

Beyoncé, beauty and the all mighty dollar

Written by Irma McClaurin, Ph.D
Friday, 09 March 2012 13:27



Just for the record, we are not in, nor has there ever been, a post-racial moment in America. And so, we must dive deep into historical memory of this country to understand why all the fuss about L'Oréal's latest advertisement for cosmetics featuring Beyoncé.

Racial Passing

Centuries ago, before Black was defined as beautiful, those individuals whose features (nose, hair, lips) and color suggested European ancestry hid the origins of their one Black parent and “passed.” These offspring were generally the result of a liaison between a white man and Black woman, and on occasion, between a Black man and a white woman. The latter unions were often the motivation for lynchings in an effort to protect “white womanhood.” And, most often, the former unions occurred under duress, power imbalances and were all too frequent a consequence of a white male slave owner taking control of what he deemed his property—the bodies of Black women.

This is a moment in American history in which Black enslaved bodies were considered commodities to be bartered, sold and destroyed, if the owner so desired. During this period, Black women were forced to have sexual relations with anyone whom the Master considered a good breeder, and the resulting children were considered the Master's property to be bought and sold. So what does this have to do with Beyoncé and L'Oréal and the marketing of beauty products?

While the French, who ruled Louisiana until its purchase in 1803, promoted a form of slavery based on assimilation—teaching their slaves French culture, language and educating the offspring of their unions with Black women—, we should not forget that origins of the relations were rooted in a power imbalance in which men had control over women's bodies and used them as vessels for their desires. In today's parlance, a woman's refusal of such sexual

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advances and/or her inability to consent would be prosecuted as RAPE. Back in the day, it was an acceptable standard.

What the French did differently from the British-derived Protestant Americans is that they created a caste culture based upon phenotype and the degree of French cultural assimilation. In short, the closer you were in color to whiteness and the greater your fluency in French language and culture, the higher your social status. The insane degree to which this color caste system operated can be found in the terminology that developed: Mulatto (50% white/50% Black) Quadroon (75% White/25% Black), and Octoroon (87.5% White/12.5% Black).

In other parts of the United States, what prevailed was what my former anthropology colleague the late Marvin Harris termed “hypodescent.” Known as the “one-drop rule,” Marvin argued that under hypodescent, the offspring of a mixed union would be relegated to the subordinate (hypo) status (descent). He used the two terms (hypodescent and one-drop rule) interchangeably.

In folk parlance, anyone with a single drop of Black blood (visible on invisible) was classified as Black. This idea of hypodescent has guided U.S. social relations for over three hundred years, and it informed the Jim Crow laws (in place between 1876 and 1965) that prohibited miscegenation (or race mixing) throughout most of the United States up until *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Nonetheless, as late as 1970, the state of Louisiana still had on its books a law which defined anyone with “one-thirty-second ‘Negro blood’” as Black.

In New Orleans, the birthplace of Beyoncé’s mother, because of a large “Gens de Couleur Libres” (free people of color) class, comprised of former slaves who had been freed, slaves who purchased their freedom, the off spring of white men and Black women who were given their freedom at birth or later in life, a new social segment known as “Creoles emerged,” and continues to this day. Nowhere else in the United States, except Louisiana did such a racial category exist. That social group later was enlarged through the immigration of free Blacks from what is now known as Haiti after its Revolution that began in 1791. What should be noted is that you could have two people with the exact same phenotype and skin color in New Orleans. One could claim to be “Creole,” if they were free and the other would be designated as “Black,” if they were enslaved.

To Be or Not To Be Hybrid

Claiming hybridity and mixture has become very popular in America. It doesn’t help that we have adopted the nomenclature of “people of color,” which includes international people of every social class—some of whom have experienced oppression and some who are from the wealthiest social ranks of their society. So why the negative reaction of Black women to how L’Oréal has chosen to market Beyoncé as representing “every woman” —“African American, Indian, French”? One explanation could be that as powerful consumers of beauty products, the majority of Black women who spend almost \$7.5 BILLION in this product area, would like to see themselves represented. Yet most of these consumers would bear little resemblance to the Black celebrities whose faces and bodies often are used to sell the products. I have nothing against Halle Berry or Beyoncé, but they do not look like every day Black women who buy cosmetics. I would love to buy a bronzer sold under the Halle image, but I just can’t get a color

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to match my skin—I have the same problem with band aids that are supposed to be “flesh colored.” They are, but it’s just not my flesh color—so I am forced to resort to the Snoopy ones.

Black Women’s Dollar Power

Dodai Stewart talks about why Black women may not be flocking to buy products branded by the chosen celebrities like Beyoncé in her 2009 Jezebel blog, “Black Women Love Make up, But Does the Beauty Industry Love them Back?” She offered the following as a reason for the lack of mass appeal: “Could it be because many of the black celebrities who pitch cosmetics—Halle Berry, Beyoncé, Rihanna—represent only a light-skinned sliver of what the general population of African-American women look like?” Beyoncé has been hailed as a “Black” entertainer, and has embraced this image for most of her career. Now L’Oréal, whom some accuse of having photo-shopped Beyoncé’s skin to make her lighter (an accusation they deny), is marketing this “Black” entertainer as ‘hybrid’ or “multi-racial” but not 100% “Black.” This may seem like betrayal and an insult to the Black women and community who have made Beyoncé famous by buying her music. The approach of hybridity also stands in stark contrast to L’Oréal’s Jennifer Lopez ad, in which she is promoted as 100% Puerto Rican, embracing her identity.

Most African Americans have the right to the same claim of hybridity because of the mixtures that occurred (involuntary mostly but some voluntarily) between Black women mostly with European men under slavery, and with Native Americans (often to escape enslavement). Most of us don’t have the means to trace our ancestry, and beginning in the 1960s through the advent of cultural nationalism, we transformed the one-drop/hypodescent concept that was used as a negative into a positive social ideology and political identity that embraced Blackness (“Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud”).

Anthropologists and other scientists have presented enormous evidence that concepts of race are not rooted in biology, but are socially constructed categories, but they do have impact on our everyday lives. Politically, choosing categories such as hybrid, multi-racial, mixed, etc, may seem like much ado about nothing, but it can have economic, social and even political consequences. What’s a Beyoncé to do?

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