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Who is Brown/Who Browns? A Meditation on Melanin, Politics, and Coalition

Without Conflation

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1.

“Get used to having the most melanin in the room,” advised a non-Black woman of colour about moving from North America to the United Kingdom. The most melanin, I wondered, – me, as an East Asian femme? Was the bar that low, that pale? My arrival: London, 2018. I attended a “Race in Britain” activist workshop where we shared our self-identifications: one introduced themselves as of South Asian descent -- and, “I identify as ‘politically Black.’” My move exploded my senses of comparative configurations of racialized gender. I present this reflection on “brownness” as both an analytic of cross-racial meaning-making and the practices and technologies of care for the melanated epidermis, complement to Mira Al Hussein’s and Vanita Reddy’s gendered navigations of colorism and beauty structured by histories of global racial capitalism.

2.

My colleague’s quip sparked meditations on biologized considerations of what Frantz Fanon calls epidermalization in tandem with Cherríe Moraga’s figuration of theory in the flesh – toward a sensibility of solidarity as expressed in Moraga’s co-edited foundational queer feminist of colour anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*. Under UVA my skin turns brown while rarely burning: following the Fitzpatrick scale that classifies human epidermal pigmentation on a range from I to VI, I am likely a Type III. Melanin, or to be accurate, eumelanin (responsible for black and brown shades in skin and hair) is an imperfect scale for the taxonomies of racialization. Nonetheless, anxieties about quantity of epidermal eumelanin – and

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the attendant capacity to further produce it – index constitutive overlaps between classism and colorism across many cultures, convergent with, even if not originally constitutive of, anti-Blackness. These degrees of phenotypical brownness influence comparative racialization and modulate the spectrum of racialized gender. Black feminist physicist Chanda Prescod-Weinstein discusses Afrofuturist technological possibilities of melanin in defiance of the pathologization of Black people's melanation; as she states, "Black identity both is and is not about melanin," noting that Black people are "the most melanated" in the "umbrella" of "people of color" (95; 104). Through my archive I often ponder Edith Maude Eaton/Sui Sin Far's turn-of-the-century statement of solidarity that she is "of the brown peoples of the earth" despite being a light-skinned mixed race Chinese woman amongst the British colonizers in Jamaica who expect her to uphold their anti-Black, classist, hierarchies that would afford her provisional valorization if she passes as white (198). Her use of "brown" overlaps with the current invocation of "Black and brown peoples," one contemporary nominal configuration that attempts to address the inconsistent plurality of peoples racialized as not-white.

3.

"Political Blackness": the mid-twentieth century term for organizing Black and Asian migrants in the U.K. still operates – despite structural asymmetries between Black and Asian peoples, non-Black Asian appropriations of Blackness, and the persistence of shallow, exploitable politics of representation. A bombardment of disorientations/reorientations as I continually reevaluated my melanin in each metaphoric room: a nearby university considered progressive slapped me in the face with "Oriental" adjacent to "African" in its name; that "Asian" signifies "South Asian" so "Oriental" still lingers as a signifier for "East Asian"; that my union representing workers in UK higher education uses "black" "to refer to people who

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are descended, through one or both parents, from Africa, the Caribbean, Asia (the middle-East to China) and Latin America,” explaining, “It refers to those from a visible minority who have a shared experience of oppression. The word is used to foster a sense of solidarity and empowerment” (Nicholas). In trying to settle in, I found myself profoundly unsettled.

In 2017 a prominent UK race equality thinktank using political Blackness counted 350 Black women full professors across all disciplines (Runnymede Trust). I learned I was the first faculty member of color that a postdoctoral researcher had met at my institution; a few months later, another report tallied up only 25 Black women full professors in the UK – defining Black in the way familiar to me as racialized Black, of African origin and descent (Rollock). Against the stark white background of UK academia – a backdrop etiolated even by the standards of US and Canadian academia – a Chinese Canadian like myself appears comparatively melanated. While acknowledging the importance of a history of grassroots cross-racial political organizing where I now live and work, I am uneasy about an anachronistic interpellation by what feels dangerously like conflation under the auspices of coalition.

4.

Can shared but not equivalent melanation lead to solidarity in ways that do not recapitulate essentialism or collapse differences into undifferentiation? 2018 also saw the creation of “PoC Skincare: The Group” by Tacola Buyarski on Facebook where peoples of color of all genders share skincare advice in a carefully curated inclusive community. Buyarski, a Black American, founded the space because of the deficiencies in another group run by white women: “when people of color posted, there wasn’t good advice or the administrators would generalize that all skincare is the same for all people of color” (Lee). Members do their best to help one another

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negotiate skincare regimens without simply reproducing skincare described by Emily Raymundo as an intimate technology of neoliberal regimes of global racialization and capital. POC Skincare constellates community care for the differing needs of melanated skin. “For many, the most helpful part of the group is the solidarity that you’re not alone in your skin issues: ‘The most commonly discussed topic is definitely hyperpigmentation. We have threads about it with *thousands* of comments,’ [Buyarski] says” (Lee).

The communal practices of POC Skincare attest that caring for skin and the aspiration for bright, glowing skin is possible for all degrees of melanation without necessarily capitulating to desires for colonial beauty standards associated with whiteness. Through a subdermal view of race Thuy Linh N. Tu traces how skincare for Vietnamese women is not about aspirational whiteness upholding white womanhood as ideal, but a shift to brightness or *sáng* which “refers not to a color, but to a quality, a luminousness that radiates from the skin,” an ambition for modernity, health, and strength that is specifically East Asian (Tu 2019, 27). Tu unveils the racial, imperialist history of US dermatology: links between medical experimentation reliant upon Black incarceration and the Vietnam War (Tu 2021). I speculate there is a congruence between Tu’s illumination of *sáng* and what Krista Thompson calls the Black diasporic visual economy of shine, reworking value and belonging through the manipulation of light. Now, Thompson acknowledges skin bleaching in Jamaican dancehall culture as a way of manipulating how one’s body is photographed (22); similarly, the beauty ideals of Asian skincare has rightly been criticized by Black Youtubers for antiBlackness (Dasol). Nonetheless, in the Facebook group Asian skincare and its attendant grammar of the multi-step regime offers less a reiteration of what is rightly critiqued as the proliferation of expensive products selling beauty Orientalism to an international market, than an adaptable syntax of

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possibilities for caring for skin. This is a community-based practice of care based on more egalitarian access to a vernacularized vocabulary of precise epidermal concerns and pedagogical support for improved skincare literacy. They pit this vernacular savvy and lived experience against marketing juggernauts in order to navigate the widest possible spectrum of dermatological products at different price points from around the world.

POC Skincare exemplifies practices of solidarity in a collective cross-racial version of what Tu calls experiments in skin, the possibility of a “different epistemology of skin” (Tu 2019, 157). To play off my colleague’s wry advice, my ongoing challenge has been to be politically aligned with Blackness through my relative melanin, my brownness; and to work for structural changes in departmental and university policies, recruiting, retention, well-being so as *not* to be the person with the most melanin in the room.

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