



**WIGGING, WEAVING AND BURNING AWAY BLACKNESS:
POST-RACIAL HAIR AND HOPE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Let's not pretend Chris Rock's recent film, "Good Hair", revealed any well-concealed secrets about how Black people, especially Black women, conceive and do their hair. The names of the chemicals have changed from "conk" to "creamy crack" and the irons have been transformed into new technological toys. But the urge and aspiration to alter one's ethnic image and to parallel, if not embody, the Eurocentric paradigm, is as old as enslavement and racism and as deeply rooted and enduring as their evil effect. Indeed, Chris Rock's daughter's distress about her misdefined hair tells us not only about many among us with a racially problematized conception of themselves, but also about a pathological and pathogenic societal context that cultivates and sustains this conception.

The movie tends to focus on how we do our hair, but how we do our hair is, in itself, one of the least of our problems. However, the reasons we do our hair the way we do can be and often is a problem of serious significance. Thus, to discuss simply what we do to our hair without a credible engagement with the reasons we do it turns out as another diversion in the sense of both distraction and entertainment, done at considerable cost to a dignity-affirming conception of ourselves.

The "good" and "bad" hair issue is a question of how we see ourselves as a whole and how society reinforces or undermines our sense of self and worthiness in the world. Without this educational and corrective thrust, such a film easily moves from documentary to "mockumentary", again presenting racial pathology, real or imagined, as a perpetual source of society's entertainment. Indeed, it becomes just another way to reveal and bemoan another source and sign of pathology among us without any intent or expectation of correction. Under the oppressive gaze, judgment and

treatment of a racist society, Frantz Fanon tells us a person and people can go thru at least four stages of psychological disintegration of self: self-doubt, self-denial, self-condemnation and self-mutilation. It begins, then, with self-doubt—doubting the worth of ourselves, hacking ourselves into unworthy pieces and constantly condemning ourselves.

We begin early to suspect a racial deficiency and set about questioning the worth and appropriateness of our physical presence, let alone our mental capacities. We question our skin color, nose, lips, hair and the life-affirming loudness of our laughter. We are, something evil tells us, too Black, our hair too tightly curled or our nose too bold, or our lips too large with loveliness and our laughter too loud and celebratory of life. We must restrain and restrict our Black selves, not speak ebonics, do the second "d" in "didn't" and not concede the deep-structure tendency to change "th" to "f", saying "Roof" instead of "Ruth". And we are to take a knife to our nose, chop off our cheeks and wig, weave and burn away the Blackness of our hair and overall self-presentation. In this context of post-racial fantasies of White hair and the hope for ethnic invisibility, irrationality and self-injury run rampant.

Clearly, there is something seriously sick about a society that would cultivate even in successful, wealthy and otherwise highly-educated people the desire to dismember, disfigure or in any way "racially" correct themselves. This is a spiritual and ethical problem, especially for those among us who believe that humans are made in the image of the Divine and who at the same time believe we were made inherently unequal in Divine physical and mental endowment.

The contradiction is easily understandable, if we realize we are dealing with one of the greatest problems of our times—the progressive

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Europeanization of human consciousness and culture. This means the systematic invasion and effective transformation of the cultural consciousness and practice of the various peoples of the world by Europeans. This pernicious process is essentially achieved through educational transformation, media messages and models, and technological dominance and deformation.

This produces three interrelated results. First, there is the progressive loss and replacement of the historical memories of the altered peoples. Secondly, there is the progressive disappreciation of themselves and their culture as a result of a conscious and unconscious assessment of themselves using European standards. And finally, it results in the progressive adoption of a Eurocentric view not only of themselves, but also of each other and the world.

This, in turn, leads to damage, distortion and diminishing of their sense of their own humanity and the increasing degeneration of the cultural diversity and exchange which gives humanity its rich variousness and internal creative challenge. Examples of this are also reflected in Asians and Latinos altering their eyes and noses; yellowing their hair; lengthening their legs and other self-redesigning in the image of Europe. It also means preferring European culture to their own and diminishing interest in their own classics. And it means European things become normal and normative, something toward which compliance rather than questioning is the proper and rewarded response.

There is no people without problems or practices which could not be called pathological, arguably insane or irrational and

unquestionably self-destructive, even among the self-designated elite, elect, chosen and exalted. Therefore, when I lecture on various issues which self-designated superiors tend to see themselves as exempt from and above, I point out practices particular to them which bear considerable resemblance to ones they ridicule in others. After all, there are some self-designated superiors who strive to tame stringy hair, enlarge and pad insufficient lips, breasts, and butt, and seek color correction for an otherwise vaunted whiteness. Although this is not done because of a sense of racial inferiority emerging from oppression or a collective sense of deficient being, it nevertheless comes from personal perceptions of inadequacy.

This, of course, is said not to humiliate, but to impose a needed racial and religious modesty, shatter illusions of exemption and superiority, and conduct our conversations on the common ground of shared human weaknesses as well as strengths. Likewise, having made this point, I ask members of the so-called problematic and self-doubting groups to retrieve and embrace a more expansive conception of themselves and approach even serious problems in the most dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways.

In this way, attempts at wiggling, weaving and burning away Blackness become archaic and ethically unacceptable. And there is no need for fantasies of post-racial hair and hope of ethnic erasure. Instead, we confidently believe in the beauty of our own bodies; act in ways that define and deepen our sense of dignity; and clear space so that we can speak our own special cultural truth and walk in the world in the wonder and security of our own selves.

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