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## Open Mouth Insert foot: Sheryl Underwood's take on Natural Black Hair

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On the 30 August 2013 episode of the multi-host, female talk show, "The Talk" (CBS), African-American female comedian Sheryl Underwood caused a furor with her derogatory comments about black hair. In the midst of a conversation about how the white female super model and mother Heidi Klum saves the cut hair of her mixed-race children (the product of a marriage with Henry Olusegun Adeola Samuel, aka Seal, the black British R&B singer), Underwood chimed in while laughing (she is a comedian after all), "Why would you save Afro hair?" Implying that the texture positioned it outside of the realm of the desirable, she went on to say,

"You can't weave Afro hair, you don't never see us at the hair place going, look here, what I need, I need this curly, nappy, beady [hair], that just seems nasty."

When her white co-host Sara Gilbert chimed in that she does the same thing with her children, Underwood interrupted playfully to state that her (Sara's) children's hair, because they are white of course, was that "beautiful, long silky stuff." Gasp!

And what was the response of the other women at the table? They all erupted in laughter, including the other African-American host, Aisha Tyler, and the audience. Underwood's hair - whether relaxed, weave or wig - is worn in a straightened style. It is not an accident that Underwood's critique of Klum's collecting practices involved her envisioning the supposed ludicrousness of anyone wanting to *buy* natural black/Afro hair. The context of an economic transaction speaks to the ubiquity of black (and of course

other races of women) purchasing natural and synthetic hair for weaves and extensions, which maximize length and most often duplicate a straight, voluminous, Eurocentric ideal which is constantly paraded as *the* desired look in shampoo and hair product commercials from Pantene to Garnier. Indeed, women in general are constantly being told that this specific look is one to which we should all aspire.

Although we might expect more from a black woman with the platform of an internationally broadcast talk show, women of African descent are not immune from this type of self-loathing, a structure that was implemented over centuries of western colonization and quite literally whipped into blacks through the vehicle of slavery. I promise you that Underwood didn't randomly wake up that morning and have her first thought about the supposed worthlessness of African hair, which she, *sans* relaxer, weave or wig, surely also possesses. The systematic denigration of the black body was deliberately situated at the heart of 400 years of Transatlantic Slavery. Why? The social control and economic exploitation of an entire race could not be ensured only through physical violence (whipping, branding, torture, rape etc.), but necessitated psychological and psychic violence to "convince" Africans that they needed to be "civilized" into the cultural, moral, social and yes, corporeal ways of the European.

European forays into Africa and later their contact with diasporized Africans in the Americas, demonstrated a pervasive white interest in the difference of black bodies, including complexion and hair. African bodies became the "scientific" site of Eurocentric knowledge production intent upon explaining such differences and their distance from the norm, which was unquestionably assumed to be the white male body. Early print culture (and later forms of pre-photographic art and visual culture) representing the intricate hair styles and practices of the Africans that Europeans encountered, centered on the almost magical sculptural property of African hair, which was at times gravity defying and stunning in its ability to hold all manner of intricate shapes, patterns and designs. But the creation and hierarchization of race upon which slavery and empire-building depended, necessitated that Africans be deemed a lower form of human, if we were deemed human at all. As such, after complexion, hair texture became the dominant means through which whites defined their visual, physical difference and supposed superiority to Africans.

The progressive whitening of the enslaved through the institutionalization of rape in Transatlantic Slavery, served to entrench theories of racial difference. Often the children of enslaved black mothers and white slave owning fathers, these mixed-race enslaved people known by now outdated terminology like mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon, were often manumitted or laboured as domestics as opposed to the more arduous job of "field slaves". Simply put, their corporeal proximity to whiteness, and the fact that they were often literally related to the white enslavers, put the white slave holding community at ease. These mixed race enslaved people not only had lighter complexions, but often, so-called good hair that more closely approximated European textures.

With the colonial western idealization of the white female as the Beautiful, black women's hair became a site of intolerable difference. For centuries, and still today, racial

discrimination against blacks is directed at our complexions, but also against blacks who dare to preserve their own hair texture and to wear Afro-centric styles like Afros, locks, twists, braid, etc. Unsurprisingly, hair straightening (pomades, oils, hot iron, chemical relaxers) became a necessary rite of passage for black female adolescents, a part of our assimilation in a white-dominated culture. But as proudly sported by Sherri Shepherd on “The View” (ABC), weaves or even wigs have now augmented hair straightening. Indeed, the obsession with hair extensions and the Eurocentric measures of hair beauty like volume, length, and movement have even sent white women over the edge of hair sanity, as is evidence by every single “Real Housewives” show.

I want to be very clear. I think that women should be free to choose how they want to style their hair. But deciding from a space of socially inflicted self-loathing can't be healthy. With the backlash against her statements, what Underwood likely now understands is that natural black hair styles are on the upswing, and black salons specializing in natural hair are likewise becoming more common in the USA, Canada, and elsewhere. As the article “She Stopped relaxing – and she was Fine!” in Oprah Magazine's, *Let's talk About Hair* issue (September 2013) described, the sale of chemical relaxers “plummeted almost 40 percent from 2007 to 2012”, indicating a renaissance of black women returning to (or never leaving) their natural hair texture. A move in the right direction? I think so (and so do my locks).