**Shapes and Colours: race and beauty among the new Africans in the Diaspora**

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**Abstract (postgraduate stream)**

*That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ar'n't I a woman?*

***Sojourner Truth, Speech delivered at the Women’s Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851[[1]](#footnote-1)***

In the 1960, the pan-African identity campaign advocating “black is beautiful” attempted to discourage black people from straightening their hair, lightening their skins or mimicking Caucasian appearance. This movement achieved many things but somewhat failed to persuade black women especially in the US and Europe from straightening their hair.[[2]](#footnote-2) To date, an industry dedicated to “ethnic cosmetics” thrives. Despite this tendency to move towards Caucasian-shaped aesthetics, the editorial team of *Elle* magazine decided in 1997 to put Alek Wek, a former Sudanese refugee and the darkest girl in the industry, with closely cropped natural ringlets of African hair on the cover of its November issue.[[3]](#footnote-3) Their justification was her shape, not colour. This paper examines the range of questions that arose from Wek’s success and what the debate says about race and beauty especially to Africans in the Diasporay. A review of existing feminist and poststructuralist literature reveals that mainstream fashion media is increasingly constructing beauty around the image of a tall, thin and nicely shaped woman. This allows beauty to be applied to all races and encourages African women in the Diaspora to aspire to “universal beauty” such as Wek has achieved; their cultural ideas of beauty notwithstanding. For analysing this I rely on a comparison of a young African woman recently engaged in *Australia’s Next Top Model* reality television show with another young Africa model in the United States. Drawing on poststructuralist analysis, I examine their statements, performances and the comments they received. My results suggest that mainstream construction of beauty emphasises shape. Whether this emphasis is to the exclusion of race may be subject of future research.

**Key words**: Pan-African identity, Beauty, Diaspora, Dinka people, Race

**Introduction**

In this paper, I explore the idea of beauty among Africans in the Diaspora as represented in fashion. Effects of beauty on women and identity have been studied by feminists but not in relations to African immigrants although their numbers are rising in this industry and that is beginning to reshape the perception of black identity. I will approach beauty as a social practice by first giving the background information that triggered the paper and proceed to explore various conceptions of beauty in the literature before zeroing in on African diaspora in Fashion.

**Background**

When the 1997 November edition of *Elle* magazine went on sale with Sudanese born British supermodel, Alek Wek as the cover girl, it made history, sold like hot cakes, and promptly sparked debate.[[4]](#footnote-4) Immediate reactions were to question whether she was beautiful or ugly or just different.[[5]](#footnote-5) Wek herself told *Ebony* magazine that she “was met by an avalanche of criticism when [she] walked in the door.”[[6]](#footnote-6) She also notes in her memoir:

At the time, supermodels with slender but curvy bodies and long thick hair ruled. Most of them had fair skin and fair hair. This look sold cosmetics, clothes, everything. The advertisers were afraid to try anything else, and so were the magazines. Sure, Avedon had wanted me. But Middle America didn’t.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The black cover girl saga also gave Wek a surprising degree of attention: newspapers wrote about her and Oprah Winfrey invited her onto her show. “Black is beautiful” was back in debate. The African-American community saw her success as an extension of the long fight for the acknowledgement of their beauty in the mainstream. She was featured on African-American fashion publications such as *Ebony* and *Essence* and named the 1997 MTV model of the year.[[8]](#footnote-8) In short, she revived the pan-African identity.

Yet Wek represents something very different from the African-American story. She is a Dinka woman – a descendent of a people known for being tall, thin and very dark. Dinka ideals of beauty are constructed in that – arguably polar opposite to American perception of beauty – order, making Wek’s success a confirmation of the Dinka aesthetics by the Western world rather than some sudden epiphany of the long overlooked beauty of black women in Middle America. In an interview with *Essence* magazine in 2000, Alek Wek admitted to the interviewer, Constance White, that her most admired features of velvety black skin, descent height and shapely body frame are very common among the Dinka (and Nuer) women.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The rise of African models especially from Somalia, Ethiopia, Sudan and West Africa has been found to be closely related to the rising influence of African design in Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10) European fashion designers like John Galliano and Jean-Paul Gaultier “have taken inspirations from African art and designed, and exoticised it for Western consumerism”, with the help of black models.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Since appearing on *Elle*, Alek Wek has been on the cover of other big fashion magazines including *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. Her success seems to affirm the black power slogan, “black is beautiful” in a way that Halle Berry or Naomi Campbell could not. Wek’s complete and “natural Africanness” appears to be the reason for inspiring strong identification with black people. This idea of natural Africanness has been creating rifts in Pan-African identity movement for a long time and does not seem to go away (for example WEB Du Bois is said to have debated this topic with Marcus Garvey only for the former to end up calling the latter “black and ugly”; black being a very offensive term for a darker Negro in early 20th Century America; Negro, was the acceptable word).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Pan-Africanism implies the role of common ancestry and the shared experience of being black in this globalised world.[[13]](#footnote-13)The pan-African ideology underpins Weks reception by little black girls worldwide, as their role model; from newspapers, magazine to Oprah Winfrey, Wek’s role model status has been the main theme. Now, it seems young girls from Wek’s background – the Dinka and the Nuer – appear to see modelling as accessible based on the shape of their bodies.

\* \* \* \*

Almost thirteen years after *Elle* chose Alek Wek for its cover, the magazine chose another black girl – Oscar nominee, Gabby Sidibe for the October 2010 cover. There were two controversies surrounding this choice. The first, and perhaps the most outrageous according to blogosphere, is the magazine’s decision to air brush the darker Sidibe, so that her skin appears lighter than it actually is. This protest seems to be in defence of natural beauty of all skin colours. The second and somewhat more contentious dispute is her weight or how that influences her size and shape and the way such shape sits with contemporary taste of female body.

In a very scathing attack on themagazine, cultural critic Mary Elizabeth Williams wrote on *Salon.com*, that *Elle* was now preaching “fat acceptance” to its readership.[[14]](#footnote-14) Alison Samuels in *Newsweek* put it bluntly that putting Sidibe on the cover “sends a different, and disturbing message”; she went further to insinuate double standard and, perhaps, even racism:

Yes, (Sidibe) was nominated for an Oscar, but so was Taraji Henson just two years ago for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.* The petite, real-life single mother of a teenage son who also appeared in films such as the critically acclaimed *Hustle and Flow* received her share of love from traditional black magazines such as *Ebony* and *Essence,* but white magazines didn’t seem to find her particular beauty or story coverworthy… So the complicated question is, why Sidibe? What does *Elle* see in her that it (or any other beauty magazine) didn’t see in the others?”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Samuels continued to argue by allusion that if Sidibe had been white, she would never have been picked for the cover but *Elle* had no compunction preaching fat is beautiful to black people. Samuels’s anger is rooted in the African-American women’s vulnerable position in society – they are defined (as in the Moynihan Report) and often stereotyped as strong, dominating, fat, imposing and ugly – a tendency that goes as far back as Sojourner Truth. Beauty somehow eludes them. So what exactly is beauty? How is it defined and objectively applied to something or someone that is beautiful?

While the concept of beauty is very old and widespread, philosophical reflections on (as opposed to artistic representation of) it began in ancient Greece and reached its positivist heights in Western Europe during the enlightenment.[[16]](#footnote-16) The positivist construction of beauty removes the concept from its simple definition, which is, “[b]eauty is the idea as it shows itself to sense” and situates it in the abstract – as opposed to perceptual – state of thought.[[17]](#footnote-17) The positivist view of beauty is better expressed in Bosanquet’s words: “…aesthetically, beauty is purely formal, consisting in certain abstract conditions which are satisfied, for example, in elementary geometrical figures.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

This view, from its Cartesian or Universalist vantage point, also assumes that beauty “is infinite, that is to say, free from relativity whether according to the law of sufficient reason or …desire.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In this formalised state, the Shakespearean maxim that “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder” cannot be true for the beholder either lacks objective criteria by which s/he can differentiate appreciation from desire or his/her individual view is not representative of what is beautiful. This view reigned until the emergence of post-structuralism.

Abstracted beauty centralises shape and size so that components of a beautiful object assume their proper dimensions in the whole.[[20]](#footnote-20) To bring this back to the topic of this paper, it is probably this conception of beauty that is behind how fashion models in particular, and women and human body in general, are perceived today. The female body shapes – hourglass, pear/spoon, apple etc – are also pure geometrical concoctions based on how the female body appears in standing position.[[21]](#footnote-21) In modelling, aspiring women are subject to “objective” criteria called WHR (waist hip ratio) which, among other things determines the size and the shape of a woman fit to be a fashion model so that they can physically conform to this delimited physical ideal.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**The literature on race and beauty**

Janell Hobson has shown that there is a tendency in mainstream Western aesthetics to depict black women in certain stereotypical ways.[[23]](#footnote-23) These stereotypes, poststructuralist thinking would contend, are linked to the power/knowledge structure of the races. This structure is rooted in Foucault’s distinction between “the will to knowledge and the will to truth.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Knowledge of races was constructed in colonial mindset using what Foucault has called “crude…anthropological methods” driven by curiosity rather than proper conceptual tools capable of uncovering objective truths.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Regardless of its foundation that knowledge became accepted by the coloniser and the colonised primarily because of the power relations between the two and the consequence of this, historians and sociologists have found, caused certain damage in the originality of self-definition and perception among black people, colonised or enslaved.[[26]](#footnote-26) Pan-African thought suggests this claim to be as true in Los Angeles as it is in Lagos, Paris or Rio de Janeiro.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The effect of racially colour-coded social hierarchy on black people’s self-perception of beauty and self-worth is perfectly captured in no better place than Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye (1970)*. In that book, the 1940s generation of black girls’ most predictable gift was a blue-eyed pink doll. The toy reflects “the maker’s daughter”, whom the little black girls know, has the exclusive right to play in the parks and boss black adults around. The link between race and privilege here is one; being black and light-skinned was also a petty privilege and a step up in the privilege-beauty hierarchy. Pecola Breedlove, black and ugly, was one of these girls who internalised her externally defined ugliness based primarily on her dark skin. Pecola hated her appearances so much that she kept praying for blue eyes.

The ideas of Morrison’s masterpiece have been tested by psychologists in preschool settings; they were real and it seems little has changed in the real U.S.[[28]](#footnote-28) Darker people remain ugly to both whites and light-skinned blacks.[[29]](#footnote-29) Kathy Peiss for example argues that “…many Americans still consider African appearances beautiful only if exoticised…”[[30]](#footnote-30) It is probably for this reason that ostentatiously exotic models like Alek Wek can overcome the colour coded system and a possible reason Gaby Sidibe’s *Elle* cover picture was air brushed to look lighter because she, despite her background, could not come across as truly exotic.

That exoticisation of black people makes them appeal to middle class whites is common knowledge and has been subject to visual dramatisation. Laurent Cantet’s 2005 film - *Heading South* – dramatises the infamous Caribbean sex tourism and one particular line in the movie captures this exoticisation of the black body perfectly. This is when one white women, Ellen, berates Brenda, another white woman with whom she shares Legba, (the young black local) for buying him clothes. Ellen’s argument was that Legba, a young, dark and, beach-loving, bare-chested hunk, would now look like another black man in Harlem. A black man in Harlem by implication is not sexy, attractive or desirable – they know this; that, besides anonymity, is why they were in Haiti but not Harlem. A bare-chested Haitian on the other hand, is a handsome, spirited and simple-minded subject of desire with whom you can easily part.

This dramatisation of the exotic other in Cantet’s film and the construction of ugliness in Toni Morrison’s novel are intricately connected to the power Europeans have exercised over the colonised peoples over centuries. Post-ism theorists from Foucault and Said to current thinkers view the European construction of knowledge (including Gobineau’s classification of races) and colonial power as inseparable. For example, Edward Said, in *Orientalism*, points to the privileged pedestal European literary figures assumed in their portrayal of the eastern others.[[31]](#footnote-31) As Ali Mazrui observed, Said’s study – in both *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* – should not be read as excluding the construction of Africa(ns) in European imagination for he also unearthed a comprehensive bibliography including Joseph Conrad’s bleak portrayal of Africa among others.[[32]](#footnote-32) That beauty is a social construction can sometimes sound silly because there is so much suggesting the opposite.

**Body Aesthetics in Evolutionary Science**

Evolutionary aesthetics started with Charles Darwin himself. He pondered what role being beautiful or ugly played in the survival of human species but found none.[[33]](#footnote-33) In *The Descent of Man* he went further to draw a social, rather than an ethological conclusion that:

It is certainly not true that there is in the mind of man any universal standard of beauty with respect to human body. It is however, possible that certain tastes may in the course of time become inherited, though there is no evidence in favour of this belief, and if so, each race would possess its own innate ideal standard of beauty.[[34]](#footnote-34)

According to Darwin, and indeed, evolutionary science, the idea that being beautiful as socially defined is somehow linked to survival of species is yet to be proven.[[35]](#footnote-35) Sure all animals choose those partners who are “fit” to enhance the life chances of their progenies; however, being fit in this context has nothing to do with body, shapes and sizes.[[36]](#footnote-36) Being fit is a function of adaptability which in modern society would be marked by the ability to provide and protect a family where the provision part will be satisfied by a career.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Breidbach traces the present Western tendency to strive for the athlete’s body to earlier societies’ practice of staging competitions as a means to test skills and abilities of young men to establish their place in society; victory in such performances led to accolades like knighthood.[[38]](#footnote-38) Still, this is social history and evolutionary aesthetics’ aim is to naturalise the subject, that is, use physical science methods to investigate a philosophical or social question. Unfortunately, such an exercise is never easy. As Breidbach speculate, “[if] aesthetic were just ‘seeing’, biology might offer a solution for defining beauty and establishing a new aesthetic. When aesthetic, however, is recognition, then, the situation is different.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

How much is seeing and how much is recognition in the definition of beauty is a difficult question. Langlois et al attempted to bypass this problem by studying how three month-old babies reacted to beautiful and ugly faces.[[40]](#footnote-40) They found that babies stare at beautiful faces for longer than ugly ones. From this they concluded that people are borne with innate beauty detector. Cunningham conducted a similar study on sexual attractiveness. He showed men from different cultural backgrounds pictures of diverse women and asked them to select the most attractive. He found that men preferred similar women, based mostly on shapes and faces.[[41]](#footnote-41) Although this is a new research direction, it is important to be sceptical whether such findings are free from real-world influence of experience and recollection.

**The New Black Diaspora in Fashion**

Alek Wek’s success based on her Africanness was not isolated for long. African-Australians started appearing on the Australian fashion scene in early 2000s and their number has so far risen.[[42]](#footnote-42) Most of the first African Australian models were approached by modelling agencies in public settings just like Wek; the height and shape of both Akuol Diing and her cousin, Akeer Chut-Deng, for example attracted the modelling agents.[[43]](#footnote-43) Both women entered fashion with little concerns about race and, like Wek, they always had to answer questions about their shapes and heights.[[44]](#footnote-44) In a 2004 interview with *Africanoz*, Diing said her main fear was shyness. “[She] was scared going out on the catwalk with all these cameras flashing.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

While these women found the modelling career only under the gazes of those interested in the fashion industry, another model emerged and she, unlike those before her, put herself under public scrutiny. The girl is Atong Tulba Mulual, contestant in the first series of Australia’s Next Top Model reality show on *Fox8*.[[46]](#footnote-46) She subjected herself to all the televised commentary on weight, height and one would have suspected, race. Interestingly, race never publicly surfaced as an issue. Before she was eliminated, one of the judges opined that she had “a rough attitude” and this came back to haunt her until she was eliminated in the eighth spot.[[47]](#footnote-47)

What has been striking about the emergence of these models is not lack of racism – it might or might not be an issue – but the rise in confidence that they will, and it seems they always are, judged by their shapes. They tend to be comfortable in their natural African appearances of darker skin tone and nappy hair. Alek Wek started this trend and she has been emulated by Sudanese-Australian models like Akuol Diing and Ajak Deng.[[48]](#footnote-48) Appearances like these popped up in the recent Miss Africa pageant in Adelaide. It would not be going too far therefore, to suggest Wek and other models have helped normalise, to young African girls, their natural appearance. While this normalisation may work for Africans in Australia the possibility of it working in the United States is small.

African immigrants in the United States inevitable become a subset of millions of black Americans. Consequently, they fall into the skin complexion pecking order already alluded to. This was the case for Sudanese-American model, Nya Nyuon. In an interview with Tyra Banks, she said American students, black or white teased her because of her darker complexion and her height.[[49]](#footnote-49) Even after engaging in beauty pageants and modelling a little, she was “still in the process of accepting [her] dark skin.”[[50]](#footnote-50) Despite modelling, the layers of blackness and history of racial stereotyping and prejudice in the U.S. clouded Nya’s sense of beauty. In the same interview, she admitted that “seeing Alek Wek now makes [her] finally accept the fact that [she is] beautiful.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Nya’s ambivalent acceptance of beauty speaks to evolving nature of both race and beauty in different area across African Diaspora.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper set out to explore the questions of race and beauty triggered by Alek Wek’s representation of Africanness in a post-liberation era. In so doing, I examined her story and proceeded to situate it in three affective conditions: the feminist, the postcolonial and the Pan-African conditions. This conditions grapple with certain underlying structures of power/knowledge, the effects of which, are largely responsible for devaluing of black beauty in the first place.

However, the new aesthetics based on body shape, weight, height and attitude to fashion are becoming increasingly the judging criteria which ‘exoticisable’ black Africans seem to meet to represent Africanness. The degree, to which race matters is difficult to measure and therefore cannot be neither dismissed nor affirmed. It can be argued, however, that shape seems to matter more than race in determining modern beauty and this necessitates examining what beauty means – in terms of identity, empowerment and so on – to the new African diaspora.

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