



**"The Beauty Walk:" Interrogating Whiteness as the Norm
for Beauty within One School's Hidden Curriculum**

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"If the judges are White, a White girl will win. If the judges are Black, a Black girl might win." (Kisha, age 13)

These words were spoken by one of the adolescent girls who collaborated with us to study a taken for granted school practice known locally as the "Beauty Walk." The practice occurred as a school-sponsored fundraiser. Its format was that of a beauty pageant. Adolescent girls who were contestants in the Beauty Walk appeared on stage and stood before an audience of peers, parents, teachers, and community members. Twice the group was culled publicly as some girls were selected and others excluded based on judges' criteria for physical beauty. Ultimately a single winner was identified. As described by Destiny and JaylInn, two of our adolescent collaborators who studied the Beauty Walk, "The Beauty Walk is an event that sells tickets to students, parents, and friends to see 8th grade young women parade around on the stage in pretty, expensive, and fancy gowns."

As a school practice, the Beauty Walk had a long history in the community where we worked. Beginning with 5-year-old girls in Kindergarten and continuing through the 12th grade, schools throughout the community held annual Beauty Walk competitions. Because the Beauty Walk was held as an annual middle school practice, the messages circulated through the event constitute part of the school's hidden curriculum—the unofficial knowledge that is circulated by school practices and events that lie outside the bounds of the official curriculum (Bigelow, 1999). Schools' hidden curricula have been found to be pedagogically influential insofar as they have implications for students' learning and well being (Kenway & Modra, 1992; Kirk, 1998). Thus critics have argued that, though more subtle than official curricula, hidden curricula require careful scrutiny from researchers and educators (Giroux, 1983).

We learned of the Beauty Walk as Kim worked in the school as an educator and researcher helping girls to critique cultural messages about the female body. Together, we were exploring whether the critical practices Kim encouraged enabled girls both to interrogate cultural messages about the body and to resist those messages that held negative implications for girls' health and well-being. Because there appeared to be a general acceptance of the Beauty Walk—a practice we found to be both anachronistic and abhorrent—we experienced dismay and disbelief when learning about it. Rather than ignore the practice, we decided that the Beauty Walk was an appropriate focus for the critical analysis Kim had begun with the girls. Thus Kim invited one group of girls with whom she'd been working to conduct an inquiry into the practice.

In this chapter, we describe and discuss the attention the girls paid to the role that race and racism played in the practice of the Beauty Walk. In particular, we note the girls' descriptions of cultural messages of beauty that centered on characteristics of the white body as the standard for physical beauty to be emulated and rewarded. We show how our collaborators began to question the fairness of the school practice as they surveyed and interviewed their female peers about their views on the Beauty Walk. Additionally, we show how students at the school we studied simultaneously resisted and accepted the cultural messages about female beauty that circulated through the practice of the Beauty Walk. We highlight girls' voices throughout our descriptions.

Theoretical Perspective

We came to this research inspired by our personal and professional experiences as women, university teachers, and researchers attempting to develop social justice practices in the

various arenas of our lives. For example, as white women aware that white hierarchical values and practices continue to percolate through US society, we have worked to notice and resist such values and practices in our own lives and to invent and adopt more just alternatives. Though we experience ourselves as agents in these matters, we recognize agency as a partial phenomenon-one limited by many factors, including the discourses and cultural practices available to us. Hence we make no claims to innocence or absolution (Lather, 1991). Rather we recognize our work as incomplete and flawed performance that requires recurring close examination and critique (St, Pierre, 2000). Thus in this chapter, in addition to reporting our findings, we include a discussion of our work pointing to several of the issues it suggests.

Our research has been informed especially by the many adolescents who have assisted us in developing strategies for interrogating cultural messages of the body. For example, girls with whom we have worked have explained how fashion operates to complicate their young lives (Oliver, 1999). They have informed us of the role that "being noticed" plays in their relationships with boys and other girls (Oliver & Lalik, 2000). They have helped us to understand ways that they monitor their bodies to conform to standards of beauty they accept for themselves (Oliver & Lalik, 2001).

Besides listening intently to girls, we have learned from writers who speak from many different theoretical perspectives. From black feminists, we have learned about the ways that black women have been overlooked and often demeaned in many conversations about feminism in the US (Collins, 1990, 1998; hooks, 1989, 1990; Lorde, 1995). Poststructural feminists have informed us about the limitations of progressive conceptions of freedom and agency and progressivism's ignorance of the role that power and surveillance play in the development of the modern citizen (Kelly, 1997; Lather, 1991; Mc Robbie, 1994; St. Pierre, 2000; Walkerdine, 1990, 1998). Anti-racist scholars have pointed out our responsibilities as Whites to interrogate the way that our taken for granted practices as whites may interfere with our rhetorical stance as anti-racist teachers and researchers (Dyer, 1997; Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez, & Chennault, 1991; Scheurich, 2000). Critical race theorists have encouraged us to question current mainstream contentions that racial equity has been achieved within US society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; West, 1994). Given these many sources of insight and theory, our research should not be understood as an attempt at unity in the service of theory. Rather it is more aptly explained as a search for practical action-one informed through our study of multiple theoretical perspectives and our close attention to the views of the adolescents with whom we have worked.

Cultural messages of the female body are a focal point for the practical action of critique we seek to develop for ourselves and our collaborators through this and previous research. As has been explained by Walkerdine (1990), cultural messages about female bodies have long been persistent and ubiquitous. Through those messages female bodies have been pathologized. They have been found insufficiently developed for sophisticated reasoning; they have been "hystericized and medicalized" (p. 33) and even found to be "dangerous."

Fine and Macpherson (1992) reported girls' awareness of many of these messages about the female body. During a series of conversations at dinner, four teenagers told these researchers, "They are often reminded of their bodies as a public site (gone right or wrong), commented on and monitored by others-male and female" (p. 185). Further they reported painful descriptions of "the violence of racism on the female body" (p. 190) that girls of color had experienced. Reminding readers of how girls experience their bodies at the intersection of gender and culture, Fine and Macpherson elaborated:

Gender determines that the young women are subject to external surveillance and responsible for internal body management, and it is their gender that makes them feel vulnerable to male sexual threat and assault. Culture and class determine how-that is, the norms of body and the codes of surveillance, management, threat, assault, and resistance available to them. (pp. 185-186)

Together with our attention to the cultural messages about the female body, we have developed a sustained interest in critical literacy. Scholars, who describe literacy, as a transformational process for developing the knowledge, skill, and moral courage to change one's self and one's society in the interests of justice and equity, have encouraged our interest. Prominent among these scholars is Paolo Freire (1974), an educator who rejected mainstream characterizations of literacy as a sound/letter association process primarily involving printed texts. Instead he favored a more robust conception of literacy in which being literate means being able to critically assess and materially transform the world.

Scholars in the US and elsewhere have interpreted and applied ideas and practices developed by Freire. For example, Shor (1992) demonstrated and described ways of supporting college students in critiquing the knowledge created by mainstream journalists and in developing strategies for producing knowledge less compromised by dominant group interests. Others have described similar efforts with middle and elementary aged students (Alvermann, Moon & Haygood, 1999; Edelsky, ____; Fecho, 1998).

While practical application of theory often falls short of expectation (Ellsworth, 1992) and intention (Lather, 1992), we agree with Gore (1993) that the efforts of those scholars who have applied these theoretical notions in real world settings remain particularly impressive. This is so because such work allows for discovery and insight, even if such learning comes at the price of realizing the limits and insufficiencies of one's efforts. In sum, we recognize that doing applied work means leaving the safe haven of pure theorizing in favor of the more complex and morally dangerous terrain of practical action.

In our efforts to help girls become critically literate, we have learned that race is a salient signifier for the adolescents with whom we have worked. Thus, increasingly it has become so for us (Oliver & Lalik, 2000). In this regard, the views of hooks (1992) about the persistence of white supremacist values in US society ring true. According to hooks:

Racial integration in a social context where white supremacist systems are in tact undermines marginal spaces of resistance by promoting the assumption that social equality can be attained without changes in the culture's attitudes about blackness and black people. (p. 10)

To counter this problem, hooks encouraged her readers to employ an "oppositional gaze" (p. 117). She explained its relation to agency. "Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other, but also look back, at one another, naming what we see" (p. 116). Though hooks' words are addressed to Black people, we believe that she is also challenging non-blacks to engage in anti-racist efforts.

Speaking more directly to Whites, Scheurich (2002) argued for active attention to the problems associated with race and racism.

In many ways, white racism is like a monster standing amid us, affecting so much of what we do-or do not do-while we, particularly white people, appear to hope that if we avoid it, ignore it, or don't look at it, it will quietly go away. It won't. (p. 87)

Agreeing with Scheurich (2002) and others who argue that it is better for us Whites to face the problems caused by white racism than to ignore them, Kim engaged four African American adolescent girls, Destiny, JayLnn, Alexandria, and Brandi, in a yearlong study of cultural messages of the female body. As one phase of that study Kim invited the girls to pursue an inquiry on the Beauty Walk. The girls attended Landview Middle School, an 8th grade school in which about 70% of the students identified as African Americans. The school is located in the southeastern region of the US.

Working with the Girls

For the first part of the inquiry, Kim and the girls designed a survey to learn about how other adolescent girls perceived the Beauty Walk. With Kim's help, the girls created 12 survey questions designed to evoke comment and critique of the Beauty Walk. The questions were: 1) Were you in the Beauty Walk; 2) Did you want to be in the Beauty Walk; 3) Do you think the Beauty Walk is a popularity contest; 4) Why does Landview Middle School have a Beauty Walk; 5) What do girls who are in the beauty Walk have to do to prepare for the "Walk;" 6) How do you think the Beauty Walk makes girls feel about themselves; 7) How do you think people act towards girls who participate in the Beauty Walk; 8) Describe how the Beauty Walk might be unfair to girls; 9) Imagine you won the Beauty Walk, describe how it would make you feel about yourself; 10) Imagine you were in the Beauty Walk and you did not win. Describe how it would make you feel about yourself; 11) Describe what race might have to do with the Beauty Walk; and 12) Why do they have a Beauty walk for girls and not boys?

To learn more about the Beauty Walk, two of our four collaborators, Alexandria and Brandi, attended the event with Kim. They took field notes recording their observations about contestant and audience behavior. Throughout the event the girls talked with Kim about their observations and reactions.

During the weeks immediately following the Beauty Walk, Kim helped the girls to distribute their survey in two girls' physical education classes. To learn more about the survey responses, each of our collaborators interviewed two survey respondents asking for clarification and elaboration of their written comments. While our collaborators were conducting interviews with their peers, Kim interviewed Kemya, a non-White Beauty Walk participant.

With Kim's help, Destiny, JayLnn, Alexandria and Brandi analyzed the survey data focusing their analysis on how the Beauty Walk affected girls. During analysis, the girls focused much of their discussion on how respondents described the unfairness and discrimination involved in the Beauty Walk.

During the final phase of the inquiry, Kim helped the girls synthesize their learning about girls' perceptions of the Beauty Walk. To support the synthesis, Kim asked the girls to express their learning in the form of a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. Kim gave the girls a list of directions she wanted them to follow as they created their letters. These were: 1) use the surveys and interview data to help with the letters; 2) use as much detail as possible; 3) use examples and quotes from the surveys/interviews; 4) look for how the Beauty Walk is unfair to girls and why; and 6) focus on the possible advantages and disadvantages of the Beauty Walk and why. The girls worked in pairs to compose two letters. JayLnn worked with Destiny, while Brandi worked with Alexandria.

Interpretations

In this section, we focus on the girls' voices to develop three major themes that emerged from our data analysis. That is, we describe how the White body is the school enforced ideal for beauty, even in this predominantly non-White school. We show how our collaborators developed a critical stance toward the Beauty Walk through their inquiry work. We also show how students at the school simultaneously supported and resisted the Beauty Walk. We begin this section with a vignette describing Brandi and Alexandria's comments and records while they attended the Beauty Walk with Kim.

"A Night among the Stars": The White Body as the Enforced Ideal of Beauty

Brandi, Alexandria, and Kim walked through the gymnasium door, Kim paid the admission price of 12 dollars for this group of three who had come to observe the event and take field notes. Two students, serving as ushers, greeted them and handed each of them a program. Depicted on the program cover was an image of a young White woman with long hair, wearing a fancy dress, pearl earrings, necklace and bracelet. The title on the program read, "A Night Among the Stars."

The three found seats amongst several Black students attending the event. As the three looked around the audience, they noted that the majority of those attending were Black. Most of these audience members were students, though a few were adults who had come to support contestants. There was a small group of White students in the audience, as well as White parents and family members of the Beauty Walk participants. In all the White parents, teachers, and administrators outnumbered the White students attending the event. There were three female judges, two were Black and one was White.

As Brandi, Alexandria and Kim sat and waited for the "show" to begin, they looked through the program. Alexandria and Brandi identified the race of each of the participants. In a school with a student population that was 70% African American, one might have expected that if all things were equal, about 70% of the participants would be African American. Nevertheless, of the 37 Beauty Walk participants, 46% (17 girls) were non-White, while 54% (20 girls) were White.

The program began with the "parade of the beautiful students" during which all 37 girls paraded out onto the stage together. They formed a semi circle at the back of the stage, and faced the audience. As they filed out, Alexandria documented in her fieldnotes that "there was a lot of snickering from the students [in the audience]." Each contestant took a turn walking to the front of the stage, turning around so that her back was facing the audience, waiting three seconds in that position, and then walking from one side of the stage to the other and back to her original position. As each girl took her turn, she was introduced by name and by homeroom. For example, the announcer called out, "Kemya Reeves from Ms. Smith's homeroom," as Kemya took her turn walking across the stage. Besides naming each participant, the announcer reported each girl's age, her parent's name(s), her preferred activities, and her favorite television show. Brandi documented in her fieldnotes that, "The Black girls received more applause from the audience than the White girls."

After each girl was introduced and took her turn walking across the stage, the three judges selected the top 11 contestants. Typically only 10 girls were selected, but on this evening two girls tied for the number 10 position resulting in a "top 11." The only apparent criteria for the judges' selections were how the girls looked and how they walked across the stage. As the names of the top 11 contestants were called, each stepped forward to form a line at the front of the stage. Thus two lines of girls were created. The back line consisted of the girls who had not been selected to move to the next level of competition.

While observing the formation of the two lines of girls, Brandi, Alexandria and Kim each commented on the composition of each line with respect to race. That is, the "majority of the girls" in the back line-those who had been eliminated from further consideration-were "Black." In contrast, the "majority of girls" in the front line-those who would continue to "walk in beauty" in this competition-were "White." Brandi documented in her notes the racial identification of the girls selected as top 11 contestants. According to her notes, of the top 11 contestants, 8 were White girls, 2 were Black girls, and 1 girl was interracial.

The next phase of the competition involved each of the girls responding to the judges' question, "Who do you admire most and why?" As each of the top 11 contestants took a turn answering the question, the girls who had not been selected remained standing at the back of the stage. When the questioning was finished, the judges announced the top three contestants, as well as the girl who would be "Ms. Congeniality." The second runner up was a light skinned interracial girl, Rachel. The first runner up was a White girl, Carol. Ms. Congeniality was a White girl, Amie. The Beauty Walk winner was Mary Anne, a White girl and the daughter of the school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) President. Brandi described the winner, "Mary Anne looks like a Barbie Doll."

Based on the patterns of participation and selection, it appeared that the White body was the school enforced ideal for beauty at this Beauty Walk competition. In a school that was predominantly African American, it was the White girls who participated and who were selected at each level of competition. Only one non-White participant was selected among the top three contestants, and, according to Brandi and Alexandria, she appeared to be a White girl.

Resisting Messages from the Beauty Walk: An Interview with Kemya

Kemya described herself as a 13-year old "mixed" [half White, half Black] girl. She had participated in the Beauty Walk, completed a survey, and she talked about her experience of the Beauty Walk during an interview with Kim. To foreground Kemya's views, we present an excerpt from the interview.

Kim: I want you to explain your [survey] responses to me...you know how at the beginning you were really excited about the Beauty Walk and then I saw you Friday and I asked you if you had a good time and you said, "No." Well, tell me about it from the moment you left school to get ready.

Kemya: Okay. When I first left school I was really happy and my dress had just got back from the cleaner's 'cause it had to be pressed. And I was so excited and I went to get my hair done. And I was gonna get my nails done, but I didn't think that was, you know, they wouldn't see my hands that much. And I got my hair done, and I thought it was just so cute and then I got home and it started to fall and I was like, 'Oh my God, oh my God.' I was going crazy. And then I went to McRae's [department store] and this lady did a beautiful job on my make-up. I loved it. I thought it was so cute. And I practiced my walk like it was nothin'. Like this is my stage, it's my walk.... And I feel that I should have made at least the top 11.... I didn't think it was fair...because most of the girls that won, it's not necessarily a racial part, but you know, every girl that was up there [in the top 11] was blonde hair and green eyes, blonde hair and blue eyes. And Rachel, I don't even think they [the judges] knew that she was a mixed, or had Black in her because her skin was so light.

Participating without Winning: Exploring Dynamics of Equity, Race, and Power

When we first began the inquiry into the Beauty Walk, our collaborators were not sure whether race played any part in the competition. They believed that because "both White and Black girls were allowed to participate" the event could be considered to be fair. Nonetheless, after observing the event and surveying other girls' perceptions of the Beauty Walk, they became more skeptical about the fairness of the event with respect to race and influence.

When our collaborators analyzed the survey responses and interview data, they were somewhat surprised at what they found. In particular, they noticed the concerns about racial inequity expressed by the survey respondents. One survey response regarding race captured the girls' attention and prompted much discussion. "If the judges are White, a White girl **will** win. If the judges are Black a Black girl **might** win."

After Brandi and Alexandria finished interviewing girls about their survey responses, they joined Kim and Kemya who were talking about the role of race in the Beauty Walk. The girls began to theorize with each other about how race operated within the school event.

Kemya: [There were] 8 White girls, 2 Black girls, and one interracial girl.
That's 11.

Brandi: I think if the Black judges picked mostly White [girls] so they could probably could get in with the, [pause] so they could fit in.

Kim: And of the Black girls [selected for the top 11] that were up there, only one had dark skin.

Kemya: You couldn't tell Rachel was Black.... Ashley's not that dark either, she's a little bit darker than me, but she's not really dark.

Brandi: They could have at least had one Black [dark skinned] girl, but they didn't have any. Maybe they thought since Rachel was kinda mixed, maybe they thought they were doin' us a favor since she was mixed.

Alexandria: My mama says that since a Black girl won homecoming queen, you can just forget about the Beauty Walk.

Brandi: But see, we voted [for homecoming queen], it was our [student] choice.

Alexandria: In most Beauty Walks or pageants it is said that the White girls always win.

Through this inquiry on girls' perceptions of the Beauty Walk, JayInn, Destiny, Brandi, and Alexandria developed and articulated a discourse of the Beauty Walk that featured several forms of critique. They synthesized their critique during the final phase of the inquiry. They did this by creating a letter-to-the-editor highlighting some of their findings about the Beauty Walk.

Both letters explain how a school function that places girls' bodies on display discriminates based on gender, race and social class and lessens "girls' self esteem." As Alexandria and Brandi wrote:

To Whom It May Concern:

We're writing this letter to express our concern about the Beauty Walk. We're concerned about the following: the discrimination against girls, because of racism, and how it makes girls feel about themselves. Most girls that we surveyed think the Beauty Walk is unfair to females. Some girls don't have the money to buy needed supplies..."Girls show off their bodies to paying people". People are paying to see these girls. They seem like prostitutes and the girls didn't get anything. Racism is a big issue in the Beauty Walk. One student thinks, "If the judges are white, a white girl will win. If the judges are black, a black girl might win". Another student says, "Race shouldn't have anything to do with the Beauty Walk".... In conclusion, we think that the BW is unfair. It raises one girl's self esteem by cutting down other girl's self-esteem. We don't think that should be taught in schools. Basically, the BW should be abolished.

Destiny and Jaylnn wrote:

Concerned students say Beauty Walk (B.W.) discriminates, is unfair, and is almost equal to prostitution. The B.W. is an event that sells tickets to students, parents, and friends to see 8th grade young women parade around on the stage in pretty, expensive, and fancy gowns. According to 8th grade girls, B.W. is "unfair" because girls are judged by their looks not by character, talent, or any other quality. Also B.W. costs too much money. Therefore girls that do not have enough money can't afford to participate. Girls have to get their nails & hair done, buy a dress & shoes...Most girls don't have enough money for those kinds of things. They don't have to do these things, but they are afraid if they come as themselves, the everyday person that they are, that they really won't win. That lowers most girls' self-esteem...Also because only one girl wins and that makes every other girl feel "not so beautiful"...Some of the girls say that the B.W. discriminates by race because most of the time it's a white girl that wins...The 8th grade girls say that's "racist." ...What I'm trying to say is that there's no need for a school to have such a "bad" fundraiser for school. It makes girls feel bad about themselves or make them have a low self-esteem about themselves if they don't win. So from now on, take this in consideration, and don't have that kind of fundraiser.

Simultaneously Resisting and Supporting Institutionalized Racism

The girls Kim, Jaylnn, Destiny, Alexandria and Brandi interviewed and surveyed frequently noted the role that race played in disadvantaging Black girls who participated in the Beauty Walk. They expressed their resistance to the racism they perceived by communicating their dissatisfaction in their written comments and in their oral discussions during interviews. Yet they simultaneously supported the institutionalized racism they perceived. This was true in as much as Black girls continued to participate in the event, and many Black students attended the event for which each student had to pay the price of three dollars for admission. Thus they provided financial support for the event that was championed by the adults at the school in part because it continued to be a "money maker" for the PTA.

Even while supporting the event in the form of participation and attendance, Black students attending the event found a way to express their resistance publicly. They enthusiastically

applauded the introduction of Black participants. Further, as Kemya described, they used silence, departure, and rumor to show their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the event.

Kemya: And then [when the winner was announced] the thing that was so funny, it wasn't necessarily funny.... It was total silence in there [in the room where the event was being held]. Total silence. After Mary Anne [the winner] started walking, everybody got up and left. I couldn't believe, I was like, 'Oh my god!' It was funny, but you know I think it kinda hurt her feelings. She was like 'Why is everybody leaving?' I think she kinda felt bad about it. And there were like all of these rumors going around...Her mother knew the judges all that type of stuff...her mom is the PTA president.

So while many of the Black students and parents were willing to fund the school event, they walked out without clapping, thus, diminishing the winner, Mary Anne, and the event itself.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the Beauty Walk was a part of the school's hidden curriculum that celebrated the White female body as the norm for beauty even in a predominantly Black school. Through the inquiry processes that Kim supported, our collaborators were able to critique the Beauty Walk as a cultural practice and to theorize about some of the factors that supported it. Students at the school both supported and resisted the Beauty Walk. The success of our collaborators with inquiry and the resistance we observed among students was encouraging to us. Nevertheless, we are left with several concerns about our work.

Though the girls were able to conduct an inquiry project designed to critique this school event, the research fell short of helping them learn to change the taken-for-granted school practice. We believe that girls' need to have opportunities to develop alternative discourses about taken for granted practices that form the hidden (as well as the official) curriculum. Nevertheless, we wonder if it is helpful for them to develop these discourses without concomitantly developing strategies of transformation. It could be that learning critique without transformation leaves adolescents with feelings of frustration and helplessness.

We had hoped that the letters to the editor would be a small step in the transformational direction. However, the girls did not express interest in continuing on with this focus, preferring instead to refocus their inquiry on other topics. Kim followed their lead, believing that keeping girls' interests at the center of inquiry was a better alternative than clinging to the preferences of the adult group leader.

Another issue grew from our awareness of the racial differences between our four adolescent collaborators and us. Though we are struggling to express our anti-racist stance in our work, our history and perspectives as Whites limit us. As hooks (1992) has explained, "observing the world from the standpoint of 'whiteness' may indeed distort perception, impede understanding of the way racism works both in the larger world as well as in the world of our intimate interactions" (p. 177). Even so, we are hopeful that by listening to our adolescent collaborators and studying the writings of anti-racist scholars we may learn to understand our limitations and develop alternative practices. hooks (1992) tells us that such a shift of location is possible. "Understanding how racism works, he [a white person] can see the way in which whiteness acts to terrorize without seeing himself as bad, or all white people as bad, and all black people as good" (p. 177).

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