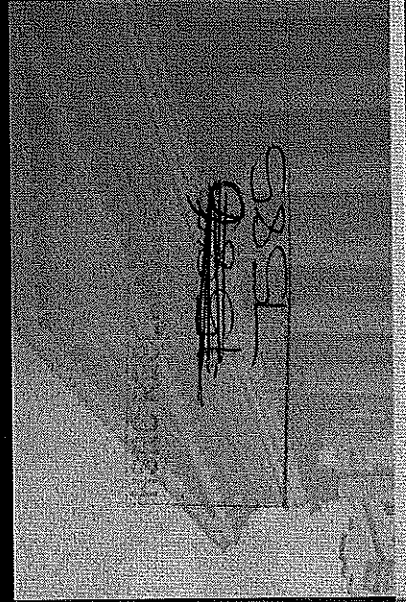


Talking about beauty: Identity category maintenance and transgression of young South African Women

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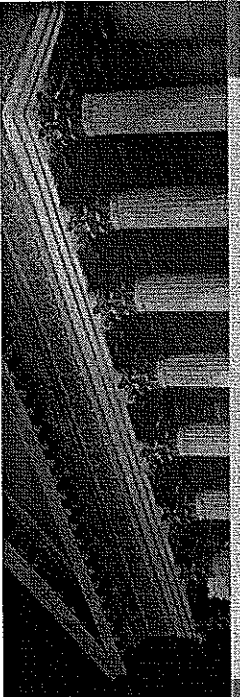


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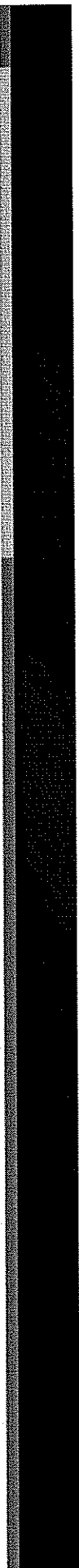
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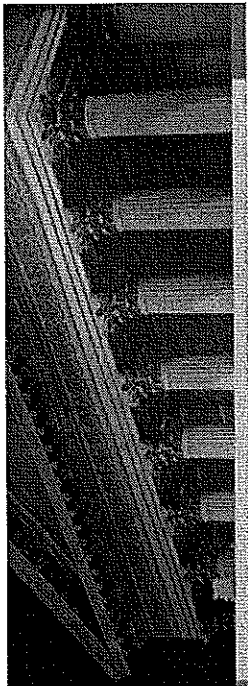


"If your hair is relaxed, white people are relaxed. If your hair is nappy, then they're not happy." ~ Paul Mooney





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Identity formation in post-apartheid South Africa involves multiple instances of “category-maintenance” and “transgression” (Davies 1989, 29) of historical ideological racial categorization. Despite the official ideology of the post-apartheid government being one of non-racialism, there are still incongruent messages about identity from all quarters (including family, peers and the institutions in which we teach, learn and work) that need to be negotiated.



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How this negotiation is managed is considered through examining young South African women's attitudes towards beauty as a terrain of desire upon which ideological (gendered, raced) subjectivities are formed. It is argued that desire is deeply invested in the psycho-social complex of what being "white" and "black" is assumed to stand for, especially in relation to what is considered to be beautiful.

Beauty, inasmuch as it can be ideological, is a deeply personal and cultural understanding and doing. Thus in this presentation I am examining the data in one possible way. This is not to exhaust all possibilities for interpreting the participant's views on beauty.



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### Background to the study:

- Interviews in 2010 as an extension of a masters study
- Conducted 26 interviews (16-24 year olds), some one-on-one, some focus groups, semi-structured, but open-ended questions broadly looking at youth identity
- From public and private schools
- Iteratively coded/re-coding the transcripts for emerging themes
- First paper we wrote was on *accent and desire* (Soudien and Botsis, 2010, Feminist Formations)
- Next emerging theme we're focusing on is Beauty
- Extracts are drawn from a focus group with final year high school girls, at an all-girls private school in the West Rand in Johannesburg. We met 3 times, and the topic of beauty emerged more than once



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Currently, South Africans “can deviate from the identity descriptions attributed to them or to which they will attach themselves” (Davies 1989, 29); however, this deviation involves both transgression and category-maintenance work that simultaneously enables and constrains the subject.

Our desires are not “natural” in the realist sense; we are born into a world where meanings are already in circulation and into situations not of our own choosing. We come to know ourselves and form our desires from within a certain set of ideological meanings that were in circulation prior to our engagement with them.

Davies (2006) explains this process as the self deciphering itself through available discourses (75).



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Janks' example of students who were involved in critiquing sexist representations of women. The female students were competent in lifting out the ideological plays apparent in the images, but this did not stop them from desiring to be like the female models represented as sexual objects in the advertisements.

Janks makes the argument that where identification "promises the fulfilment of desire, reason cannot compete" (2002, p. 10).

In these following extracts we see what can be construed as normative whiteness being re-inscribed through constructions of desire as they pertain to beauty.



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**R:** I've been here 13 years of my life and most of the colour was white. And that's how I got to be like, I can try and be friends with the white people even when it was back then I remember now that even though they were white and I was coloured I still couldn't fit in with the white people...even if I grew up with them it was always she's coloured, she doesn't fit our expectations, we can't be friends with her. And it was like...and with the whole hair story, **thank goodness they introduced GHD (straightner) for us coloured girls, cos I have very coloured hair when it goes "home" and stuff...**

**T:** ja you do...

**N:** goes home... [laughter]

**T:** goes back to its roots

**R:** and then the thing is I would get teased for that, because I didn't have their hair and now that we have GHDs its like, **now I can straighten my hair and everybody's like wow your hair looks nice like that, its like, now I fit in because now I fit in with you guys, kind of thing.**





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*You know when I die, and I'm going to ask god why in the world he gave black people such hair. Like I swear I was livid, I was livid, I was really angry and on the verge of tears and I was like, I don't understand why we have such hair. Cos its, honestly really unfair that you know, that you see these black women trying to put bonding in, and I do it as well because I wanna, I want to fit in, I want to have hair like Roxanne, you know like the girls in our school who shake their hair, some people are annoying when they do that, they shake their hair and they move it to the side, and I can't do that, cos I'm forced to relax it, its not the most expensive hair to maintain because you can do anything with it, but it's the most taxing, like it takes so much time to do it. So that's why, you know, you get your GHDs and I was **like thank goodness for human hair!** And like yes! I can do bonding! And look just like you guys, and my mother hates it, she thinks its...[...]*

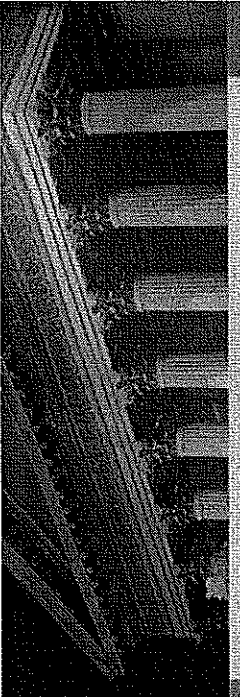


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*The people who have nice hair, and some people might say its not cos of that, its cos its in fashion but subconsciously the truth is it's because we've been told, that we need to look a certain way to be beautiful, we get women from America, who are not even pure black, they have some white in them, they have gorgeous hair, long hair, like Beyonce and Queen Latifa and all of them they have like almost coloured hair you know? And we have pure African hair and you know, we want to be like them, because they are closer to the white people who've got stunning hair, and can do whatever they want with it, and we also want to be like that.*



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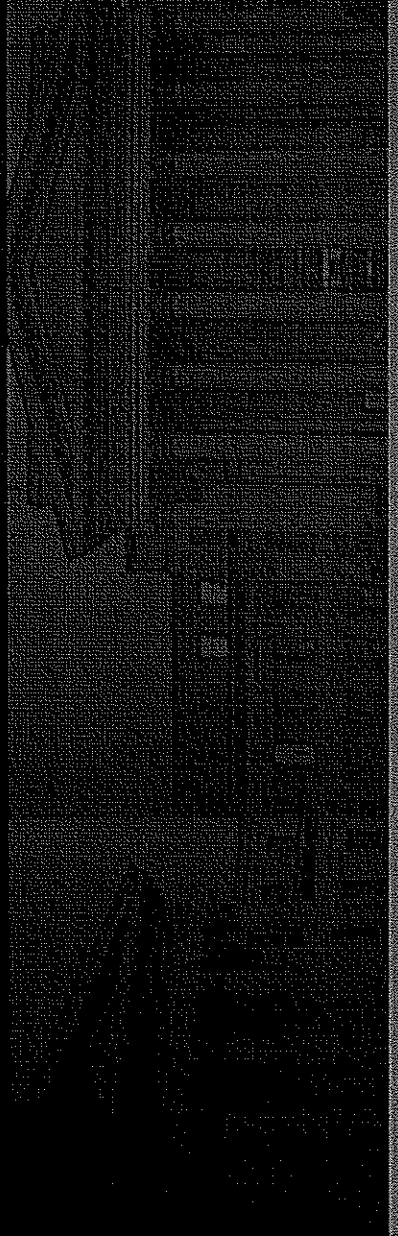
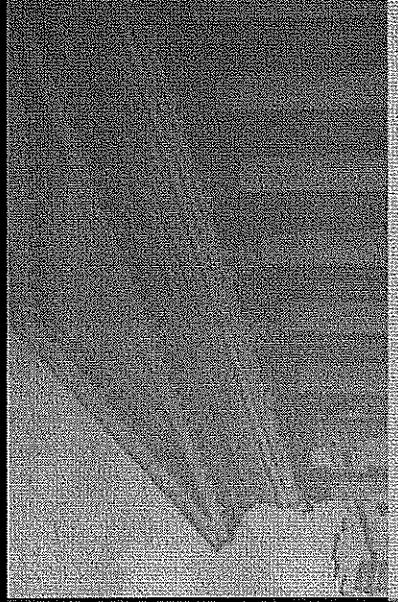


The “potential disruption works at the level of her desire to be a particular kind of subject” (Davies 2006, 88). They could denounce the power of whiteness, but their desires to be a particular kind of subject within the social constraints of their context leads them to reproduce the ideological power of whiteness through their beauty practices.

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