in dubiously consented relationships with both Native and Black women. Their "exotic" appearance compared to the average European appearance evoked both feelings of disgust and lust in settlers and slave owners (those who claimed to "own" people). Colonists raped and engaged in coercive relationships with enslaved Africans and Natives. Quoting Kempadoo in "Meet Me in the Islands", Paula E. Morgan writes "Polygamy, tribadery, sodomy, rape, adultery, prostitution, incest, bestiality, pederasty and sexual profligacy as well as a perceived lack of modesty were taken as prime indicators of inferiority" (Morgan 3). Sexual domination were reinforcements of the power dynamic, a show of confused disdain for the Other.

Despite the concentrated efforts of European eugenicists, philosophers, explorers, colonists, those who claimed to own slaves, lawmakers and the general public alike to denigrate the African body, enslaved Africans were under no impressions about their value. They took care to care for themselves and the families they either had or had to create. They made sure they would have beautiful lodging and a beautiful appearance. In her article, Ferguson argues that by "steadfastly struggling to create pots and houses as well as families, colonial African Americans created a subculture that became a source of power for responding to oppression" (Ferguson 34). Ferguson creates a chart detailing the archaeological finds in the Slave Quarters

on South Carolina's Santee River. Under artifacts, we see "Sewing and Clothing Artifacts: Buckles, Thimbles and Pins, Buttons and Glass Beads" (Ferguson 35). As opposed to succumbing to the outright degradation of themselves, enslaved Africans continued to adorn their captive bodies and makeshift homes with handmade furniture and accessories. We can see a concentrated effort by enslaved Africans to reclaim their themselves through aesthetics, through beauty. Relegated to ugliness, enslaved Africans did not believe that their blackness made them undesirable or bodies to be conquered. An 1830 account cited by Shane White and Graham White read, "In every cabin the men are shaving and dressing-the women, arrayed in their gay muslins, are arranging their frizzy hair, in which they take no little pride, or investigating the condition of their children's heads-the old people neatly clothed are quietly conversing or smoking about their doors" (White and White 45). We see evidence of enslaved Africans ritualizing their appearance, retaining and developing hair care practices, making fashionable clothes from scraps. The women took "no little pride" in their hair, refuting the idea of the dirty African or the inherent ugliness of black hair. Ugly? Unkempt? Primitive? Thousands of years of African living had taught them otherwise, and they were able to pass these traditions down. Waist beads have been worn in West Africa for centuries. Archaeologists are unable to discern the true significance of the beads and their colors. DeCoarse writes, "The simple inexpensive [waistbeads] may speak more to the socioeconomic status of African Americans in the plantation setting than a shared system of belief" (DeCoarse 144) In the modern-day, many Black Caribbeans adorn themselves with waist beads, which have various meanings. However, they also serve to look good. I can't imagine that enslaved people were not using the beads for similar reasons, holding on to their practices of beauty, self-expression, and

communalism. Still, traditions become diluted, and without adequate preservation of history, descendants of enslaved Africans did internalize the grand narrative of their ugliness, undesirability, and sexual availability.

Psychological reparations are as important and imperative as monetary reparations. Graeber understands that not all moral obligations are debts, but, inherently, all debts are moral obligations. Being able to pay what you owe speaks to the value of your humanity. Comparing a moral obligation to debt, he clarifies that in debt, "a creditor has the means to specify, numerically, exactly how much the debtor owes" (Graeber 14). As the creditors, descendants of enslaved Africans can present a reality informed by our past, or the effects of contemporary beauty standards informed by past and present eugenics. While outright degradation is unacceptable, white bodies inundate all forms of media, including television, film, and music. Black bodies, when present, are often counterparts to whites' bodies, dead, menacing, or ineffectual. Sexualization of black bodies is rampant, but sexualization does not grant you entry into the cult of beauty. This is understood and internalized subconsciously, as media is extremely suggestive. In "African American Body Image: Identity and Physical Self-Acceptance", Vetta L. Sanders Thompson writes, "African-American men and women in Western society may find themselves idealizing and comparing African Americans and others to European standards of beauty" (Thompson 45). The desire to emulate whiteness is not, at least outwardly, the experience of every Black American. However, those who do are not a minority. The psychological stress of being in a body that is already denigrated compounded with a need to emulate whiteness (obtain a new body) in hopes of escaping discrimination (ugliness) can be profound. In "The Domain of Psychological Restoration", Daudi Ajani ya Azibo proposes

"proposes a practical use of reparations in repairing the mental grotesqueries that have resulted from enslavement and its aftermath" (Azibo 51). Azibo positions Americanization as warfare. If Americanization is the "Eugensis of Beauty", if it is the process of degrading the black body to maintain subjugation, the term warfare would be the correct. Besides forced illiteracy and labor, exclusion from safe housing, disenfranchisement, and exclusion from economic growth, Black Americans are still coerced to live by a "whitewashed worldview.... [a full blown] antiblack ideology link[ed] in so many ways to so much of white thought and behavior that we might speak of it as a broad worldview. Seen comprehensively, [it encompasses] all the mental images, prejudiced attitudes, stereotypes, fictions, racist explanations, and rationalizations that link to systemic racism" (Azibo 54). With this worldview, the Black American can only see themselves as somewhat inferior, quietly relegated to a lower caste. They can only see their bodies in comparison to the European standard and this could cause distress akin to dissociation from the body, leading to low self-esteem, insecurity, feelings of unbelonging and one must wonder, "why am I black if there is nothing here for me?" This can manifest in self-sabotaging and destructive ways, or it can become either awareness or entitlement, which is then spun to further the stereotype of Inherent Black Hysteria. Michael L. Blakey of Howard University had to deal with accusations of hysteria for attempting to preserve the bodies of enslaved African Americans. The centuries-old disdain for Black bodies was still present in the 1990s. Blakey writes, "While the disrespectful treatment of the cemetery and its descendant community by Euro-American controlled institutions had not qualitatively changed since the 1600s...The Federal Government did not adequately comply with [public requirements] and worked expeditiously to remove more than four hundred burials" (Blakey 54). It is beyond

reason that the Federal Government would conscientiously destroy one of the oldest African burial grounds in America. However, looking at the early constructions of beauty during slavery. We can understand why Black corpses were of no concern to the government. The subhuman, diseased, ugly slaves weren't worth the effort. They haven't been for a while.

Reparations for psychological warfare could be monetary, but it would have to come with an explanation of why and how the capital would contribute to Black psychic healing. It would have to be understood that the capital being redistributed was made possible, partially, due to the suppression of Black bodies and further suppression of Black mental health and determination. Perhaps reparations could like providing monies for Black people to build and operate and own quality clinics in Black communities. Being left out of the beauty standard is only one of the reasons that the inherited trauma of enslaved people's descendants has manifested into mental and psychic distress. Regardless, it cannot be argued that archaeological research, especially research done by Black archaeologists, into the construction of beauty alongside race is imperative to measure the psychological effects of slavery on the descendants of enslaved Black people.

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