



Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America

Obiagele Lake

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The author explores how Africans in America internalized the negative images created of them by the European world, and how internalized racism has worked to fracture African American unity and thereby dilute inchoate efforts toward liberation. In the late 1960s, change began with the Black Is Beautiful slogan and new a consciousness, which went hand in hand with Black Power and pan-African movements. The author argues that for any people to succeed, they must first embrace their own identity, including physical characteristics. Naming, skin color, and hair have been topical issues in the African American community since the 18th century. These three areas are key to a sense of identity and self, and they were forcefully changed when Africans were taken out of Africa as slaves.

The author discusses how group and personal names, including racial epithets, have had far-reaching and deep-seated effects on African American self perception. Most of her attention, however, is focused on issues of physical appearance which reflect a greater or lesser degree of racial blending. She tells us about exclusive African American organizations such as The Blue Vein Society, in which membership was extended to African Americans whose skin color and hair texture tended toward those of European Americans, although wealthy dark-skinned people were also eligible. Much of the book details the lengths to which African American women have gone to lighten their complexions and straighten their hair. These endeavors started many years ago, and still continue, although today there is also a large number of women who are adamantly going natural. Her historical look at the cultural background to African American issues of hair and skin is the first monograph of its kind.

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