

Reflect & Write: bell hooks's "Straightening Our Hair"

Text: hooks, bell. "Straightening Our Hair."

<http://www.zcommunications.org/straightening-our-hair-by-bell-hooks>

Envision Connection: Use in conjunction with Chapter 12

Background: In this often-reprinted article, American feminist and activist bell hooks addresses the relationship between African-American women's choices in hairstyles and American racial ideology. hooks, who has been called "One of our nation's leading public intellectuals" by *The Atlantic Monthly* is well-known for her insightful critique of race and contemporary culture, having published numerous works on the subject including *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (1996), *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004), and *Soul Sister: Women, Friendship, and Fulfillment* (2005). "Straightening Our Hair" was first published in the September 1988 issue of *Z Magazine*.

Reflect & Write

- What role does personal narrative and anecdote play in this essay? What does it contribute to the development of the argument?
- At one point in her conclusion, hooks states, "The reality is: straightened hair is linked historically and currently to a system of racial domination that impresses upon black people, and especially black women, that we are not acceptable as we are, that we are not beautiful." Why does she not say this in her introduction? Why does she delay this statement to her conclusion?
- Identify a passage in hooks' argument that you find the most persuasive. What is it about the style, development, evidence, or use of rhetoric that makes it so convincing? Now identify a passage that you find the least persuasive. Why does it not persuade you? Look at issues of rhetoric and style as well as the ideas expressed in that passage.
- Does hooks suggest that hairstyle is an individual or cultural choice? Do you agree? What is your experience of how you use hairstyle as a way of constructing identity or showing a relationship to a particular social group?
- **Write:** Consider the *kairos* of the article, first published over 20 years ago in 1988. Do hooks's assertions still hold true in the current cultural climate? Write a 4-6 page essay, drawing on your own primary research

(using personal interviews and/or examples from popular media) to “update” hooks’ argument for the twenty-first century. In your paper, be sure to confirm, qualify, or refute hooks’s points based on this new rhetorical situation; draw on specific quotations from her essay as you make your argument.