The governmetality of black beauty shame: discourse, iconicity, resistance

Shirley Tate
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

This paper uses as data 35 conversations on the question of beauty between British women based in London, Birmingham and Leeds who identify as black-white 'mixed race'. The conversations were analysed using an ethnomethodologically inclined discourse analysis (Tate, 2005) in which the data was transcribed using a conversation analytic transcription, followed by locating the discourses of black beauty shame and the sequential organization of subject re/positionings in the talk. This elucidated (a) the discourses on/of black beauty shame in which the women were imbricated (b) what identifications were enabled or negated by the iconic black beauty models emanating from Black Nationalist politics or the white politics of difference (c) and how the shame inducing governmetality of these black beauty models was resisted by the women through 'race performativity’ in which they brought new subjectivities into being in the conversations (Tate, 2005; Tate, 2009).

The data shows that black beauty shame is always already there in racialized societies where the governmetality of discourses of white beauty as iconic produce black 'ugliness'. Discourses of black women as ugly mean that they occupy identity locations of shame as a 'bad feeling’ that attaches to what one is. Another discourse of shame relates to Black Nationalist discourses which places black-white 'mixed race' women as despicable because they are mixed. In the talk, as women disidentify from the governmetality of discourses which interpellate them as 'ugly’ or 'despicable’ they use 'race’ performativity in order to bring black-white 'mixed race’ beauty identifications within Black beauty’s boundaries and to renounce black beauty shame’s governmetality. As such, both the iconicities of white beauty and the Black Nationalist darker-skinned, more afro-haired beauty are negated as the core of these women’s beauty identifications within the conversations themselves.

Keywords: governmetality, affect.