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Institut für
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Shades of Power: Beauty, Skin Lightening, and Gendered Aesthetics in the Jamaican Diaspora



Jamaican 'blue
power' cake soap.
Lisa Johnson,
Jamaica, 2019.

This presentation critically examines the intersection of beauty, race, and gender among Jamaican women in Montreal, with a particular focus on skin-lightening practices and aesthetic self-fashioning. Grounded in ethnographic research, it situates these bodily practices within a transnational framework, wherein diasporic identity is continually negotiated through the interplay of Jamaican cultural heritage and the racialized landscape of Quebec. Skin bleaching, a widely debated yet pervasive phenomenon, extends beyond mere conformity to Eurocentric beauty ideals. Instead, it functions as a complex socio-cultural strategy for self-styling, social mobility, and embodied agency. In Jamaica, skin-lightening practices are rooted in deep-seated colorism that traces back to the island's colonial past, shaping beauty standards, social hierarchies, and even dancehall culture, where lighter skin is often glorified in lyrics and visuals. Engaging with scholarly critiques that challenge reductive interpretations framing skin lightening solely as internalized racism, this analysis foregrounds the nuanced motivations underlying these practices. While some interlocutors perceive lighter skin as advantageous in professional and social domains, others actively reject hegemonic beauty standards, embracing Afrocentric aesthetics influenced by Rastafari culture. The transnational circulation of aesthetic ideals—propelled by social media, music videos, and remittance economies—fosters an ongoing dialogic exchange between Kingston and Montreal, continuously reshaping notions of beauty, desirability, and femininity. This dynamic process is shaped by what bell hooks termed the “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy;” yet it also creates spaces for cultural resistance and innovation. Beyond aesthetics, bodily practices serve as critical sites for negotiating systemic racism, cultural politics, and gendered marginalization within Quebec’s Francophone society. While dominant narratives of integration emphasize linguistic and cultural assimilation, Jamaican women strategically employ beauty work as a means of constructing diasporic belonging, reclaiming visibility, and articulating agency. By interrogating the intersections of body politics and transnational identity formation, this presentation contributes to broader anthropological debates on diaspora, gender, and the politics of aesthetics.

Lisa Johnson is a cultural anthropologist and migration researcher specializing in transnational mobility, migration studies, and music anthropology. She holds a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Trier University (2020). Her book *Moves – Spaces – Places* examines the migratory trajectories and strategies of Jamaican women in Montreal.

Institutskolloquium Sommersemester 2025 Leitung: Matthias Krings

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