

BLACK WOMEN, BEAUTY, AND HAIR AS A MATTER OF *BEING*

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If a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her
for a covering.

—1 Corinthians 11:15

Since I was a teenager, I have chemically altered the natural state of my hair. At the time, I never really thought about why I did it, or the extent to which that chemical would rule over me. But my *hairstory* is not unique. For the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience. The crux of the Black hair issue centers on three oppositional binaries—the natural/unnatural Black, good/bad hair, and the authentic/inauthentic Black. On the one hand, scholars in the Caribbean, Britain, and the United States speak of the importance given to the dominant beauty paradigm, which privileges “white/light skin, straight hair and what are seen to be European facial features” (Tate 301). On the other hand, the legacy of the 1960s and 1970s Black Power Movement is that Blackness was redefined such that Afrocentric or “naturally” Black hairstyles became associated with the authentic. As such, “Within this Black anti-racist aesthetic the beauty that was valorized and recognized was that of ‘dark skin’ and ‘natural afro-hair’. . . the only authentic Black hairstyles would be dreadlocks, afro, cane-row and plaits. By extension, the only authentic Blackness would be a dark-skinned one. These are the valorized signifiers of the ideal of ‘natural Black beauty’” (Tate 302–03).

This article uses causal talk about hair to examine how media and social interactive processes mediate one's grooming choices while simultaneously ascribing an aesthetic value on one's body.

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The Black¹ and bi-racial² women featured in this article demonstrate the depth and breadth of issues that arise when Black hair is discussed. Using social comparison theory as a framework, I argue that the Eurocentric beauty standard of straight, long and flowing hair has a sociocultural affect on Black women's notions of physical attractiveness, but also on courtship, self-esteem, and identity. Leon Festinger's social comparison theory suggests that people compare themselves to others when they are not certain about themselves. Ultimately, this article seeks to explain the discrepancy between desired and perceived beauty and how such perceptions lead Black women to engage in hair practices designed primarily to align themselves with the dominant beauty standard.

In order to understand the complexity of the juxtaposition between adhering to Eurocentric beauty standards and the assimilatory cultural practice of hair straightening, I first review the history of Black hair and hair altering techniques. Second, I explain how and why social comparison theory is a valid measure to elucidate Black hair issues, especially since beauty is subjective. Third, I contemplate the ways in which hair length and texture perform as a marker of femininity; the Western beauty ideal and the pressures to conform to this ascribed beauty aesthetic, and how such conformity contributes to conceptualizations of what it means to be physically attractive, and sexually desirable. Finally, I critique the politics of Black hair in the workplace, exploring the question of why Black hair continues to be eyed as a threat to the dominant hegemonic beauty ideal.

A History of Black Hair

Hair. It may seem like a mundane subject, but it has profound implications for how African American women experience the world. —Lanita Jacobs-Huey (3)

¹I conducted interviews with these women in July 2007. The interviews were done both in person and via telephone and transcribed by myself. In discussion with them, we agreed to use an alias name to protect their privacy. I have personally known these women for several years, with the exception of one, who was referred to me by one of the women interviewed.

²Participants were Caribbean and Caribbean and Indian descent and lived in Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

Several African-American scholars have explored the history of Black hair from pre-slavery Africa to contemporary times (Banks 1–49, 149; Byrd and Tharps 1–9, 183; Mercer 101–142; Rooks 31–40). Prior to the transatlantic slave trade, Black hair denoted cultural and spiritual meanings for both men and women. While some of the hairstyles that were donned by Africans during this period are still worn today, including twists, braids, Zulu knots, Nubian knots, and dreadlocks,³ once the slave trade began, the African's connection to their hair was forever altered, and complicated by life in North America. Forced to work in the fields all day, there simply was no time to care much about one's appearance or one's hair. Moreover, "treasured African combs were nowhere to be found in the New World, so the once long, thick, and healthy tresses of both women and men became tangled and matted" (Byrd and Tharps 12–13). Where women, in particular, used to meticulously craft elaborate hairstyles back in Africa, once in the New World (America, the Caribbean, and Canada) they took to wearing head scarves or handkerchiefs atop their heads, partly to shield themselves from the sun, but also to hide their unsightly, unkempt hair. In *400 Years without a Comb*, Willie Morrow chronicled the history of Black hairstyling practices, arguing that skin color and hair are so intertwined that it is hard to separate the two when examining the forces that shape Black people's lives. Morrow argued that "[hair] is the basic, natural symbol of the things people want to be . . . and its social-cultural significance should not be underestimated" (qtd. in Banks 7).

During the 18th century, it was fashionable for White men of the upper class to wear wigs; in turn, slaves who worked in the "big house" also took to wearing wigs, while others shaped their own hair to look like a wig. In order to further distance Blacks from their cultural roots, and denigrate any attempts to hang on to such African hair traditions, during this period, European scientists began to categorize the appearance of Blacks in the New World, including hair and skin tone. Dominated by fair skinned and straight hair people, "African hair was deemed wholly unattractive and inferior by the Europeans. Many white people went so far as to insist that Blacks did not have real hair,

³Made famous by reggae singer and Rastafarian Bob Marley, dreadlocks have their roots in African culture, and still carry many negative connotations for people who wear them.

preferring to classify it in a derogatory manner as ‘wool’” (Byrd and Tharps 14). Further, once Black beauty was juxtaposed with White beauty, a socially stratified hierarchy began to take shape.

By the time slavery was abolished in the late 19th century, “the goal of grooming the hair had morphed from the elaborate and symbolic designs of Africa into an imitation of White styles adapted to Black kinks and curls. . . . There existed neither a public nor a private forum where Black hair was celebrated” (Byrd and Tharps 16). As free Blacks left their plantations, demarcations related to straightened Black hair began to circulate. In her historical review of early 20th century advertisements, Noliwe Rooks found that the products that were advertised regularly included before and after pictures encouraging Black women to lighten their pigment and straighten their hair, if not for themselves, but for their community.⁴ These advertisements, as Rooks notes, “argue for the desirability of changing physical manifestations of ‘classic’ African features by juxtaposing the characteristics of Caucasians and Africans to highlight the advantages of disavowing the physical manifestations of an African ancestry” (27). In conjunction with such advertisements, Black entrepreneurs recognized the tremendous opportunity to market and sell products to Blacks—especially women—that would similarly appeal to the need to assimilate into White culture. Madam C.J. Walker’s 1905 hair softener, which was accompanied by a hair-straightening comb (known as a hot-comb), is regarded as the first hair product developed and manufactured by, and sold to, Black people. Walker revolutionized the way Black women thought about their hair. Because she was also Black, not only did her product sanction the act of straightening, it also turned it from something Whites had demanded that Blacks do into a collective signifier of progress. As Tracy Owens Patton argues,

⁴According to Rooks’ research, by the turn of the 20th century, ads for Ozonized Ox Marrow showed in the “before” drawing, the woman’s hair almost standing on end, whereas the “after” drawing portrays the hair as neatly combed and styled. The advertising copy proclaims, “This wonderful hair pomade is the only safe preparation in the world that makes kinky or curly hair straight.” Finally, advertisements for Curl-I-Cure: A Cure For Curls said, “You owe it to yourself, as well as to others who are interested in you, to make yourself as attractive as possible. Attractiveness will contribute much to your success—both socially and economically. Positively nothing detracts so much from your appearance as short, matted un-attractive curly hair” (27–40).

“Walker’s beauty empire, therefore, not only contributed to higher self-esteem among the Black community, but also created a new job industry for those who attended her beauty schools” (29). And while Walker’s astute entrepreneurial endeavors make her an undeniable trailblazer, “by the mid-1920s, however, straight hair had become the preferred texture to signal middle-class status” (Rooks 75) not natural Black hair, in large part due to her efforts. Walker may have positively reinforced the act of straightening one’s hair, but during the Black is Beautiful movement of the 1960s and 1970s, hair alteration became a contested practice.

The “shift to calling oneself Black and being proud of it translated into a style that proudly hearkened back to Africa” (Byrd and Tharps 53). This shift was largely sparked by the hairstyles of such performers as James Brown, Sammy Davis Jr., and Cicely Tyson,⁵ who all wore Afros and braids during the 1960s. The aforementioned also contributed to demarcations surrounding an *authentic* and *inauthentic* Blackness. Those who wore an Afro were also wearing another look, known as the “natural,” which was “unstraightened Black hair that was not cut close” (Byrd and Tharps 57). Ultimately, the ideological shift in Black hair coincided with a political shift. A “real” Black person adorned a “natural” hairstyle, while those who straightened their hair were deemed fake for attempting to emulate a White aesthetic, and an “unnatural” Black look.

Today, hairstyles run the gamut from Afros to straightened hair to Jheri curls,⁶ irrespective of skin tone, socio-economic class, and political affiliation. However, this article aims to debunk the idea that Black hair is no longer political or “just hair.” First, at the same time Black people have a plethora of hair options at

⁵Cicely Tyson, an African-American actress, is touted as one of the first women to adorn a natural hairstyle on television. As Byrd and Tharps recount, “In 1962, Cicely Tyson appeared on the CBS drama series *East Side, West Side* with her hair in an Afro and, in subsequent episodes, in cornrows” (54). While it would be several years later that the wearing of an Afro meant an allegiance to Africa, nonetheless, Tyson’s hair was groundbreaking at the time.

⁶Made popular in the eighties by Black celebrities of the day, the Jheri Curl was essentially a chemical added to the hair that gave the appearance of tight, curly hair. It required an activator, aka “Jheri Curl Juice,” and a shower cap to keep the moisture in one’s hair. When Michael’s Jackson’s Jheri Curl caught fire during the filming of a 1984 Pepsi commercial, the style began to fade.

their disposal, there have been punitive measures taken by employers to restrict the donning of the “natural” in the workplace. In the case of *Rogers v. American Airlines*⁷ for example, the court “upheld the right of employers to prohibit categorically the wearing of braided hairstyles in the workplace. The plaintiff, a Black woman, argued that American Airlines’ policy discriminated against her specifically as a black woman . . . the court chose, however, to base its decision principally on distinctions between biological and cultural conceptions of race” (Caldwell 366). In 2007, a Black woman in West Virginia was fired from her job at a prison for wearing braids, which was deemed to be inappropriate⁸—even by penal standards. While the argument can be made that Black hair no longer carries the same socio-cultural significance it did in decades and centuries past, the “natural” remains an unwanted politically charged marker in the workplace. As Lori S. Robinson writes, “corporate America isn’t the only adversary of natural styles. Some black institutions discourage the ‘natural’ look, believing it’s best to prepare African Americans to blend into a majority-White corporate environment” (9). Second, perhaps fueled by hip-hop culture and its images of pimps, thugs, and gangsters who wear cornrows and braided hairstyles, a review of the discourse on Black hair shows very little acceptance of natural Black hair.

In *The Hair in Black Women*, Dr. Neil Persadsingh, a trained dermatologist (who is light-skinned with curly wavy hair) provides a guide to styling, grooming and treating Black hair. In describing the genetics of Black hair, Persadsingh writes:

Black hair has some advantages, especially in a hot climate. . . . Caucasian hair offers better protection against the rain compared to black hair, but water runs off it rapidly with little lasting cooling effect. (21)

This is an excellent example of the ways in which Black hair continues to be juxtaposed with “Caucasian”⁹ hair as being inferior to, or in need of fixing. While Black hair has “some advantages,”

⁷1981.

⁸I cannot recall the woman’s name but this was a topic of discussion on the Michael Biesdon syndicated radio show on September 13, 2007.

⁹I presume Persadsingh’s use of the word “Caucasian” is meant to include all ethnicities other than African descendants.

Persadsingh implies that the negative aspects of the “natural” aesthetic far outweigh the positive. Similarly, in her book, *The Guild to Styling and Grooming Black Children’s Hair: It’s all Good Hair*, Michele N.-K. Collision uses language that prioritizes straightened hair over Afrocentric styles. In describing whether or not a parent should put their child’s hair in dreadlocks, Collision writes:

Locs are not for every child. The hairstyle is permanent. If your daughter or son is the type who wants a new hairstyle every couple months, tell her or him to try a different style. . . . Locs are recommended for children who are confident and can talk about their hair choices. A lot of people don’t understand locs and may say cruel things to children about their hairstyle. When his friends start to call him “Buckwheat,”¹⁰ he may decide he doesn’t want locs. (95–96)

Conversely, she describes chemically “relaxing” a child’s hair as follows:

You’ve all seen the pretty pictures of the little girls on the perm boxes with the beautiful, bouncy hair. Lately, you’ve been thinking that relaxing your child’s hair would make your life much easier because you wouldn’t have to spend so much time managing and styling it. Or, maybe it’s your daughter—or even your son—who’s pushing for the change. (110)

It is the contemporary discourse on Black hair that reminds us that it is still a contentious issue. While their respective works provide necessary styling guidance on different types of hair textures, both Collision and Persadsingh demonstrate how straight hair, which is more aligned with Western beauty ideals, continues to be privileged over natural styles—especially dreadlocks. It is important to note that hair straightening has been challenged as an expression of collective pride, not as a badge of self-hate. According to Paul Taylor, hair straightening “has taken on such racialized significance that participation in the practice can be a way of expressing Black pride rather than a way of precluding it” (668). Further, Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden argue that “not every woman who decides to straighten her hair or change

¹⁰Buckwheat was a Black character in the 1930s television show, *The Little Rascals*. His appearance was largely an exaggeration of Blackness, and by today’s standards, is quite offensive. As such, Collision makes the reference here to connote the negative reaction people who wear dreadlocks will likely receive.

the color of her eyes . . . believes that beauty is synonymous with Whiteness. Trying on a new look, even one often associated with Europeans, does not automatically imply self-hatred. It is possible to dye your brown tresses platinum and still love your Blackness” (178). For some, hair alternation is a matter of personal choice, thus, the question this article aims to examine is whether straightened hair should be considered just another option amid a plethora of styling options, or whether all hair—natural or unnatural—should be critically evaluated as Kobena Mercer suggests, “as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, *all* Black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both symbolic meaning and significance” (104).

Social Comparison Theory and Hair

Social comparison theory provides a measure to understand how and why people compare themselves to societal standards when assessing their own behaviors. With respect to beauty, this theoretical framework can provide a critical tool to evaluate a woman’s hair choices, and the ways normative hair standards are used to evaluate one’s level of attractiveness. As Law and Labre describe, “once a comparison is made, assuming that the person wants to be similar to and ranks the other person as superior, then the existence of the discrepancy will result in action on the part of the person making the comparison in order to reduce the discrepancy” (706). There are several examples where social comparison theory has been used in gender studies involving physical attractiveness and self-esteem. Thornton and Moore found that women’s self-ratings of attractiveness and social self-esteem were lower after exposure to a physically attractive, same-sex model than after exposure to a physically unattractive, same-sex model (474–80). When it comes to body shape, researchers have found that Black women are not strongly affected by mainstream body standards of beauty, which is consistent with findings that Black women have greater body satisfaction than do White women (e.g., Evans and McConnell 163). Beth Molloy found that unlike White American women who are plagued by waif-like images they cannot attain, African American women are relatively positive about their body image, as she writes, African-American women

“believe that African-American males prefer larger women, they have less need to lose weight, and therefore, feel more attractive” (qtd. in Patton 34). However, this finding does not take into consideration the images of hair that are disseminated by mainstream media. Understanding the intersection of social comparison and hair gives us deeper insight into why Black women find it difficult to resist aligning their hair choices with that of the dominant beauty ideal. The juxtaposition of in-group comparisons and social interactive processes also provide valuable insight into the pressures to conform to mainstream standards of long, flowing, and straight hair.

Hair Texture and Identity

Good hair means curls and waves
Bad hair means you look like a slave

—India Arie¹¹

It has been over ten years since I last combed my hair. When I mention this, friends and family are sometimes scandalized. I am amused by their reactions. During the same ten years they've poured gallons of possibly carcinogenic “relaxer” chemicals on themselves, and their once proud, interestingly crinkled or kinky hair has been forced to lie flat as a slab over a grave. But I understand this, having for many years done the same thing to myself.

—Alice Walker¹²

A fundamental question that all Black women, irrespective of skin tone, hair type and socio-economic class have asked themselves at one point in time is: what am I going to do with my hair? Black hair, in all its manifestations, must always be contemplated. Byrd and Tharps argue that “it is impossible to ignore the fact that pop culture paradigms of beautiful Black women are coiffed with long, straight hair” (155). During conversations with “mixed race” Black women in Britain, Shirley Tate notes that “shade and its companion hair, matter for acceptance into Black community” (307). Specifically, one of Tate’s respondents cited that when

¹¹Lyrics are from the song, “I Am Not My Hair” off Arie’s album, *Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationship* (2006).

¹²Mastalia and Pagano, 8.

faced with the denial of Black people in her youth, she plaited her hair and wore an African head-wrap to hide the straightness of her hair, an act which supports Judith Butler's concept of performative reiteration, in that Black beauty, following Butler's argument, is a matter of *doing* and its effects are not therefore an inherent attribute. Rather, it is about "racing" bodies and being raced by embodied subjects (33). For instance, Latoya recalls a childhood visit to New York and how exposure to African-American culture shaped her hair choices; and Rebecca, in talking about her experiences going to a Black hair salon, illustrates how and why for "mixed race" women, "shade and hair are . . . refigured as an absence such that *Black* can be rendered present in every account of beauty while 'mixed race' is erased as a source of identification" (Tate 307):

Latoya

I used to go to the states and hang out with some of my cousins who were quite a bit older and they used to have their hair relaxed like everybody had their hair relaxed. Nobody had natural hair in New York; that was the style and that was what the cool kids were doing. . . . I think prior to that I would wear my hair in two plaits down my head or something like that and nothing fancy or anything like that. I wanted to be doing whatever the cool kids were doing.

Rebecca

When you're half or when you're "mixed race" it's difficult to fit in because you're many things. It's difficult to find similarities between people, culturally or community speaking wise and I think I just felt really isolated and I felt I finally found somewhere where I felt like African beauty or hair was celebrated . . .

Black hair in its natural state is often negatively marked for its difference. While White women have lots of issues about their hair, "they also have lots of affirmation for their hair. [Black people] don't have the overall cultural affirmation that counters the negative obsession" (qtd. in Byrd and Tharps 154). For example, Byrd and Tharps further argue that "Since the beauty standards in [America] are set according to a White aesthetic—from Miss America to the Barbie doll—Black women are left with precious few places to find an image of beauty that showcases unstraightened tresses and natural styles" (154). Further, "hair functions as a key *ethnic signifier* because, compared with bodily shape or facial

features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening” (Mercer 103). When asked about her earliest childhood memory about her hair and its difference, Sheila told me: “I would say probably when I was around eight. I used to . . . wear blankets on my head and wear headbands to hold the blankets and I’d pretend that it was my hair . . . I think that’s when I really noticed that I didn’t like my hair, well I don’t want to say I didn’t like my hair but I preferred the longer hair.”

Historically, White women have also been forced to adhere to a beauty standard that is often unattainable. In the 17th century, “ample breasts, hips, and buttocks became the beauty ideal” (Patton 31); then in the 18th and 19th centuries, women continued to wear corsets to exaggerate small waists, despite adverse effects on their physical health. In the 20th century, a similar prescribed beauty ideal became ubiquitous and entrenched. Importantly, not all racial minority groups have been affected the same by such standards.

Evans and McConnell found that Black women and Asian women, although both racial minorities, respond differently to mainstream standards of beauty. Specifically, “although Black women may employ self-protective strategies while comparing themselves to mainstream standards of beauty . . . Asian women were less likely to utilize such strategies. Instead, Asian women appeared to adopt non-ingroup, mainstream beauty ideals” (162). Second, they found that “Asian women resemble White women in their desire to strive for mainstream beauty ideals” (163). While researchers argue that Black women do not subscribe to the same thinness ideals that are prescribed in mainstream culture (e.g., Evans and McConnell 163), through their hair, Black women are similarly struggling to adhere to mainstream beauty ideals.¹³ Importantly, Frantz Fanon first regarded cultural preference for all things White as symptomatic of psychic inferiorization; however, if Black hair, and all human hair, has no inherent aesthetic value in that it must be worked upon before it can be beautiful (Mercer 105), what peculiarities distinguish Black hair from other types of hair? As Midge Wilson and Kathy Russell found, “hair becomes such a major preoccupation for

¹³There has yet to be quantitative or qualitative comparison research done to affirm or disaffirm the argument I put forth here.

adolescent girls of both races that their self-esteem can actually rise and fall with every glance in the mirror” (qtd. in Patton 37). Since Black “hair decisions are subject to more critical feedback from friends, because hair styles are laden with political overtones” (37) the aesthetic stylization of a Black woman’s hair, whether intentionally or unintentionally, “seeks to *revalorize* the ethnic signifier” (Mercer 104), and reduce the impact of psychic inferiority. For example, African-American writer, Akkida Mcdowell’s recollection of her childhood illustrates how black hair is as an ethnic signifier that requires action:

When my hairstyle differed from the elaborate norm, my classmates and peers viewed me as unacceptable. . . . If my hair didn’t look good (to them), I wasn’t any good. My hair dictated whether I went out or not. On days that my hair acted up, the TV kept me company. According to movies, my beloved television, my classmates and even my neighbors, a proper hairstyle not only completed the package, but defined and delivered it. (124)

Similarly, Jackie, Vanessa Christine, Nicole, and Tracy all give accounts from their childhood that highlights the power of social comparison. Their comments also illustrate how through the physicality of hair, Black women are caught between what Mercer describes as two logics of Black stylization—one emphasizing *natural* looks, the other involving *straightening* to emphasize *artifice*:

Jackie

When I got to school . . . considering that my brother and I were the only two Black kids in the whole school I learned early that my hair was different. . . . If my hair wasn’t braided and my mom let it out, they would be like, ‘your hair is so spongy’ and they always liked to touch it, it was probably grade 1 when I noticed.

Vanessa

When I was in elementary school, grade four or grade five . . . being a young kid, it really caused me to be a little more self-conscious of my hair. . . . My hair made me different . . . there were a lot of different races where I grew up and I’m not sure how my other friends felt about it but I always felt definitely that they were intrigued by my hair.

Christine

My mom has always pressed her hair since I was a kid and a person who was not of our culture came over and saw her pressing her hair and actually said,

‘your mom is putting fire in her hair!’ So that to me was a wake up call because I realized that what we do to our hair is tantamount to torture compared to other people who have straight hair, more manageable hair.

Nicole

I was one of the lucky kids I guess because everyone back in the day was like ‘oh, you’re hair has to be long to be beautiful’ and my hair was . . . I was always asked to wear my hair out to school but then . . . people would always want to touch my hair and be like, ‘oh you hair is so nice, can I touch your hair?’

Tracy

I think it would probably be when I was really consciously aware was probably grade 7. . . . Because at that point I started to not go to school with my hair braided in plaits, I was starting not to do that and sort of trying different styles and I realized that I had limited styles that I could do and get away with going to school and still look decent.

Hair straightening is not only linked to physical attractiveness, it is also a marker of socio-economic mobility; as Noliwe Rooks recalls, “my grandmother believed I would be ostracized by middle-class African Americans if I did not straighten my hair” (75).¹⁴

Historically, the idea that straight hair means higher social and economic opportunities was spearheaded by C.J. Walker; however, by the mid-1940s White-owned companies recognized that Black women were a multiple product-dependent market, desperate to move up the social and economic ladder. Thus, such companies as “Vaseline and Dixie Peach . . . established themselves as key players in the hair game” (Byrd and Tharps 84). The Black hair industry was dominated by White-owned companies up until 1954 when African-American George E. Johnson created the first “permanent” straightening system that could be applied in one’s home. Although the Black is Beautiful movement valorized a natural aesthetic over a chemically treated one, that ethos could not be maintained; albeit, it did have a short lived revival in the 1990s.

During this second hair movement, “Black women started wearing their hair in intricate African-inspired braided styles, which launched an enormously successful business for immigrant African hair braiders” (Byrd and Tharps 93). Hair braiding was so

¹⁴Circa 1976.

popular during the 1990s that Vanessa, who grew up during this period said, “I would get my hair braided almost every summer either with extensions or my own hair. I don’t know if you remember Sheneneh¹⁵ from *Martin* that TV show but she was the only character at the time that was Black and had braids.” Once again, hair manufacturers seized an opportunity to introduce new lines of sprays and sheens for natural hairstyles, and just like in the past, White-owned companies again dominated the market with products like African Pride, which was “packaged in the African nationalist colors of red, black, and green” (Byrd and Tharps 94).¹⁶

Each of the women I spoke to at one point in time chemically straightened their hair. Interestingly enough, their reasons for doing so were in large part due to a growing tiredness with their natural hair, and the fact that they came of age during a period—the late 1980s and 1990s—where chemically straightened hair was an easy option (or quick “fix”) at their disposal:

Latoya

I got my first relaxer when I was about 14 or 13 maybe. Living in the community that we lived in there wasn’t any Black hairdressers around and I asked my mother to buy a kit and help me do it and we did it.

Vanessa

It was my idea . . . I felt really excited about it like “finally, I’m in some kind of club,” I don’t have to wash my natural hair and have it shrink so it was really an exciting experience. I guess I was walking a little bit taller the next day at school.

Nicole

I was about four or five years old and . . . my mom was combing my hair and it was tough because you know natural hair, I was getting my hair pulled every time and I would cry and cry. . . . So, every morning I remember dreading getting my hair pulled. So, my mom actually said to me one time . . . there’s this treatment you can do and your hair will be a lot easier to comb so it won’t hurt as much . . . I’ve pretty much had my hair relaxed since then.

¹⁵Sheneneh Jenkins was a female character played by African-American actor Martin Lawrence on the television sitcom *Martin*, which ran from 1992 to 1997.

¹⁶Byrd and Tharps further write, “Most consumers assumed that African Pride came from a Black manufacturer until company president Brian Marks decided to sue a smaller Black-owned company and his cover was blown” (94).

Jackie

The first relaxer must have been in grade six, and I think my mom was just tired of combing my hair and tired of me screaming but then I think my mom relaxed it at home and of course that didn't last and my hair broke off a lot.

Rebecca

When I was in my second year of university . . . when I went to the hairdressers . . . I just fell in love because it was something that I could relate to because it was women in particular like me and . . . I wanted to do what they were doing. . . . My hairdresser and I started talking about having straight hair and she said well the only way to straighten it is to put a chemical in it and she kept saying how wonderful it would look and I was . . . fascinated. Part of me was totally thrilled to be a part of something that I could identify with and so I did it.

Tracy

My mom used to press my hair for years and she didn't want me to relax my hair because she never relaxed her hair. . . . Everyone reacts differently to relaxers and there are different types of relaxers too. . . . The chemicals are ridiculous and now I think it's just crap that you put in your hair. At the time, I just kept thinking to grin and bare it because it will be straight and I can sweat and it will still be straight.

These Black women talk about using relaxers in a way that suggests it was something they willingly did to their hair in order to be a part of something; in other words, participation in straightening signified a collective sense of Black pride. Similarly, as Lanita Jacobs-Huey found with respect to African-American women, in their talk about hair and hairstyles, they “strategically invoke an array of in-group hair terms, gendered experiences, and cultural discourse styles to establish their individual and collective rights” (88). However, it is important to consider Cornel West’s assertion that “much of Black self-hatred and self-contempt has to do with the refusal of many Black Americans to love their own Black bodies—especially their Black noses, hips, lips, and hair” (85).

Physical Attractiveness and Sexuality: Is Hair Really *Depoliticized*?

All women, irrespective of race, compare themselves to the Western beauty ideal. As Patton notes, “it is fair to say that in the United

States, and in many countries that are influenced by the United States (largely through mediated forms), the current standard of beauty is a White, young, slim, tall, and upper class woman” (30). However, shame is a key concept that underscores in-group talk about Black hair. According to Eve Sedgwick the power of shame lies in its ability to transform or intensify the meaning of things such as body parts, identities, or people’s behavior towards oneself (1–16). In describing the shame one of her respondents experienced, Tate writes, “It is about how Black others perceive and react to her and it is felt because she has an attachment to Black community” (308). Because shame is a part of the process in which identity is formed and is available for the work of reframing, transfiguration and deformation of identities (Tate 308), if “beauty contradictions are felt as shame and ambivalence because the essentialisms of racialized and normalized racializing beauty mean that Black beauty is entailed, made proper, installed as such and naturalized within our thoughts and our being” (Tate 310), and identification is a matter of emulating a fake aesthetic, while disidentification is a matter of embodying an *authentic* Black beauty, is hair really *depoliticized*?

Sheila, like millions of other Black women, has taken to wearing synthetic hair weaves, a process she describes as follows:

I just glue in tracks¹⁷ up until not the top of my head but more or less to the top it just looks very natural. There’s not one person that can tell my hair is weave. But you can still see my scalp and everything at the very front so when I part it, it looks like it just blends right in which is why I only do a half head so it still looks natural. . . . So you leave it like an inch so if you want to wear your hair back you can pull it back and not see the tracks and still only see your natural hair.

These comment are quite revealing in that despite the fact that Sheila continues to relax her hair in addition to weaving, her interpretation of her relaxed hair as “natural”—by its very nature an *inauthentic* Black style—illustrates how the *authentic* natural Black aesthetic is often denied the right to exist; instead it is replaced (almost entirely) by the “regulatory ideal of normalized racializing Black beauty congealed into a corporeal . . . and also a psychic reality” (Tate 315). For example, Sheila continues, “My

¹⁷Tracks are rows of synthetic or fake hair.

hair is relaxed so the hair is straight. It's just normal Black straight hair. I mean, it's not Caucasian, it's the permed straight so it still kind of has that texture to it." How did Black hair get to a point where straight hair is considered to be "normal?"

Importantly, Vanessa said, "I definitely see it as a lack of education, a lot of the Black magazines I read like *Essence* and *Ebony* all the ads in there are for relaxed hair." From Oprah to Janet Jackson to Tyra Banks and a slew of others, weaves have become a normative part of Black beauty. More so than ever before, Black women are bombarded with images that have normalized long, straight hair. While the age long quest was always to have straight hair "through the use of weaves, the long-standing Black problem of not having long hair is effectively solved" (Byrd and Tharps 123), but why has this obsession with having long—unnaturally Black—hair taken off with such force? As hooks reminds us, "popular culture provides countless examples of Black female appropriation and exploitation of 'negative stereotypes' to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it" (*Black Looks* 65). Undoubtedly, the image of Black beauty in popular Black magazines gives the impression that Black hair is only beautiful when it is altered. The vast majority of the images in publications such as *Essence*, *Ebony*, and *Sophisticates Black Hair Styles and Care Guide*, are of women with straight, long hair, and to the extent that they do show natural hairstyles, it is often an insert with hairdos that arguably perpetuate a racialized Black beauty.

With the exception of Sheila, each of the women I spoke to about weaves affirmed hooks' argument that "the idea that there is no meaningful connection between Black experience and critical thinking about aesthetics or culture must be continually interrogated" (*Yearning* 23). For Vanessa, Nicole, Rebecca, Tracy, and Christine, resisting ascribed beauty ideals serve to counterpoliticize the signifier of ethnic and racial devalorization and challenge definitions of Blackness as defined by hegemonic structures:

Vanessa

It just seems like we have to conform to some standard that's out there. Why should we feel that way? I'm a Black woman, my hair is never going to be long down to my butt, I'm not mixed with anything . . . we don't grow hair naturally that long, I don't see what the appeal is to have silky long hair and it is so obviously fake.

Nicole

I think growing up and always kind of being “the other” and seeing White culture for what it is, it’s always been inherently fake. . . . The [White] women have always been very insecure or very focused on their appearance and so you know I don’t like my hair like this, I want to perm it. . . . It’s all a business and most people are not happy with what they have naturally.

Rebecca

I have mixed feelings about it [weaves]. I have mixed feelings because I understand the history and I understand the struggle of identity. . . . I’m conflicted because it’s fake. It’s again something being projected by a mass media and a power outlet. . . . I think that you lose something of your identity if you’re doing that to yourself.

Tracy

I think the whole process of weaving is damaging to your hair. . . . I just think it’s the worst thing we can do psychologically and physically to ourselves. Psychologically to ourselves and physically to our hair. . . . There is no way you can do something like that long term and your hair is going to be thick and healthy, there’s just no way. It’s like anything else—chemicals, relaxing, and after a period of time hair braiding—anything you add to your hair like that will deteriorate it.

Christine

People are buying into this standard; this beauty standard that we’re well aware of because even back in the 20th century it was a problem. When we deny this standard and we wear our hair natural . . . we’re saying you know what, I’m beautiful the way I am, I’m not going to try to be like you. And when you weave, what you’re saying to the world is that I want to imitate you . . . I don’t like who I am naturally.

It is my contention that although hair straightening, weaving (and to some extent braid extensions) are as Christine noted, “tantamount to torture,” Black women continue this practice because a “real” woman has long straight hair, while short nappy hair is relegated to something children have or those women—according to mainstream and Black beauty standards—who may be deemed less attractive.¹⁸ What affect does a valorized *inauthentic* aesthetic have on a Black woman’s conceptualization of her physical attractiveness and sexuality?

¹⁸There are of course exceptions to this statement. For example, Sudanese supermodel Alex Wek and actor Whoppi Goldberg both adorn natural hairstyles and it has not impeded their ability to be successful in mainstream culture.

The crux of the hair issue for Black women appears to center on the performance of beauty and to a large extent, heterosexual courtship. Latoya said, “I feel that men have such a strong attachment to what it means to be feminine and female that they’ve created this expectation that to be a woman, to be considered sexy, to be attractive and desirable one must have a head of long flowing hair and to choose to do something different with hair is like a slap in the face and a personal offence to them.” Latoya’s comments are illustrative of Butler’s argument that gender is culturally constructed. The notion that gender is constructed suggests a “certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies” (12) wherein the body is “a construction, as are the myriad of ‘bodies’ that constitute the domain of gendered subjects. Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender” (13). For instance, Patton notes that “we learn that beauty is one of *the* defining characteristics of a woman. . . . Most often the hair commercials show Euro American women tossing their bouncy, shiny, long, straight hair. . . . This image, while directed toward Euro American women, impacts African American women, because it is often not our image that becomes the vision and standard of beauty” (39). To what extent does the body come into *being* in and through the mark(s) of gender? For Black women, gender (and sexuality) comes into *being* through adherence to an *inauthentic* hair standard. As Mcdowell affirms, “deep down, we might even believe that we must be in a perpetual state of artificial fineness to attract men. . . . To get a man, I need to beautify myself by any means necessary—including starving and having my power/telephone/hot water shut off—in favour of phat¹⁹ hairstyles” (129). We are socially constructed through the language of texts²⁰ and through mediated images to believe that hair is what makes a female (sex) a woman (gender), and a beautiful woman is defined by hair that is long, silky, and flowing. For example, in *Big Hair: A Journey Into the Transformation of Self*, Grant McCracken describes a variety of hairstyles for women; he suggests that each style carries a variety of meanings:

¹⁹Slang for great or wonderful.

²⁰For example, previously noted works of Collison and Persadsingh.

“Voluptuous hair” is mostly about sexuality. “Imperial hair” is mostly about social standing. The “career coif” is mostly about professionalism. The “shaved and shorn” look is mostly about protest. The “Pixie” look is about a certain charm and élan. The “mature bob” is about a certain tragic or dignified retreat from fashion. Each look is a piece of our culture turned into the nature of hair. (122–23)

Where does that leave Black women if, for the most part, each of the aforementioned hairstyles are naturally unattainable, short of getting a weave to “fix” the problem?

Importantly, “femininity is not merely associated with long hair . . . but with White women” (Banks 89). Thus, just like during slavery where “emulating White hairstyles, particularly straight hair, signified many things in the Black community . . . free vs. slave; employed vs. unemployed; educated vs. uneducated; upper class vs. poor” (Patton 28), arguably, the status of Black liberation remains perpetually stagnant because the imitation and emulation of White-defined standards of beauty continue to reign supreme. While “self-hate” is a term that many Black women resist using because of its harshness, Vanessa reminds us that whether or not a Black woman identifies her hair alternation as an act of “self-hatred,” there is still an attempt being made to emulate Whiteness:

Vanessa

The whole European look is also exotic to men. I don’t remember where I heard it but some female artist was . . . perming her hair and she found that boyfriends were leaving her for the more European look so she started weaving her hair and dying it blonde or light brown . . . to try and fit in.

Further, Jackie, Rebecca, Latoya, and Tracy show us how female (hetero) sexuality is perpetually defined by long flowing hair:

Jackie

When you feel like you can attract a man that gives you some power. . . . Back in the day in Europe if you didn’t have the long thick flowing hair you were probably suffering from malnutrition or something. . . . I think it’s just sexuality that you’re seeing . . . if you see a couple of short haired women, you automatically assume that they’re lesbian.

Rebecca

When I was younger, everybody thought I was a boy before I developed . . . and this whole thing again about being sexualized and being put into a

gender that I didn't identify with . . . in high school I became very dainty and very girlish and all those things which are me you know wearing the dresses and wearing very elegant clothing which I love and is part of my femininity but when my hair is cut short some people are like is she gay or is she bi?

Latoya

Hair is like this market for heterosexuality and femininity. . . . I've had guy friends who have clearly said to me that what they like is long flowing hair. . . . I'm finding that I'm getting more favourable responses from men with fake hair in my head than I did when I had my natural hair and I was wearing it how it grows out of my head.

Tracy

When my hair was short I was wearing a lot of makeup. I always had make up and jewellery and earrings . . . I wore a lot of skirts and then my hair started growing and I just felt better. . . . You do kind of feel a little masculine but I don't know if masculine is the right word, maybe a little less feminine is a better way of saying it.

As Butler declares, "women who fail to . . . understand their sexuality as partially constructed within the terms of the phallic economy are potentially written off within the terms of that theory as 'male-identified' or 'unenlightened'" (39–40). If Black beauty is about repeating hegemonic norms in order to be a viable subject, does that mean that challenging a racialized Black beauty and a reified White beauty is futile?

Black Hair is (Not) Just Hair

It is not enough for Black women to simply wear their hair any way they please without their styling choice being called into question. After centuries of condemnation, Black hair is inextricably laden with social, class, sexual, and cultural implications. For example, I asked each of the women to describe what it means to have "good hair" and "bad hair," Tracy, Latoya, Rebecca, and Nicole's responses suggested a shared understanding of the power associated with adhering to the Western (White) beauty standard—having hair that is straight, long, and flowing—in addition to lighter skin, and called into question the assertion that all hair is "good":

Tracy

To me, good hair means less nappy and bad hair means Negroid and I think that's just the extreme continuum. . . . The closer to Caucasian hair your hair is . . . is good hair, the further away from that on the opposite end of the continuum towards being . . . Black, thick, nappy, dense strong hair is bad hair.

Latoya

When I think of good hair it goes beyond the hair and it speaks more to the person. So people with good hair also look a certain way. For the most part, their skin is lighter; they might even be prettier or considered to be prettier.

Rebecca

In terms of "mixed race" children . . . it doesn't speak to their identity; it speaks to their identity but it doesn't in a positive way speak to the traditions of African hair, it sort of adds a negative tone onto it.

Nicole

I've heard that I had good hair growing up. Good hair now to me is when you have good strong, thick and healthy hair but it was also you know how soft your hair was, the longer your hair was, I guess maybe closer to Whiteness in texture or the finer your hair was, was considered to be good hair.

Rose Weitz argues that "No matter what a woman does or doesn't do with her hair—dyeing or not dyeing, curling or not curling, covering with a bandana or leaving uncovered—her hair will affect how others respond to her, and her power will increase or decrease accordingly" (683). As McDowell notes, "those making the choice to be 'happy nappy' are in the minority. . . . Many with natural hairstyles can recall shameful childhood memories as well as recent ones of feeling too nappy by nature. They often face criticism of being unrefined, unhygienic, low class and ugly. Alternatively, they are accused of being militant, lesbian or out of touch with the times" (131). Even though various texts have argued that natural hairstyles (e.g., dreadlocks and Afro styles) were once politicized statements of pride but are now incorporated into mainstream fashions—and therefore are *depoliticized*—a fact that needs to be underscored is that Black women continue to fear adorning the "natural," especially in the workplace because of the spectacle an *authentically* Black aesthetic will create, and the potential negative impact on one's economic mobility.

While there is anti-discrimination legislation in Western countries, and hair choices are an important mode of self-expression, as Caldwell astutely notes, “For Blacks, and particularly for Black women, such choices also reflect the search for a survival mechanism in a culture where social, political and economic choices of racialized individuals and groups are conditioned by the extent to which their physical characteristics, both mutable and immutable, approximate those of the dominant racial group” (383). For instance, Jackie said of her workplace, “the only Black girls who are wearing their hair natural are the ones who are mixed so going for the natural kind of curl but for the most part they all have their hair straightened; there’s a handful of us with our braids not too many of us with braids, and a lot of them with weaves,” and Vanessa said, “If I decided to grow an Afro and I went to work people would be like ‘what’s up with her, what’s she trying to prove?’. . . If I were to go to work with all . . . White men, they might think I was trying to prove something and they would distance themselves because they’d think I was some kind of radical.” These women affirm that very little has changed with respect to the *depoliticization* of Black hair moreover “the rationalizations that accompanied opposition to Afro hairstyles in the 1960s—extreme, too unusual, not businesslike, inconsistent with a conservative image, unprofessional, inappropriate with business attire, too ‘Black’ (e.g. too militant), unclean—are used today to justify the categorical exclusion” (Caldwell 384–85) of natural hairstyles in the workplace. For example, Jackie, Tracy, and Latoya rationalize about wearing natural hairstyles (Afros and dreadlocks) to work:

Jackie

One day when I’m more established in my career I would like to get dreadlocks . . . I can’t do it now . . . I want to be in corporate Canada and . . . if I’m going to show up with my hair in dreadlocks in the first year of dreadlocks [when they are very short] they would not think I fit a corporate ideal and for sure I wouldn’t get the job.

Tracy

I was working in the office and I went in there with dreads and I thought they were going to fire me and they would tell me it was because of my performance but I’d know it was because of my hair. I was so fearful.

Latoya

I feel that there's still in Canada definitely there's still a lot of focus that's put on Black people in general about how they look in the professional landscape and if you don't look a certain way and you don't speak a certain way your opportunities career wise just do not present themselves.

Further, Tracy said, "If I went in (to work) with a huge Afro tomorrow that's political because they'll think, 'ok, what's my statement now?'" Ultimately, the crisis of Black womanhood can only be addressed as hooks poignantly writes, "by the development of resistance struggles that emphasize the importance of decolonizing our minds, developing critical consciousness" (*Black Looks* 60). While resistance can take the form of momentous acts of organized, planned, and disciplined protests, "it may consist of small, everyday actions of seeming insignificance that can nevertheless validate the actor's sense of dignity and worth" (Caldwell 396).

Conclusion

I got tired of perming my hair and using all those chemicals on my head. . . . Straightening my hair was a way of conforming to Caucasian society, and that's just not my tribe . . . I finally came to a place where I could permit my hair to be natural.—Hazelle Goodman, actress and writer²¹

It has been the intent of this article to refute the notion that Black women are liberated from their hair. Today, it is not uncommon to hear someone flippantly remark, "Just get a weave, it's no big deal" without a second thought. Covering up your natural tress and damaging your real hair for the sake of a desired "look" should not be taken lightly. Sure, all women, irrespective of race, have been socialized to adhere to a beauty standard that has caused "psychological damage, loss of self-esteem, anorexia, bulimia, sexism, racism, ignorance, and lack of communication" (Patton 46); however, Black women are unique in that we are asked not just to strive to attain mainstream standards of beauty, but to have such standards completely override our natural *being*. As Byrd and Tharps sullenly conclude, "America's, including Black America's, beauty ideal has not altered drastically since the late 1800s. Large breast, small waists, and masses of flowing hair

²¹Mastalia and Pagano, 128.

are still the look desired by men and sought after by many women. . . . Black people looking to fit into the mainstream visually still overwhelmingly have to contend with the same standards as in the past” (181–82). It is the 21st century, yet Black women are still struggling to meet this standard. Ontologically speaking, these eight women have shown us that Black subjectivity has no existence without comparison to White (mainstream) culture. Natural Black hair remains misunderstood, villainized, and eroticized in virtually every facet of society. It is not simply a matter of assuming that Black women who relax, weave or braid their hair do not want to, or have not considered going natural, but fear of societal reprisal—i.e., limited employment opportunities; lack of male interest (courtship); and, the possibility of their sexuality being questioned—is the overwhelming reason why hair continues to hold such immense political power. As film producer Maxine Walters asserts, “In America, Blackness doesn’t count. Society is not geared toward giving us confidence—it’s geared toward keeping us in our place” (qtd. in Mastalia and Pagano 68). Until Black women (including “mixed race” women, who may not necessarily process or weave their natural hair) collectively agree that hair alternation stunts any potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred, hair will always be a contentious (and debated) issue.

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