

# The importance of hair in the identity of Black people

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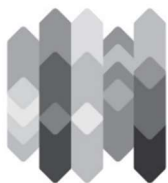
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## Résumé de l'article

Les coiffures ont toujours été importantes pour les Africains noirs et leurs descendants et sont des facteurs importants d'expression de l'identité. La traite transatlantique des esclaves a rendu difficile le maintien de ces coiffures, principalement en raison de la séparation des liens familiaux et autres. Étant donné que les phénotypes noirs étaient considérés comme inférieurs, les cheveux et les styles noirs étaient jugés laids et inacceptables. L'American Civil Rights Movement (ACRM) a inauguré une résurgence de coiffures « naturelles » soutenant une identité collective et un mouvement contre-hégémonique. Cependant, le succès de ce mouvement n'a pas propulsé les coiffures noires sur le même plan que celles qui maintenaient l'esthétique impériale de l'idéal blanc. La diminution constante de l'identité noire par le dénigrement des coiffures noires a été utilisée comme synonyme de racisme et peut entraîner une détresse psychologique et une instabilité mentale. Bien que les Noirs résident au Canada et au Québec depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, ces questions sont très peu traitées dans la littérature universitaire canadienne. Cet article théorique présente un discours sur l'importance des cheveux pour l'identité des Noirs et offre aux institutions canadiennes et québécoises une meilleure appréciation de l'importance des cheveux noirs et des coiffures pour l'identité et le bien-être des Noirs.



## DOSSIER

# The importance of hair in the identity of Black people

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Les coiffures ont toujours été importantes pour les Africains noirs et leurs descendants et sont des facteurs importants d'expression de l'identité. La traite transatlantique des esclaves a rendu difficile le maintien de ces coiffures, principalement en raison de la séparation des liens familiaux et autres. Étant donné que les phénotypes noirs étaient considérés comme inférieurs, les cheveux et les styles noirs étaient jugés laids et inacceptables. L'American Civil Rights Movement (ACRM) a inauguré une résurgence de coiffures « naturelles » soutenant une identité collective et un mouvement contre-hégémonique. Cependant, le succès de ce mouvement n'a pas propulsé les coiffures noires sur le même plan que celles qui maintenaient l'esthétique impériale de l'idéal blanc. La diminution constante de l'identité noire par le dénigrement des coiffures noires a été utilisée comme synonyme de racisme et peut entraîner une détresse psychologique et une instabilité mentale. Bien que les Noirs résident au Canada et au Québec depuis le XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, ces questions sont très peu traitées dans la littérature universitaire canadienne. Cet article théorique présente un discours sur l'importance des cheveux pour l'identité des Noirs et offre aux

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Mots clés : coiffures noires, esthétique impériale, santé mentale, Québec, Canada.

*Hairstyles have always been important to Black Africans and their descendants and are important in expressing identity. The transatlantic slave trade made it difficult to maintain these hairstyles, mostly due to separation from familial and other ties. Since Black phenotypes were viewed as inferior, Black hair and styles were seen as ugly and unacceptable. The American Civil Rights Movement (ACRM) ushered in a resurgence in 'natural' hairstyles, supporting a collective identity and a counterhegemonic movement. However, the success of this movement did not propel Black hairstyles on to the same plane as those that maintained the imperial aesthetic of the white ideal. The constant diminution of the Black identity through the disparagement of Black hairstyles has been used as a synonym for racism and can lead to psychological distress and mental instability. Although Black people have resided in Canada and Quebec since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there is very little in Canadian academic literature addressing these issues. This theoretical paper presents a discourse on the importance of hair to the identity of Black people and will add to the limited literature by providing Canadian and Québécois institutions with a greater appreciation of the prominence of Black hair and hairstyles to the identity and well-being of Black people.*

*Keywords: Black hairstyles, imperial aesthetic, mental health, Quebec, Canada.*

**Identification :** “psychological orientation of the self in regard to something (such as a person or group) with a resulting feeling of close emotional association” – Merriam-Webster

## CONTRIBUTION OF THE PAPER

This paper provides Canadian and Québécois institutions and workplaces with an appreciation of the prominence of Black hair to the identity of Black people. It will encourage academics, clinicians, and government officials to understand both how Black people structure their identities and what the role of hair is in such structuring. It will also underscore how ‘Black hair’ has become a pseudonym for racism. To support the thesis

that hair is important to the identity of Black people, academic literature is being cited. Due to the paucity of Canadian and Québécois academic literature on the subject, grey literature dedicated to the hair of Canadian Black people was also consulted.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) launched a funding call aimed at improving the mental health of Black Canadians. PHAC's website states that racism and a lack of culturally appropriate and culturally competent services negatively affect the mental health of Black people (PHAC, 2018). Part of cultural appropriateness, as elucidated by Kreuter *et al.* (2003), is demonstrating an awareness of issues that impinge upon individual and communal mental well-being and developing strategies that are targeted toward, and tailored for, the population under consideration. In addition to racism, prejudice and stereotypes must be considered when developing appropriate strategies to address this population's mental health. This article will focus on institutions as well as other areas—such as workplaces, political spheres, and child care agencies—in which Black hair politics are negotiated.

## Definition of terms

The major terms used in this paper will be defined as follows: “natural” hair refers to the hair of Black people, which is tightly curled and has not been either thermally or chemically treated, and may include hairstyles such as braids, dreadlocks, cornrows, or the Afro; “Black people” are those who self-identify as being of Black African descent (e.g. Afro-Canadians, Afro-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans); “white people” are those who trace their ancestry to European roots; “racism” is a belief that one's assigned race not only determines one's traits and capacities but also ascribes superiority to one race over all others; “prejudice” is preconceived conscious or unconscious feelings and attitudes towards others; and “stereotypes” are beliefs that associate individuals from certain groups with certain traits. No attempt is being made to create a racial essentialism. These categories are for operationalization only.

### **Black people as a group**

Importantly, Black people's sense of identity varies between individuals, as this is not a monolithic group. However, this paper is not focussed on how Black people view themselves per se, but on how they are often perceived by others, particularly within the dominant society, and the effect such perception has on the well-being of Black people. In other words, it is not Black people who are viewing themselves as a monolithic group, but those who engage in racism, prejudice and stereotyping—as described above—who refer to Black people as though they are a single entity. Such references indicate that there are common abuses and insults that are experienced by those of African descent, regardless of their own self-perceptions (Hall & Fields, 2015; Sue et al., 2008; Thompson, 2019).

Furthermore, a) those viewing Black people through racial and stereotypic prisms usually do not make natal and residence distinctions; b) most Black people in Canada know Black people in other countries; c) most Black Canadians know, or know of, Black people in other countries who have been subjected to racism, stereotyping, and prejudice; and d) the instant availability of all media means that Black people in Canada have ready access to worldwide occurrences and may empathically suffer the same indignities undergone by others, albeit vicariously.

### **Enmeshment of hair, identity, and racism**

A major historical contributor to the identity of Black people is hair (Majali et al., 2017; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; Patton, 2006; Thompson, 2019; Williams, 2019). This theoretical paper will address the importance of hair to the identity of Black people and will argue that, when natural Black hairstyles are used to deny rights that are readily available to others, it is called racism, as has been ruled by the Supreme Court of California (SB-188). Importantly, racism has been shown to be a contributor to mental illness amongst people of African descent (Utsey et al., 2008). Furthermore, as stated by Brown (2018), “due to the ways in which stereotypes function in Canadian society, the question of agency becomes crucial to investigate the extent to which Black women's hairstyle choices translate into political forms of expression that are representational of race” (p. 66).

As stated earlier, some racist assaults are universal. Hence, whether internalized or not, all Black people are subjected to the same stings. Thus, observations, questions, and suggestions pertaining to the role of hair in the identity of Black people are applicable to more than one geographical region. Moreover, according to Brown (2018), acknowledging

the many identities of Black Canadians recognizes the heterogeneity of the collective and promotes “further social and political alliances” (p. 66).

### **Importance of looking at the hair of Black people through Canadian and Québécois lenses**

Black people have been in Canada and Quebec since the 17th century. However, knowledge of Black Canadians is often viewed through American historical data. As Thompson (2019) has argued:

When I started researching Black beauty in Canada, most people were shocked there was enough material for me to write about in a book. The assumption was that the topic would have to focus squarely on African-American women. For decades, Canadian cultural institutions have consumed African-American desires and fantasies as stand-ins for Black Canada. As a result, Black Canadian representations in popular culture have been rendered invisible (para. 7).

Thompson (2008) has noted that, in addition to applying an American lens to Black people, there are few Canadian records to peruse.

Those who place Canada’s relationship with its Black citizenry within a completely favourable context may reflect Amadahy and Lawrence’s (2009) observation that “claims to Canadian specificity and difference from American contexts are primary ways in which Canadians deny the prevalence of anti-Black racism” (p. 105).

The purpose of this essay is to shed light on the fact that a major part of the identity of Black people in Canada and Quebec—their hair—has been ignored or relegated to a position of inferiority, and to articulate the psychological consequences of such relegation.

### **Background of hair to the identity for Black people**

The hair and hairstyles of Black people of African descent have always played a major role in their identity. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) and others (Jere-Malanda, 2008; Thompson, 2009) have opined that, for Black women, hair is emotive and cannot be separated from their sense of identity. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) trace the history of these styles from pre-slavery, showing that, long before the establishment of western African empires, hairstyles indicated one’s social and societal status. According to these

authors, the malleability and texture of Black people's hair allows for it to either convey information about the wearer (fashion, or social status, for example) or send messages (displaying logos and other images), with even political statements shaped onto the scalp. This reflects the position of Banks (2000) that hair is important to one's sense of self and identity. Johnson and Bankhead (2014) support the positions of both Jere-Malanda (2008) and Banks (2000) that the hair of Black persons of African descent cannot be separated from their identity as, "for both African men and women[,] hair is intricately connected to cultural identity, spirituality, character makeup, and notions of beauty" (p. 87).

The above statement aligns with the position of Hickling and Hutchinson (2001) that culture does not exist in a vacuum and requires something to provide grounding. Otherwise, culture cannot perform its primary function of "establishing and defining a group identity" (p. 95). Black people's hair, its texture and styles, have the ability to bind one to a sense of history and the communal space one occupies. Without this grounding, Hickling and Hutchinson (2001) assert, one encounters psychological distress based on the loss of protection. It is being posited that such loss is akin to being set asunder when the slings and arrows of racism, prejudice, and stereotypes are flung, with no one to turn to for comfort and commiseration.

### **Hair, slavery, ACRM, and political awareness**

Viewing most Black people in Canada and Quebec as part of a global community who 'share' in the racism, stereotypes, and prejudice already mentioned, their history can be divided into two mega sections: before the Middle Passage, when enslaved Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean to be sold, and after the Middle Passage. This enforced movement of Black people has had long-reaching consequences not only upon the identity of the enslaved and their descendants, but also upon the attitudes of the descendants of those transporting those bodies or benefitting from the 'rewards.'

According to Johnson and Bankhead (2014), as Europeans had traded with Africans long before the commencement of slavery, they knew of the importance of the myriad hairstyles to the cultural and personal identity to the wearer. Thus, slave owners' shaving of the heads of the enslaved, as reported by Byrd and Tharps (2001), was a deliberate act of dehumanization. However, as Johnson and Bankhead (2014) point out, the dehumanization went beyond shaved heads, as Europeans deemed Black people's hair as similar to animal fur and used words such as "woolly" and "peppercorn" as descriptors (p.

88). Furthermore, the enslavement of Black people engendered significant changes in their traditional hairstyles, not to mention their cultural and ethnic identities. As pointed out by Byrd and Tharps (2001) as well as Johnson and Bankhead (2014), those enslaved were forbidden to use the products necessary for appropriate hair care including their combs, the carvings on which identified their personal and tribal identities.

The assault on the identity and self-esteem of Black people extended to the work they were forced to perform. Their hair so offended the sensibilities of the white plantocracy that women who laboured in fields were forced to cover their heads, those whose duties required them to be in the homes of their owners were forced to wear wigs that emulated those of their mistresses, and men's heads were shaved (Thompson, 2009; Johnson and Bankhead, 2014). Clearly, the hair and hairstyles of Africans were not deemed to meet Western standards of beauty—standards known as the “imperial aesthetic” (Yerima, 2017, p. 649). Black women—more than men—ascribed and aspired to these standards until the ACRM in the 1960s, when the concepts “Black is beautiful” and “Black power” took hold. According to Dove and Powers (2018), the 1960s was an era when women of African descent became very invested in their hair and hairstyles, most of which were based on their understanding of their Africanness and African hairstyles. Thus, this focus on “identity” hairstyles had a strong political as well as cultural and personal resonance.

The power embedded in the hair of Black people was expressed by Craig (1997) as being indicative of the appearance of independent African nations freeing themselves from the yoke of colonialism. The emergence of such nations was central to the exploration and self-incorporation of an African identity among young Black people, resulting in “the Afro”: a thick rounded, thickly curled, hairstyle, usually—although not exclusively—worn by Black people. According to Craig (1997), this style

expressed defiance of racist beauty norms, rejection of middle-class conventions, and pride in [B]lack beauty. The unstraightened hair of the Afro was simultaneously a way to celebrate the cultural and physical distinctiveness of the race and to reject practices associated with emulation of whites (para 5).

Activists such as Angela Davis and Stokely Carmichael proudly wore these styles, evidencing their devotion to Black people and the struggle for racial equality. Craig (1997) recalls that Black performing artists and social activists such as folk singer Odetta, and jazz musicians Abbey Lincoln, Melba Liston, Miriam Makeba, and Nina Simone also wore



them as part of their “political commitments” (para 7). Thus, the hair of Black people was worn not only to symbolise a communal identity, but also as a major visual weapon in the fight for Black racial equality worldwide. Prince also considers the Afro an important symbol of one’s Blackness and of the struggle of Black Canadians for equality during the 1960s and 1970s (see Brown, 2018).

### **The importance of hair in spurring social change**

The influence of the ACRM extended Africanness into the artistic world and, according to Craig (1997), provided Black artists and entertainers with the freedom and power to see themselves as equal to others, specifically Caucasians, in the larger society—most visually exemplified through the Afro. This freedom continues to be reflected in the hairstyles worn by Black people, such as cornrows, braids, extensions, twists, and tracks (Thompson, 2008).

As noted by Johnson and Bankhead (2014), the 1960s ushered in civil rights and racial pride, the Afro, and the wearing of the hair in its natural state, such that ‘bad’ hair became ‘good’ hair. Thus, arguably, hair became a strong connecting force between members of the Black collective as well as a counter-hegemonic movement. Notably, until that time, the negative messages concerning the unacceptability of Black hair had been, for the most part, internalized: straight Caucasian-type hair was viewed as ‘good,’ while the tightly curled and spiraled hair of Black people was referred to as ‘bad.’ Indeed, ‘bad’ hair was straightened through either chemical or thermal means, both of which chanced bodily harm. For example, overheating an iron comb and using it to straighten the hair carried the risk of burning out patches of hair, or more dangerously, burning or scarring of the skin. Similarly, chemicals improperly applied could also result in loss of hair or chemical burns, especially when the foundational chemical compound was lye. Craig (1997) also notes that Black men likewise sought to chemically change the texture of their hair, thus altering it to be more in line with the prevailing concepts of what constituted ‘good’ hair.

### **Fighting to maintain social changes**

These triumphs have neither stopped denigration of these hairstyles nor, unsurprisingly, have they provided some Black people with enough confidence to feel comfortable with their natural hair. Johnson et al. (2017) conducted a study of 4,163 Black and white men and women, and 688 Black and white naturalista (women who make no chemical or other

changes to their hair). Data were gathered using the Hair Implicit Association Test (Hair IAT) as well as an online survey to determine explicit (conscious negative attitudes and belief one holds about a specific group) and implicit (entrenched negative stereotypes and beliefs one holds about a specific group) bias against the naturally textured hair of Black women. Since, as Johnson et al. (2017) point out, bias is correlated with negative discriminatory behaviours, the ultimate goal of the research was to determine the risk of discriminatory practices faced by Black women with natural hair. Johnson et al.'s (2017) findings confirm that:

- ♦ On average, white women show explicit bias toward Black women's textured hair. They rate it as less beautiful, less professional, and less sexy or attractive than smooth hair.
- ♦ Black women in the natural hair community have significantly more positive attitudes toward textured hair than other women, including Black women in the national sample.
- ♦ Millennial naturalistas have more positive attitudes toward textured hair than all other women.
- ♦ Black women perceive a level of social stigma against textured hair, and this perception is substantiated by white women's devaluation of natural hairstyles.

Those not affected by the negative aspects of these results might claim that a rejection of Black women's hair does not imply a rejection of the person. However, this is different from saying one believes a particular hairstyle—without referencing the hair's texture—is not flattering. Put simply, this is a rejection of the type of hair, regardless of styling. Such rejection amounts to viewing an important marker and identifier of the person as distasteful, which can be viewed as an indicator of systemic discrimination—that is, practices and behaviours that disadvantage and exclude others, and which are so common that perpetrators are often unaware that they are causing pain.

Interestingly, this research found that Black women with natural hair viewed themselves as targets of social stigma and spoke of the anxiety that engendered, from the fear of not being seen as professional in the workplace to concerns about engaging in physical exercise (due to the changes in hair because of sweating and, hence, not looking as 'finished' as their white counterparts). Obviously, one's mental and physical health will be negatively affected by the combined fear of the judgement of others and burden of constantly being stressed concerning the aesthetic that one is presenting. None of this ignores the fact that women in general are concerned about the image that they project.

However, as Johnson et al. (2017) opine, “the attitudes and biases with respect to textured hairstyles for Black women is distinct and acute, and will have different implications depending on who holds the bias, what hairstyle choices they are making, and what social pressure they are navigating” (p. 13). The combination of these variables could well lead to mental health difficulties.

### **Instability of the social changes**

The advances of the 1960s do not mean that Black people have totally rejected the norms and values of Western societies. Indeed, one may question if such a total rejection is possible, even if it were desired. As Yerima (2017) opines, the individual lives within a state of hybridity—either oscillating between loyalties or granting one supremacy over the other. While there is much truth to this contention, the individual is not necessarily bound by these binary choices, as circumstances may necessitate the occupation of multiple spaces simultaneously. For example, the late Barbadian-Canadian author and winner of the Giller Prize, Austin Clarke, started writing in Toronto during the 1960s. He related that, as a Black writer, it was expected that the literary titles would reflect “a certain [B]lackness” (Baksh, 2003, para. 7). He and other writers rejected the “Black writer” label, feeling that the “Black writer” was viewed as an inferior artist and not to be taken seriously. Neither were they to be considered full members of the acceptable circle of writers. Therefore, “we insisted on our identity, because white Canadians were not writing about it” (Baksh, 2003, para. 7). Clarke also stated that his difficulties in being accepted did not end when he was short-listed for the Giller. Nor did any acceptance extend to the African twists style in which he wore his hair. Moreover, there was insensitivity to the pain caused by some of the comments made about him and his writing. In Clarke’s words:

You know how in a cartoon the character has his hair electrified? There was a review, and they used the leading cartoonist, and he drew my hair like flashes of lightning. Part of winning the prize is that your face is reproduced on the book bags of one of the leading bookstores in Toronto, and my face is on these book bags. In London, Ontario, this Canadian man asked me: when did lightning strike your hair? (Baksh, 2003, para. 4).

Clearly, the “Canadian” posing this question misunderstood the significance of Clarke’s hair to his identity, nor did the person consider what impact the words “when did lightning strike your hair?” had on the self-esteem of the hearer—words that othered Clarke and reinforced systemic racism.

Clarke also spoke of having lived in Canada for 47 years and still being considered an immigrant. According to him, some felt that, as a Black man, not only was he not really Canadian, but he should not have been short-listed for the prize, especially as he wrote in the voice of West Indians and their travails in Canada. Thus, regardless of his accomplishments and the many books he published, until after having won the Giller, he was seen as the “other” who neither conformed to literary voices customarily used by Canadian writers nor to styling his hair in a manner acceptable to dominant norms. Therefore, he occupied the spaces of Black man, West Indian, immigrant, Black writer, and activist, all simultaneously—with the label of “Canadian” only being grudgingly granted after having won the prize. As he stated, “you have a certain image of the immigrant, but when the immigrant beats you at your game, you have to claim him” (Baksh, 2003, para. 13).

Clarke’s observation suggests that, until the othered has demonstrated some acceptable form of conformity (such as winning a coveted, world-renowned prize), the title “Canadian” will be withheld. However, once the threshold of winning has been crossed, to not welcome the immigrant into the fold would be a rejection of what it means to be a Canadian. Unsurprisingly, Clarke states that “this Canadian man” posed the question—that is to say, someone who viewed himself as having certain rights to determine how Clarke’s hair should have been presented. From Clarke’s statement, four assumptions are being made: a) the Canadian was white; b) Clarke was acutely aware of his place as an “immigrant,” regardless of his years in Canada; c) he knew he was seen as an other; and, d) his hair was one of the features used to other him.

Since hair is so linked to identity, on any given day or period, an individual may express their personality through different hairstyles: natural, straight, or a combination. For example, on one day an individual may opt for purple cornrows flowing freely at the ends in a myriad of colours, a wig on the following day, and on yet another or even the same day, a hairstyle that combines elements of both African and Western styles. Choice then can be seen as an assertion of the gains and freedoms wrought by the civil rights movement and an important act of self expression which, according to Johnson et al. (2017), is being continued by today’s millennial women, whom the researchers identify as being born after 1988.

## **EFFECTS OF THE IMPERIAL AESTHETIC ON INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

Unfortunately, segments of society refuse to relinquish the norms of the imperial aesthetic. Furthermore, these segments often seek to impose these norms on persons of African descent. Thus, despite societal progress and reconnection to their Indigenous roots, Black people continue to be subjected to generalized concepts of beauty and aesthetics that are based on postcolonial norms.

### **Hair in the workplace**

The workplace is not exempt from oppressing Black people based on their hairstyles. Padgett states that Black natural hairstyles have been viewed by employers as “unacceptable, unprofessional and even ugly” (qtd in Reidy and Kanigiri, 2016, p. 1). Such was a case reported by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) of a Black Montreal waitress, Lettia McNickle, who was told by her employer that her braids were unacceptable in the workplace. Both Ms. McNickle and her mother, Huelette McNickle, publicized the issue, with her mother stating, “I wanted to shine light on it that Lettia is not an isolated case. We face this in the [B]lack community quite often” (CBC News, 2015, para. 15).

An employer demonstrating such beliefs not only serves to support the imperial aesthetic, but diminishes the hair of Black people to a state of unacceptability. Collier (2012) opines that such employers not only forbid but “criminalize” these hairstyles (p. 34). The hurt this engenders not only adds to experiences of otherness but is a component of the hierarchical racism of superiority/inferiority expressed “through diverse racial markers” (Grosfoguel, 2016, p. 10). Hair has to be considered as one such marker. According to Lettia McNickle, “what I took 19 years to build up, someone took one moment to crush that [sic]” (CBC News, 2015, para.7). She also said: “Our hairstyle is such a fundamental part of our racial and cultural history and identity, so to deny us the right to freely wear our hair the way we want is to deny our identity as Black women” (CBC News, 2015, para. 10). Interestingly, her hair had been braided by her mother, who is a professional hairstylist, which, it is assumed, further underscored the assault upon her dignity and her mother’s professional acumen.

Ms. McNickle’s story was carried on the CBC website and generated a plethora of responses, which demonstrated that most respondents:

a) were oblivious of the racial, political and sociological significance of hairstyles to the Black community (e.g., wearing these hairstyles are good for clubbing, not for the workplace);

b) felt employers' rights, relative to hair and dress codes, must always supersede those of employees (e.g., employers have the right to determine what they like in their businesses);

c) invoked racism in a goodly portion of the responses (e.g., This has nothing to do with race; "suck it up and learn how to be a Canadian" [CBC News, 2015, n.p.]);

d) felt complainant was guilty of using the "race card" (e.g., employees "playing the race card" should be dismissed [CBC News, 2015, n.p.]).

The above responses underscore the difficulty faced by Black people as they navigate the metaphorical highways of living while Black, two of which are being bombarded by the imperial aesthetic and having the veracity of their racial experiences denied. For example, as stated above, Padgett has stated that Black natural hairstyles such as braids, dreadlocks, and cornrows have been viewed by employers as somehow "unacceptable, unprofessional and even ugly" (qtd in Reidy & Kanigiri, 2016, p. 11), a position that validates white European concepts of beauty as being most desirous and attractive while denigrating those of Black people as being unacceptable and repulsive. So complete has been the domination of white concepts of beauty that the expectation placed upon Black bodies to conform to it is, in reality, an act of cultural violence (Toks, 2016).

The backlash toward the imperial aesthetic has some Black people suggesting that none but Black people should wear Black hairstyles, as to do so is considered cultural appropriation. This position underscored a dispute that occurred at the Université du Québec à Montréal (*UQAM*), in which a white comedian was not allowed to perform in one of the university's comedy clubs as it was deemed that his dreadlocks represented an act of racism (Giguère, 2019.) According to the spokesperson, the club is a designated "safe space, free from any link to oppression" (Giguère, 2019, para. 5). In addition, they define cultural appropriation as when "a person from a dominant culture appropriates the symbols, clothing or even the hairstyles of persons from a historically dominated culture" (Giguère, 2019, para. 6). They further contended that, because of privilege, white people can wear the hairstyles of Black people, whereas when Black people wear the same hairstyles, they are "refused access to job opportunities or to spaces (housing, schools contests, sporting events, etc)" (Giguère, 2019, para 7).

Obviously, the anger of the members of the co-op was not addressed, particularly to the comedian but also to what and whom he represents. Namely, that acceptable standards of hairstyles and beauty are housed within one ethnic group that has appropriated the right to wear those hairstyles whenever they desire, while concomitantly denying the same rights to those who created the hairstyles and view them as a significant part of their identity. This is a position supported by McDonald (2017), who asserts that not only is identity scarce for those who do not have the power to determine what others do with it, but also such others feel free to commodify symbols of the identity of those assumed to be unequal, while excluding those to whom the symbols rightly belong.

### **How the dominance of the imperial aesthetic arouses feelings of inferiority**

Compliance with the hegemonic rules does not confer acceptance into its world, since the obstacles of racism and stereotypes remain. So, not only does straight hair not guarantee entrance into the dominant society and its norms, but such obstacles may be instrumental in creating a sense of aesthetic inferiority. Okeke (2015) addresses issues of identity and exclusion in her CBC piece on “Inhairitance,” which Abisara Machold, the owner of the Montreal Black hair salon bearing the name of the piece, defines as “a journey of becoming comfortable in my skin and within myself and claiming my [B]lackness and claiming my hair and my heritage” (para. 26). Okeke and Machold also discussed how they felt about their hair as children, with both wondering what was “wrong” with it and why it was “growing in the wrong direction” (Okeke, 2015, para. 10). Importantly, they also addressed the injury suffered by Ms. Machold as she had her hair straightened through chemical means, leaving her with “a scab that literally was [the width] of a headband over my forehead and [that] lasted for a couple of weeks”; she continued, “So, I left the hair salon with a severe injury [...] a lot of embarrassment and pain” (Okeke, 2015, para. 14). As this story demonstrates, pursuing the hegemonic ideal can result in physical as well as emotional scars, undermining one’s internal sense of identity and visually emphasizing one’s otherness and exclusion. The toll of living daily with such scarring—coupled with the racism, stereotypes, and microaggressions to which many Blacks are constantly subjected—will, eventually, have negative effects upon one’s mental health (Hall & Fields, 2015; Siddiqi et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2008). According to Hall and Fields (2015), not only do microaggressions lead to several physical and mental symptoms, but few of the strategies employed by the sufferers produce positive results. The researchers, therefore, suggest that coping strategies should be developed to assist Black people to successfully

confront these issues. Furthermore, white people need to be assisted to fully appreciate the effects of their behaviour on the health of Black people.

Murray (2015) discusses the experiences of Black women in Canada and points out that “dark skin shades and natural, afro-textured hair are judged in society through the lens of a racialized aesthetic, in which these features are socially constructed and discriminately labelled as different” (p. 57). Moreover, the narratives of the women interviewed in Murray’s (2015) study suggest that they face a juncture composed of “race, gender and social difference” (p. 58) that invalidates their lived reality and risks internalizing racism and a sense of inferiority

The above findings are in line with Siddiqi *et al.* (2017), who assert that, in Canada, Black people are the most likely to be exposed to daily bouts of racism, which is a major determinant of chronic diseases and risk factors such as hypertension and cardio-vascular difficulties. In other words, the consequences of living with racism are dire, especially when one considers that those experiencing the prejudices often view themselves as dependent upon the dominant group’s appraisal (Seet, 2019). This then raises the question of how one might acquire a positive and sustainable sense of self, culture, and racial identity.

## **FAMILIES AND THE ACQUISITION OF IDENTITY**

Several authors have stated that it is through families that identities are developed (Bregman et al., 2013; Cooper et al., 1983; Fiese, 1992; Grotevant, 1983; Syed et al., 2011). Thus, everyday exposure to traditions, rituals, and linguistic styles and beliefs represents major paths through which families transmit identity. Writers such as Doggett (2019) have spoken about young girls “sitting between an older woman’s legs (or in a salon chair if they had it like that) and getting their hair gelled up, slicked back, pressed, permed, brushed and combed to make their hair more ‘beautiful,’ ‘presentable’ or ‘manageable’” (para. 3). This is also a time when those caring for the hair of the young girls can transmit familial stories, customs, and traditions. However, occasionally, familial difficulties will arise, some of them resulting with Black children being placed into the care of the state.

Dove and Powers (2018) question how the transference of identity plays out within the child welfare system as children who are thus placed, while not often there for long periods, may be severed from their familial, social, and cultural communities, resulting in a reduction of exposure to supportive markers of their ethnicity and self-concept. Dove and



Powers (2018) emphasize that, “for African American female adolescents, hair and hair care are critical areas for such socialization and support” (p. 368). They conducted research to determine the role of hair on the self-esteem and sense of self of youth in foster care and concluded that these adolescents view hair as being very important to their well-being, to whom they are, and to how they view themselves as African Americans.

Dove and Powers’ (2018) study highlights the importance of continued contact with family members and others in the Black community, as it is from them that youth learn how to care for their hair. The high importance participants placed on hair is reflected in four recommendations: case workers need to (1) be aware of the importance of culture and hair care to this population; (2) ascertain that those caring for these adolescents understand how to care for the hair of Black people, and which products are appropriate; (3) create relationships between local hairdressers and barbers so that adolescents receive the hair care they require; and (4) provide funding to pay appropriate hairdressers and barbers.

### **Relevance to Canadian and Québécois systems**

In 2016, there were 1.2 million Black people in Canada, of which **319,230** resided in Quebec (Statistics Canada, 2019). Nonetheless, there is a dearth of academic literature focussed on this Québécois population in general, and Black children and youth in the Canadian and Québécois protection services (CQPP) in particular. Two seminal studies in Quebec are the 1992 report by Doray, Messier, and Parisien, and the 2004 study by Bernard and McAll (as cited in Lavergne et al., 2008), both of which document the overrepresentation of Black children within the province’s protective services.

Rambally (1995) addressed the overrepresentation of Black children in the care of Quebec’s social services and although, as pointed out by Esposito et al. (2014), most of the children are eventually reunified with their families, those who are placed in foster care between two and five years old are least likely to be re-entered into their family. Given these results, the four recommendations mentioned above would appear to be also relevant to Québécois children placed in the custody of Health and Social Services. Adjei et al (2017). assert that Canadian child welfare services need to not only understand familial cultural elements, but also develop a “comprehensive understanding” of the parenting practices of Black families (p. 461).

This assertion is important for, as pointed out by these authors, Black Canadian parents live in a system that often sees their values as odd, in comparison to white

standards. Therefore, the importance of hair and identity to Black people may not be foremost in the minds of administrators and workers within these services. In addition, Eurocentric concepts of beauty are not only to be found worldwide, but are usually viewed as the standard by which all other concepts of beauty are judged. Therefore, one assumes that these beliefs also hold within Canadian and Québécois contexts.

The “comprehensive understanding” advocated by Adjei et al. should include awareness of how Black families convey the importance of hair and hair care to children. For example, several commentators have noted the propensity of some Caucasian people to assume the right to intrusively touch and fondle the hair of Black people, especially children (Akyianu, 2019; Brown, 2018; Garlinghouse, 2018; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; Patel, 2018; Robinson, 2016; Thompson, 2009). For those engaging in this practice, there does not appear to be any comprehension of how demeaning and insulting this act is, as it reduces the Black person to the status of object—a thing to be prodded and poked at the discretion of those who feel entitled to do so. As Akyianu (2019) states, “When someone reaches for my hair, it is a signal to others that I am different and that someone is entitled to single me out for that difference” (para. 13).

As an example of the anger this engenders, Garlinghouse (2018) states in her article for ScaryMommy that she has taught her children to say to those attempting to “pet” their hair: “do not touch my hair. I do not like it” (para. 4). Thompson (2008) states that not wanting one’s hair inappropriately touched is not about something like Black pride. Rather, it concerns educating people and governments about what is and is not acceptable.

## SUMMARY

Canada and Quebec have made strides toward reducing overt racism and creating inclusive societies. However, if such inclusion is based solely on a glorification of Eurocentric norms, the concept of inclusiveness is questionable— in fact, it could be called another form of colonialism.

Whereas wearers of natural hairstyles see them as part of their cultural and ethnic anchorage, others often view them as threatening and something to be controlled or eliminated. Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) speak to the manner in which Black bodies are sought to be controlled in order to maintain the prominence of white ideals, arguing that concepts of the superiority of whiteness are maintained through the social control of such things as Black hairstyles.

Concepts of beauty in primarily Western countries are based on European norms. It is, therefore, not surprising that authority figures often seek to perpetuate that aesthetic by determining how those who report to them should represent those concepts. Indeed, arguably, not to do so represents an existential threat to their understanding of normalcy.

Slavery not only robbed Black people of their homeland: it also robbed them of their identity, including their verbal and non-verbal means of communication—verbal in the sense of their spoken languages and non-verbal in the way in which hairstyles imparted important information about one's self and overall culture. Therefore, it is a basic feature of what it means to be Black—in Canada and elsewhere—and the societal space one occupies.

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