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HOW DOES BLACK HAIR BUILD THE NEXT GENERATION OF SOCIAL DISRUPTORS



Let's Try Something....

Google “Top 10 beauty salons in New York City”.

You will most likely stumble upon a Yelp article. Click on it.

Now, ask yourself a question that the BIPOC community knows oh too well...
Where are all of the Black people?

According to an Essence feature, The Industry That Black Women Built:

“African-Americans spend \$1.2 trillion each year, and that number is projected to rise to \$1.5 trillion by 2021. In 2018 the Black hair care industry raked in an estimated \$2.51 billion, as Black consumers have progressively made the switch from general products to those that specifically cater to them.

In 2017 African-Americans captured 86 percent of the ethnic beauty market, accounting for \$54 million of the \$63 million spent, Nielsen reported. In 2017 we also spent \$127 million on grooming aids and \$465 million on skin care.”

In other words, as beauty brands continuously ignore, profit from, and exploit Black Americans, the billion-dollar industry was built by and for the Black community. And yet, the nuances of this billion dollar industry are relegated in conversations about finance, the topic of gender, and one’s sexual identity- let alone hearing the term “Black hair” which is most often excluded from the discussion, much less identified as a bedrock in the foundation of the industry.



Racial Enclaves & Cyclical Industries

There are two phenomena at play when we take a look at finance and Black beauty industries. First, Black hair care is an outlier within a sea of cyclical industries. Second, this industry can be used as a case study to examine ways to disrupt other forms of racial enclaves.

In order to understand the definition of a racial enclave, it is first necessary to understand cyclical industries and what makes an industry that is not economically cyclical, unique. It is crucial to highlight that the conversation about Black hair is an economic asset because it will help to explain how racial differences impact financial limitations and most importantly, economic decisions.

The Black beauty industry can be used as a case study to investigate and confront racial enclaves. This is because Black hair care has historically provided a space for Black individuals to thrive as entrepreneurs. This is a remarkable dichotomy: due to the legacy of slavery, Jim Crow and the New Deal — Black people were denied equal access to jobs that would allow them to invest in their own wealth.

Fortunately, in many cases, Black hair salons operate economically as spaces for the Black community to invest in their own wealth. Through intentional efforts to protect the enduring impact of enslavement from future generations, the Black beauty salon serves as space to understand colorism, class and racial authenticity. As a result, these long considered community hubs have created generations of entrepreneurs and moments of economic freedom for the Black community. These instances of economic freedom stem from the Black hair care industry and its distinct ability to take economic action as an outlier within a sea of cyclical industries.



Racial Enclaves & Cyclical Industries

A cyclical industry is defined as “a type of industry that is sensitive to the business cycle, such that revenues generally are higher in periods of economic prosperity and expansion and are lower in periods of economic downturn and contraction.” Take for example, the airline industry. When people have a disposable income in “good” economic times, more are willing to indulge in the luxury of traveling. Similar to our spending habits, we’re more likely to spend more money when we have more money to spend.

As an understanding of cyclical industries begin to strengthen and solidify, and considering a business like Black hair care which deviates from this economic cycle, it may seem logical to assume that an industry that thrives in economic highs AND lows is ultimately, financially sound. However, it is imperative to note that intentional efforts to exclude Black individuals from these financial institutions within the general market has created various forms of racial enclaves throughout history.

Professor of Sociology at Washington University in St. Louis, Adia Harvey Wingfield, presents research in “Doing Business with Beauty: Black Women, Hair Salons, and the Racial Enclave Economy,” explaining that the racial enclave economy is “characterized by the presence of fellow minority group members as owners and employees... Unlike the ethnic enclave, however, the racial enclave economy emphasizes the role of systemic gendered racism as a preeminent factor shaping the experiences of minority entrepreneurs” (20). The racial enclave is a socio-economic paradigm that reinforces racialized as well as gendered social systems and forms of inequality.

One effect of a racial enclave is the way in which Black entrepreneurs in this industry primarily cater to an all-Black market. This predicament is unique to the Black community because racial enclave economies stem from the structural ways in which racial minorities face systemic racism in social spaces that then push individuals to engage in entrepreneurship due to a lack of fiscal choice and opportunity.

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This racial enclave economy is inherently gendered, which shapes specifically Black female entrepreneurs’ decisions, motivations, and behaviors as business owners. When referring to Black hair salons as an example of a racial enclave economy, Dr. Wingfield studies in-depth interviews that each reflect similar motivators which then encourage Black women to become entrepreneurs. Most importantly, while living in a society that denies individuals a myriad of rights as a member of the majority, many BIPOC are forced to capitalize on their own individuality — for better or for worse.

Disrupting a Racial Enclave

So as a society, why do we seem increasingly hesitant to dive into intricate and specific industries like Black barbershops and hair salons that developed in response to an institutionalization of exclusivity and profit?

This is to say — if we were to discuss the concept of mass economic disparities from a smaller lens or framework — To what extent would we be able to highlight the intersectionality of race, gender, sexual identity and fiscal empowerment?

Within a conversation about value a.k.a money, why does the world of finance seem to avoid discussing the most valuable tool for all marginalized communities: the ability to make unbound social, emotional and economic choices?

Following centuries of enslavement and race-based hair discrimination, a multifaceted ripple effect was born to protect Black expression. Understanding the harmful impact of upholding racial enclave economies will propel attempts to identify likely disruptors within a cyclical industry such as Black hair and beauty salons. For this reason, it is crucial to emphasize the ways in which racial enclaves can be used as a case study to examine ways to disrupt other forms of economic inequality.

In other words, this concentration of people, goods and services within a racial enclave then lends itself to a repetitive cycle that adds to the financial challenges which prevent the BIPOC community to thrive exponentially and consistently in comparison to their white counterparts.

As the term racial enclave becomes more familiar, it is important to consider how Dr. Wingfield's research refers to the racial enclave as an economic detour. In order to expand an understanding of economics through a racial lens, it may be more effective to explore how aspects of a racial enclave can be disrupted.

If racial enclaves are referred to as social disruptors, then the language used to radicalize modern society can emerge.

Economic Detours

Economic detours perpetuate institutionalized racism and ideologies which exclude Black entrepreneurs from competing in the white market. Whereas, social disruptors imply a radical transformation, “old certainties of modern society are falling away and something quite new is emerging”.

Collectively, how can society actively use the concept of a social disruptor to strengthen an understanding of the disadvantages within this current economic system?

As you begin to focus on specific points of economic inequalities, you can extrapolate a greater understanding of race, gender and sexual identity. In other words, while identifying aspects of the American economy that disavow a cyclical form of financial “prosperity,” you can confront the drawbacks of this economic glass ceiling.

Let’s imagine an economy in which racial enclaves surpass the general market. What would it look like if BIPOC entrepreneurs remain an outlier within a sea of cyclical industries, and Black hair care disrupts an unbalanced economy?



If this society truly believes that everyone can experience equity, it has to be willing to center the language that limits racial liberation and identify tools that give context to a greater and ongoing story of systemic oppression.



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