

The Commitment to Cleanliness

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ABSTRACT

The connection between proper hygiene and the idea of beauty within the black community has been intrinsically tied with our development of culture since the inception of African American society. African American women especially have been forced to fall in line to this idea of an excessive pride and value of achieving cleanliness that can ultimately result in a body that looks, feels and most importantly, smells like it should be unachievable. This much is common knowledge, a known fact. If you wish for further confirmation, simply search your social media of choice for any term related to hygiene and the discourse will unfold. With such concrete evidence, I have established the “*what*” in commitment to cleanliness. Where my mind drifts to now has all to do with the “*why?*”

Keyterms: Hygiene, African American Sentimentalities, The Long-Lasting Effects on Women

How often do you shower? This question had been a major topic of conversation all throughout the pandemic as celebrity upon celebrity proudly claimed how infrequently that act had occurred. Spurred on by the initial debate of whether or not one should wash their legs in the shower, (a debate in which we saw one side of twitter users equate washing your body to washing a car by stating “When you bathe why would you skip your legs.---If you wash your car but skip the doors.... Then did you really wash it?”(@MFN_Ty, 2019) be combated by replies in the vain of “Legs are like the shocks and axles why would any right minded person wash those?” (@WilderEChandler, 2019)) people came out in droves to express which side of the debate they claimed and ultimately where they sat. Celebrities would of course take center stage with personalities like Ashton Kutcher stating that he only washes “some parts” or that he and wife/ fellow actress, Mila Kunis only wash their kids when they “see the dirt on them”.(Kutcher, 2021) Through all of these cases though, the celebrities whose statements and their subsequent reactions that still sit with me to this day was that of B Simone and Summer Walker.

In October 2019, Summer Walker had made a post on her Instagram story stating, she “Hates showers” and prefers “to get to wash in her bowl”. This wasn't an admission to not cleaning her body but rather an alternative method. A mass of people went on to comment under her posts suggesting that she must be dirty and unkept. Much more recently in November 2022, B Simone admitted to showering every other day on her *Know for Sure* podcast with Megan Ashley. There, comedian B Simone stated that if she “showers on monday” the next time she would take a shower would be “tuesday or wednesday morning”. This set social media off. Twitter was lined with offense claims of B Simone having awful body odor and a poor pH balance. These attacks stuck out to me specifically because I have heard them my entire life. The heavy weight of those specific fears and aversion to poor hygiene are particularly prevalent in African American culture. But why? Why is it that African Americans struggle so much with the chase of cleanliness? Well I believe the answer lies in the role cleanliness has played in the dehumanization of African Americans and their ability to perceive themselves as beautiful, especially in the case of African American women.

The African American clean complex can find its roots in the introduction of Africans to America, The Transatlantic Slave Trade. It is extremely important to remember that the purpose of the “living conditions” on these slave ships were specifically to dehumanize and demoralize the African population that were treated as nothing more than livestock. These journeys of transport had thrusting unfortunate souls hailing from various different clans and creeds who were often freshly kidnapped, branded and bound to slave decks. An enslaved man by the name of Olaudah Equiano recounted his time on these ships and the conditions of the slave deck. Equiano states “The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us....This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable.”(Equiano, 1749) Amongst the numerous atrocities that were presented in the recount by Equiano, the one that sticks out to me the most is the mention of the filth. It is reported that at the height of the Transatlantic Slave Trade one out of every five slaves would die from the conditions of the slave decks before arrival. (Liverpool International Slavery Museum,

2015) The key cause of death? Hygiene related illnesses such as fevers, dysentery and smallpox were common and spread in epidemic fashion due to heat, lack of ventilation and frequent bouts of seasickness with no form of sanitation. (Liverpool International Slavery Museum, 2015)

The purposeful removal of hygiene availability for African Americans would continue on in the New World. Enslaved people were purposefully placed in environments with little to no way to keep themselves or their “housing” clean. One W. E. B. Du Bois had said it best in his essay “Home of the Slave” that “an enslaved person’s denigration was woven into the plantation’s environment and its architecture” and that the home of the slave was built on “familial destruction and personal demoralization”. The purpose of the conditions to slavery was to remove any form of agency and self-respect from slaves. The rhetoric of homeless or impoverished people in modern times finding their inability to smell fresh and clean is one familiar to us and while they may have fallen on to hard times they aren't very often completely prevented from cleaning themselves. Prevention of proper hygiene was a punishment for enslaved people. This punishment would bear a toll of a stronger and more disproportionate rate to enslaved women. Slave masters would often force themselves on to enslaved women much to the ire of their wives. In retaliation, it was not uncommon for a slave master’s wife to prevent an enslaved woman who she suspected to be the eye of her partner’s lust from having access to hygienic utilities such as soap or cleaning water. The inability to clean oneself of course did not end the rapes of enslaved African American women nor the occurrences of consensual sex with fellow slaves of similar hygienic backgrounds causing higher rates of pH imbalances and sexually transmitted diseases. This denial of a basic human right such as being able to clean oneself can absolutely break someone. My mind runs to the scene in *12 Years a Slave*, when the character Patsy stated “Mistress Epps won't even grant me no soap ta clean with. Stink so much I make myself gag. Five hundred pounds 'a cotton day in, day out. More than any man here.”(Northup, 1853) This had been a very real representation of the trials and tribulations that enslaved women, derived from the 1853 memoir of former enslaved man, Solomon Northup, would have to face in order to feel the basic feeling of human dignity. This pursuit of dignity had the ability to persevere the suffocating hatred and humiliation passed down by slave owners. Du Bois’ essay had continued on to mention the importance of the broom within the home of the enslaved person. Enslaved people would not be provided with utilities to keep their personal quarters clean so their innovative minds would have to find ways to create their own and control what they could. The key item of the lot would be the broom. The broom had become an essential part of enslaved African American culture. Enslaved people would find a sturdy stick and bind whatever material they could get their hands on such as sage, sorghum or weeds. (Du Bois, 1901) The broom had provided a form of order in the chaos of enslavement. The broom had allowed the enslaved to control what they could and its power had been even further exemplified by its use as vessel for marriage. In some enslaved communities it was common to solidify a relationship as a marriage by jumping over a broom. (Du Bois, 1901)

Moving into the freedom from bondage, African Americans had developed a laser focus on retaliating against all of the blockades that had been placed around them. Before slavery had been abolished, African American portrayals in media had been predominantly that of enslaved people who loved their enslavement. Mammy characters had been extremely prevalent as a Black woman caretaker that loved serving her White family. The uptick of these portrayals of black characters, especially the mammy character becoming more malicious, coincided with the

freedom of slaves. There was now an agenda to push negative stereotypes on the newly freed African Americans in an attempt to further oppress. Soap ads in particular were quick to make African Americans the butt of one of their “clever” marketing ad’s jokes. Two images were dissected by Dr. Gwen Sharp on the website *The Society Pages* showcasing two damning examples. The first image display a young Caucasian child looking at a young African American child with a puzzled expression. Under the artwork lies the text, “Why doesn’t your mama wash you with Fairy Soap?” The second image shows a very similar image of a young Caucasian girl staring at a young African American boy exclaiming “You Dirty Boy! Why don’t you wash yourself with Vinolia Soap?” The attacks of African American people through the use of hygiene has been a strategic move by oppressors to control. What was once use to control had been transferred to a marketing tool focused on destroying African American self esteem and self image.

This inherent fear of filth and dirtiness that has poisoned the mind of African Americans has been the center of many health scares and issues within the African American community. African American women are reported to have practiced douching at a rate of 58.8%,(NIH, 2011) the highest of any other demographic. Douching has been known to be a harmful practice as any benefit it may provide would almost surely be temporary as the act in itself can throw off a woman’s vaginal pH balance promoting unhealthy vaginal health and poor odors. The use of douching reached high popularity in African American communities from the 1930s to the 1960s due to the Lysol Douche Kit being an inexpensive douche kit that also claimed to serve as a form of contraceptive. The truth is that Lysol has an extremely strong chemical composition that has frequently caused inflammation and burning of the vagina and cervix. (ARTSCI. 2023) The African American want to have and the search for a vagina that is uncharacteristically sweet smelling and of pristine condition may stem from the frequent use of African American women in studies of Gynecology and afflictions of the vagina. A vaginal fistula is a tear internally that causes a vagina to excrete both blood and feces from one's intestines. It only takes a simple google search to find proof that the images provided of this affliction are almost exclusively of African American women while the vaginas that appear to depict a woman of another race it is presented as medical artwork. (McLaren and Gatwiri, 2016) The message here is clear that dignity is not allotted to African American women when it comes to the matter of their bodies or their hygiene.

The story of the African American commitment to cleanliness is one that is clear through a simple walk through African American history. One of the first this taken from the enslaved Africans forced for months to wallow in their own urine, vomit and feces was dignity. The ability to have pride in ourselves is a driving force for existence in this world. We want the Bugatti because it is proof that we deserve it. Proof that it was earned. That is the same thing with our bodies really. We want to feel like we have control in all of the chaos that is life. We can't control the things outside of our hands but we can at least wash them. And maybe— just maybe, our cars are not as different from our bodies as we had initially believed.

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