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Keratin Kapital: hair and the economy of otherness : understanding the state of black hair in South Africa through the import of Indian hair

Jacobs, Evans

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Abstract

According to the 2014 Euromonitor report on black South African haircare trends, the country exhibited a decrease in sales of damaging hair care products. This trend coincided with the exponential influx of imported Indian hair into the country for the purposes of artificial hair integrations i.e. weaves and extensions. To understand the meaning of these patterns, this project seeks to understand the significance Indian hair held for black women. By analysing anthropological literature on commodities, this work reveals how the purchase of Indian hair not only exposed the state of black hair in contemporary South Africa, but how black women engaged with that environment through its usage. Further, hair's purchase situated women within a transnational exchange network that was buttressed by racial and gendered hierarchies. As such, hair's consumption placed women within an "economy of otherness". However women also utilized this economy by converting the racially charged commodity into social and symbolic capital which they leveraged for their own gain. As such, the purchase of Indian hair not only integrated women within an economy of otherness, but also provided them with the capital to participate within it.

Keywords: South African women, Black hair, Indian hair, Commodities, Capital, Otherness.