

Travels in Brown

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

The most absurd marriage proposal I have ever received was on the South African Airways flight from New York to Johannesburg. Just before touching down in Dakar for refueling, one of the air stewards knelt down besides my aisle seat and said, "Can I talk to you for a moment?" Having no idea what was to come and trapped in my constrictive, cheek-by-jowl economy class seat on a 15-hour transatlantic flight, I nodded somewhat reticently.

He explained that he was a Zulu man from Cape Town and was I perchance from Cape Town too. I said, "No, I am from Zimbabwe." He frowned slightly, "Oh, I thought..." Yes, I knew what he was thinking but I did not feel like getting into my background. He continued: "Well, I have just seen you now but I felt something inside when I saw you and we talked."

It was my turn to frown. Had we talked?

Up until this point we had had the standard interactions of passenger and air steward: "What would you like to drink?", "May I have a Grapetiser, please?", "Here you go", "Thank you, sir." Is this what he meant?

Now he leant forward resting his right elbow on his thigh and gesticulating with his left hand. A stream of words flooded out, about his feelings, his search for the right girl, his hopes for the future...our future.

I tried to keep my facial expression neutral but as he became more impassioned, the surrounding passengers began to take interest in the goings-on, earphones were being removed, curious glances slid sideways along my row of seats. One gentleman across the aisle went so far as to unbuckle his seat belt and turn fully towards us, unabashed, as if he we were watching a play.

I began to squirm in my seat, desperately trying to think up a graceful exit strategy which would promptly blast me out of this most awkward of awkward encounters without hurting his feelings and without further titillating the growing audience. He was still talking but just as he said, "I know I've just seen you now but I felt something and I want to marry you," I blurted, "I am sorry, I am already engaged. Thank you for your words, thank you. I really hope you find the right woman."

He looked at me quizzically, "Eish, you're already engaged. When are you getting married?"

I had to think fast. This was a bald-faced but face-saving lie (and I hope he never reads this). "December 15th," I hazarded.

"You're not wearing a ring," he said suspiciously.

"I don't believe in rings," I said. That part was perfectly true but inside, I was thinking, Dude! Please let it go! However, he was not so easily deterred, "Well, can I have your number then? We can stay in touch. My flight crew is getting off in Dakar."

“Dakar is wonderful!” I gushed brightly, optimistically. “And the women there are so tall, graceful and beautiful. I am sure you will find a lovely lady in no time.” Fond memories of my first trip to Senegal as an undergraduate came back to me. I had arrived at night and when I awoke in the morning, I found a six-foot-tall beauty wearing a lovely, figure-hugging, ankle-length dress in Java print cloth sweeping the corridor. I asked the other students why there was a model cleaning the house and they laughed somewhat dismissively because they were already used to the fact that so many Senegalese women are simply stunning with their almond-shaped eyes, flawless complexions and hourglass/“Coke Bottle” figures.

The air steward shook his head mournfully, “I don’t like Senegalese women. They are too dark. I like light skin.”

“That’s an unfortunate attitude,” I began acerbically and then continued with a long lecture that ended with the sanctimonious declaration: “Most Senegalese women are far more beautiful than I could ever hope to be despite my light skin.”

He stood up, brushed his palms over his kneecaps and said wistfully, “I thought you were a girl from Cape Town.”

On a recent trip home to Zimbabwe, I was forced to un-repress this horrible embarrassing experience when my seventeen-year-old cousin told me bluntly, "I only like light girls." In the course of the long lecture I again served up (and again to no avail), this memory resurfaced like the bulbous snout of a crocodile breaking the surface of the water with all its promise of a dark dangerous body still submerged.

And of course, dark always seems to mean bad/ugly/frightening/evil in every language with which I am familiar. There's a lot to be said about a history of white oppression that has led to black people internalizing racism and judging their own physical traits according to "white" standards (see Julian Abagond on this for African Americans:

<http://abagond.wordpress.com/2008/08/23/colourism/>)

But even amongst Africans, there is intense "colourism" when (negatively) stereotyping different nationalities and ethnic groups. Let's not forget that in the 2008 xenophobic riots, South African mobs attacked "dark" foreigners because dark meant that they must be those unwanted Nigerians and Zimbabweans. The logic was that South Africans are lighter i.e. better. This "shadeism" happens all the time even in ordinary everyday life (see Harriet Anena on Uganda: <http://anenah.wordpress.com/>).

And I mention Harriet here because recently, Oprah released a documentary called "Dark Girls" but one of the psychologists who is featured writes on the film's website that: "Beauty in our cultural context meant, 'Being

beautiful first and foremost in your actions toward others.' Thus, from a traditional African perspective, no one is inherently beautiful. Beauty is dynamic and contextual." (<http://www.oprah.com/oprahdotcom/Colorism-and-the-True-Definition-of-Beauty>)

What????

I am not sure if that was ever true and what is a traditional African perspective anyway? Are we back to Africa being just one country with one monolithic tradition?

But even if that romanticized notion of beauty was ever true in that mythical traditional Africa, it certainly is not true now in our increasingly globalized world, "globalized" thanks to a series of physical and mental colonizations in which "colourism" is a plague upon all black and brown peoples. Maybe white people can differentiate themselves from each other based on hair and eye color as opposed to skin color thus creating their "blondesims" and "blue-eyed-isms" but wait, I shouldn't say people. This is about women because the politics of beauty in a patriarchal system are always inherently gendered and affect women so much more than men...

But at some level, don't we all wonder about the relationship between our appearance and the sum of the everyday experiences that make up our life? If I was shorter or taller, had a better jawline or bigger eyes, if I were prettier or plumper, had more or less hair, would my experiences vary accordingly?

What would be the intensity of the difference if I were lighter or darker-skinned?

My cousin who is very handsome is a bit darker than me because both his parents are Zimbabwean whereas my mother is Italian American which is why the air steward thought I might be from Cape Town, home to many "mixed race" people some call Coloureds and some call "so-called" Coloureds depending on their view of apartheid racial categories. Under the crazy racial hierarchy instituted by South Africa's white minority government, some people became officially mixed race and others remained "Bantus" but the truth is much more hybridized.

Cape Town is also the traditional home of the amaXhosa many of whom also share my complexion, testament to intensive interracial lovemaking despite simultaneous war making for close on five hundred years. The sand-colored Khoisan peoples have left their influence on the population's physiognomy as well as the melodic clicks punctuating South African languages. My skin tone is yellowy-brown, a color which is often described by way of reference to a variety of culinary treats: caramel, mocha, honey, toasted almond, café-au-lait. As if it is soooooo delicious. Yet when I am subjected to living in cold countries, I am sallow and sickly-looking and even when I am suntanned, I do not look good in gold jewelry and rich primary colors like the dark-skinned women of Senegal. In South Africa, I can pass as

a Sotho or Tswana or a “light” Zulu but I can never pass further north in Zimbabwe where most people are darker.

Which perhaps is the reason I grew up knowing that one of the elementary “facts of blackness” (thanks Fanon) and lightness is that one can become beautiful the more one looks like the “master race” in spite of, despite obvious imperfections.

I am remembering the morning I was finally about to realize my long-held dream of being in a music video. Luckily for me, Marang, one of my close friends worked in the South African music industry and decided to indulge me. We drove through Johannesburg’s tree-lined streets at the crack of dawn to get to the set in time. I was dressed in a long black skirt and a midriff-baring black wrap top. The white director looked at me with abundant disinterest and said, “We already have enough girls.” But Marang who is both charming and persuasive said, “Isn’t this supposed to be a Cuban themed video? How can you not have a mestiza?” The director shrugged grouchily and muttered that I could be in the background.

But when I went to the make-up tent to be made up, the make-up girl told me, “Heysh, I don’t even want to touch your perfect skin. It’s just so flawless. I don’t even think you need any make-up.”

My jaw slackened in astonishment, “What are you talking about??? I have tons of pimples. I need make-up!”

She shook her head, "Eeh, but your skin is just so bright, né." Her colleague concurred, "Your complexion is perfect, man."

My complexion is not at all perfect if one means by "complexion", clear and spot-free skin. But complexion in southern Africa sometimes just means skin color in which case having a perfect complexion is just a matter of being blindingly fair.

In university, I learnt that race is a social construct, beauty is in the eye of the beholder but as I travel the world "in brown" so to speak, passing as a native from Brazil to Egypt, I am yet to find a place where dark skin is the ideal. There is no place in the world I know of where dark-skinned blackness is not associated with ugliness/poverty/slavery.

In my travels in brown, I have encountered this attitude "in reverse" myriad times. In 2010 in India, a country equally plagued by an obsession with fairness, the young tour guide leading us through Old Delhi's Mughal-era palaces amiably asked me where I was from. When I replied Zimbabwe, she shook her head emphatically and said, "No! How is that possible! You are so beautiful and fair. I have seen those people, they are very dark and ugly!"

(She also explained to the tour group that although virtually all the monuments we were seeing were built by Muslims, these were the Muslims of before, not like the "terrorist" Muslims of today. When I told her that not all Muslims are terrorists, she jauntily replied, "Yes, but all terrorists are Muslims." She was a very opinionated young lady.)

Dark = ugly dark = ugly dark = ugly is the message repeated again and again and again which is why it's long been my personal opinion that the best thing about Barack Obama is that he married a woman darker than him. But Michelle Obama's glowing complexion is not enough to counter the overwhelming global message that fair = beautiful fair = beautiful fair = beautiful.

Yes! Part of the basis of this colourism is related to white domination of the world since 1492 through settler colonialism, chattel slavery and contemporary cultural imperialism which means that for so long it has been power = fair and power = beautiful therefore fair = beautiful.

If the Black Power movement of the 1960s had been more successful, perhaps their Black is Beautiful campaign would have had more cultural impact?

I don't know...some people say knowledge is power but we know yet we don't change.

The onus of changing this colourism lies mostly with black and brown people (despite continuing white power structures). It's an internal change that's necessary to revolutionize ways of seeing - is beauty about skin or bone structure, features or color? (I am deliberately eliding the question of whether beauty as an aspirational category is not in and of itself problematic. That is for another day.)

But where will this change come from? A commercial in Egypt for Fair and Lovely skin-bleaching cream shows a girl going on an audition for the part of Cleopatra and although her features are “fine” and “delicate” and oh-so-not-African, she doesn’t get the part. As a response to her failure, a friend suggests she uses Fair and Lovely and after its whitening, lightening effects, she gets the part, voilà, success!

And where will this change come from when light-skinned girls buy into it too, trade on it, exploit it? Don’t they (we) see that they’re (we’re) also exploited by it?

I am thinking here of PEMs. Professional Ethnic Males can be found from Jamaica to the Gambia. You’ve probably seen them too. Those long, lean, dark-hued men, many of whom sport long, thick locks, who woo an endless stream of foreign tourists/expats until that lucky day, when they actually manage to marry a French or American woman who can magically unblock their otherwise impossible entrance into a First World economy.

(Aside : For centuries, black people were forcibly removed from the African continent during the slave trade and now, in the 21st century, Africans, desperate to escape their failing economies, are selling their bodies themselves, this time into marriages - marriages for green cards and work permits. Such historical ironies!)

Light-skinned girls should be aware that they are sometimes the second best choice of PEMs who have not yet found the supreme prize. When a dark-

skinned Nigerian can without irony proposition me with the words, "We Nigerian men like beautiful fair women like you" and expect me to take this as the greatest compliment of the millennium, I am thinking in my head, if you like fair, why not just go all the way?

(But human beings are so perverse. Because while fairness, lightness and whiteness are so valorized, the palest people of all, albinos, are considered "beyond the pale.")

Just replacing light skin with dark skin as object of beauty or fetish will *not* fix the inherent superficiality of unions that are more about skin than substance.

Yes, even though I can only hope that the air steward's was a seriously unserious marriage proposal, the fact is lightness had everything to do with its darker, or should I say deeper, implications...

And isn't liking someone for their skin color as reprehensible as disliking someone for it?

I am still seeking a satisfactory answer...