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The Enduring, Invisible Power of Blond

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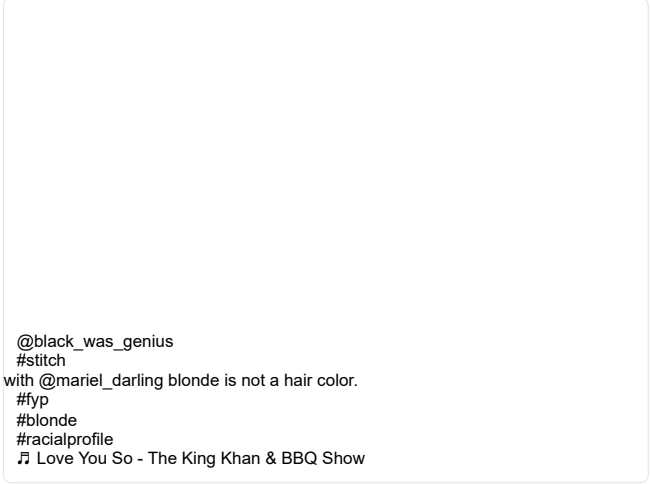
If you are ever trapped between a hungry bear and a blonde with an attitude, fight the bear.

That was my lesson over the holiday break.

I took a few weeks off into the new year to fight pneumonia and prepare for the semester. Complete bed rest meant that my administrative work fell by the wayside. Instead, I zoned out to "Masterpiece Theater," browsed through the stack of magazines I had collected during busier times, and occasionally logged into social media.

That's how I ended up running afoul of the Blondes.

You see, part of my convalescence involved watching TikTok videos, or TikToks. The app's users skew younger than me, and yet I joined last summer, in part, because I teach a graduate seminar called "Social Problems in the Information Society." TikTok's algorithm makes it easy to love. It ruthlessly surfaces the latent constructs of our personalities. We may say we are serious people who want to consume content about ancient Mesopotamia, but how we actually allocate our attention reveals that we want cats, a little soft-core porn and more cats. My TikTok algorithm served up a lot of middle-aged women playing with fashion and experts explaining their niche subject area.



That's how I found myself stitching a TikTok about blondes. I'd come across a video of a young white American woman with brassy white blond highlights and dark brown roots. A commenter had accused the content creator of being a brunette. To refute the accusation, the young woman asked her mother whether she was a "natural brunette." "No, you were born blond," the mother responded.

Give yourself 100 points if you picked up that the mother answered a different question than the one the daughter had asked. I picked up on it immediately, and using the instant editing magic of stitching, a feature that allows TikTokers to build on or respond to content across the site, I responded.

My reply described the humorous video as an example of a multiyear project I have been working on about "blonde" as a racial signifier. We use "blonde" (and if to a lesser extent "brunette") to signal that someone is white without using a racialized term like "white." It may also be more — a signifier of a *type* of white person. When the daughter with visibly brown roots insists that having blond hair as a child makes her a natural blonde, she is saying something I have heard countless people say. I have always been puzzled by it.

What could be so important about a genetic trait that someone would use it to describe herself long after the trait's phenotypic expression — light hair — no longer exists? It makes literal sense only if by blonde she is referring to something more than hair. Being a natural blonde must confer honor, esteem and power to those who can legitimately claim it. Guess how we define social status? It is as a role or identity that confers honor, esteem and power to those who legitimately hold it.

I told my modest 15,600 or so followers that we would return to the subject. As far as public scholarship goes, this was casual and low-key. It was also part of my oeuvre. My first public essay to go viral (well, what passed for viral then) was published in 2013, when I wrote about Miley Cyrus doing a sexually provocative number with Black female backup dancers at an awards show. That would not generate a lot of attention today, but in 2013, Cyrus was a few years from her Disney tenure. I wrote about how Cyrus played with race and performance and gender to signify danger. That essay started a decade-long thread about race and beauty that takes both seriously as political, economic and cultural work that we all do, usually without thinking about how we do it. I have written about the power of everyday aesthetics, Dolly Parton and political fashion. A breezy TikTok was a no-brainer.

Over two days, angry self-proclaimed blondes messaged me, stitched me and replied to me. A popular TikTok account appears to have encouraged its followers to report me en masse, a common online tactic called swarming.

I knew a lot of the anger had to do with my critics being Extremely Online, a condition where social media compels us to read thinly, strip out all context and get to the part where we can be insulted as efficiently as possible. But that doesn't explain their visceral reaction to my idea that blonde is a social status. Commenters complained that their blond children are simply prettier with light hair — and they characterized their adulation as a natural, understandable obsession with youth. People who were born blond and now have dark hair were among the angriest. They insisted that being a "natural blonde" should matter more than their actual hair color. When pushed on what makes that matter, they got even angrier.

People often get angry when I write about aesthetics and power. Most of us hate the idea that whom we are attracted to, for instance, has any political context. We hate thinking that the things we enjoy — like a soapy western with conservative tropes — mean anything. That is the thing about status. We all want it, but, should we acquire it, we don't want it to mean anything. We don't want to feel bad about having status. The real blondes let me have it because, they maintained, being blond should mean something for them but not mean anything for the rest of us. That is not how status works.

I was banned two days after my video had almost one million views.

Being banned from a major social media platform for more than a week stung a bit. Then it mellowed into pride. I've never been banned before! It's heady stuff for a kid who spent her entire youth waiting to be offered illegal drugs at a party only to discover that I kind of look like a narc.

I wear the banning proudly, but I contest my humiliating defeat at the hands of angry blondes. I don't protest out of pride but from intellectual seriousness. We talk a lot about race and class and gender in this country. Although we don't talk about it particularly well, the U.S. public discourse on race and its associated inequalities is comparatively sophisticated. You only have to look at the Meghan Markle debacle in the U.K. to see that we aren't the absolute worst at this.

When people have outsize emotional reactions to benign inquiries about their self-evident beliefs, it is often an indicator that status is doing invisible work. That makes the culture, economics and politics of blondness great ways to think about how status derives its power and how we use that power in our own lives. Now we're having a conversation about the real meaning of blonde that builds on research. "Racism Without Racists" by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, a sociologist at Duke, is a classic study on the discursive strategies we use to talk about race without talking directly about race. The book informs my thinking about euphemisms for race and status.

Bonilla-Silva argues that white people have an in-group language to talk about racial categories, just as all groups do. We may use "citizen" or "taxpayer" or "American" to talk about dominant racial groups, which, in the American case, means white. We also use "blonde" not just to construct meaning about whiteness but also to describe how it is achieved and maintained. Sometimes our usage is also about gender and class and the status behaviors people develop to be legible as members of the dominant group. I'd bet that if you envisioned a blonde at any point while reading this, the woman you pictured looks more like Reese Witherspoon than Beyoncé. The tricky thing about status is that the specter of race is always close at hand.

Blond is the physical expression or phenotype of a genetic trait. The idea can be presented as a noun ("blond" for male, "blonde" for female) or an adjective ("blond"). Parents celebrate when a baby is born blond and cry if the child grows out of it. Some research finds that blondes make more money than brunettes (that might explain why they have more fun). The blonde stereotype I'm thinking of is a modern invention of advertising and pop culture. The sociopolitical meaning of blonde as genetically superior, desirable is much older and more sinister. Many cultures have a language to describe "blond" but it does not always describe light hair. Sometimes it describes skin shade or economic capital. That is the case in Spanish, where "rubia" can mean more than light hair.

Ambitions to be a blonde, and sorrow for not "winning" this "genetic lottery," are global. Readers from Spain, Italy, Brazil, South Korea and Sweden wrote to me about their different yet intertwining beliefs about blondness. They shared deeply personal comments on Instagram, Twitter, my university and public email addresses — anywhere they could find me, really. They wanted me to know how much not being blond has impacted their lives. Some mentioned heartbroken grandparents who mourn darkening hair on a young child. Another remembered being a dark-haired Jewish child who concluded that she could never be good enough. There was the woman who used blondness to buffer fat bias. There is a lot of loss wrapped up in blonde's status. Maybe that is why staying blond is so expensive. The process can also be painful. Yet, a vast majority of the world's blondes are that way because of chemical intervention.

I may need to convince you that unpacking what blonde means as a social status is worth your consideration. I am up for the task. It helps that I'm bringing a gang. I will be talking with writers, anthropologists, economists and readers about what blonde means. They can help us understand the class distinctions people make about people who achieve blonde from $10 at-home kits versus those who pay $1,500 for it. They can also help us make sense of why so many women in conservative media are also blondes.

We all play status games and they always cost something. It may be uncomfortable at times, but to paraphrase what L'Oreal's old advertising campaign for hair dye tells us, it's "because you're worth it."

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