

Taking the Kinks Out of Your Hair and Out of Your Mind:
A study on Black hair and the intersections of race and gender in the United States



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Executive Summary

This report reframes the discussion around dominant beauty standards by emphasizing the need to expand the definition of who is considered to be beautiful by American standards of beauty. Specifically, this report takes a look at the natural hair movement and how that movement has propelled Black women to reevaluate the standards of beauty that they currently operate under – and it asserts that Black women are taking deliberate steps towards improving the language and attitudes that are cultivated in Black beauty culture. The natural hair movement is seeking to critically analyze how these actions are reaffirming the dominant European standard of beauty. The use of hair blogs online establishes a special opportunity that could potentially turn the natural hair movement into a larger social movement offline that fosters equity and inclusion of various types of beauty.

Introduction

“Both men and women were interested in straightening hair because straight European hair was held up as the beauty ideal. There existed neither a public nor private forum where Black hair was celebrated in America” – Byrd & Tharps ¹

Since 1808, Black women have been altering the natural textures of their hair to fit dominant European standards. As mentioned in the quote above, there have been few spaces where Black hair has been affirmed as beautiful. While this may seem vain to think or talk about hair so much, hair holds a strong meaning in United States history, particularly for Black women. European colonists constructed these beauty standards during slavery to eradicate African self-identity in order to psychologically break down Black women’s self-esteem and identity.

Socially constructed images of beauty have been used to constitute what is considered beautiful. Black women are not the only group of women who are adversely affected by this standard.² However, what makes this problem unique to Black women is that within the United States, the mainstream beauty culture has not taken into consideration the interconnected violence of slavery and normative beauty standards that Whites utilized to Black women strip away African identity from the enslaved Africans upon arrival to the U.S. Generations upon generations have been raised to believe that Whiteness is the norm and Blackness is the antithesis of beauty.

In spite of the affirmation of White beauty in the United States, there has been a counter culture that continues to challenge the notion that Whiteness is the only valid type of beauty. One of the most recognized and public movements to challenge this idea was the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, where the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’ reigned supreme. Black people began to collectively embrace and reclaim diverse beauty. However, this movement was short lived, Blacks in the United States started to chemically process their hair again by the 1970s and 1990s, and the ‘Black is Beautiful’ mantra took a back seat. One of the few ways that the slogan, ‘Black is Beautiful’ has

¹ Byrd & Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (2001)16.

² Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, “The Global Rise of Colorism.” *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, (2013) 26-53.

been made visible again is through the natural hair movement. In recent years, the natural hair movement seeks to teach women how to identify with and love their natural hair textures. At the same time, the natural hair movement is teaching women how to manage their hair. These teachings are being distributed in the form of online hair blogs that feature tutorials on how to style hair. Unlike the Black Power movement, the natural hair movement has its roots based in the proliferation of social media and the internet and is rapidly gaining momentum worldwide to help Black women embrace their natural beauty, both internally and externally.

This research seeks to examine the natural hair movement and its influence on Black women in the United States. Particularly, I focus on one of the core elements of the natural hair movement, hair blogging. Hair blogging has been utilized to chronicle women's stories about transitioning from processed hairstyles (i.e. chemically straightening hair) into natural hairstyles. Through hair blogging, Black women have created a virtual community of support to resist the societal and intracultural pressures to conform to the European standard of beauty. Hair blogging about the natural movement is a counterculture that is becoming increasingly more mainstream; even *The New York Times* now frequently features articles about the natural hair movement and what it means to be a Black woman who wears her hair natural.

Through the course of this research, I found that Black women are excited to talk about hair and are eager to learn more about becoming natural. Additionally, I found that there is a lack of spaces apart from the online community where Black women can talk about their experiences with hair. This paper will chronicle the history of hair, from slavery to the present-day, to explain how these issues have adversely affected Black women. Then, I will present my methodology and findings from interviews that I conducted with forty seven Black women from November 2012 to January 2013. To close, I end with my final thoughts and overall conclusions from conducting this research.

Why I Am Conducting This Research

Why does this matter? This issue matters because thousands of women, including and especially Black women, have been falsely told throughout their lives that their societal value in this world is solely based on appearance. Hair and skin color have been included as social criterion for success in one's professional and personal life. Beauty, however, must be understood as socially constructed and an important source of women's oppression. As a Black woman who spent a majority of my life getting my hair done in styles that frequently used heat and or hazardous chemicals, I was once a part of this situation. While doing an internship two summers ago with Black Women for Wellness, a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles, I examined the correlation between Black hairstylists and high toxicity levels in hair salons. I found through surveys and interviews that many of the stylists either knew or were personally affected by various reproductive and health problems such as breast cancer, uterine fibroids, and miscarriages. The stylists also overwhelmingly noted that if they had information or access to alternative solutions, they would prefer to use those products and methods instead of the way they currently do hair.

I was aware, before doing this internship, that the products and procedures frequently done at Black hair salons were chemically changing the texture and appearance of my hair. What I did not know was how toxic these products are to health and the environment. I recall getting my hair chemically straightened and feeling the chemicals burning my scalp. I would cough because the scent of the fumes was so strong and irritated my throat, yet I continued to chemically straighten my hair during most of high school. I remember bearing with the pain because the longer the relaxer cream stayed on my head, the straighter my hair would be and the longer my hair would remain straightened.

During my summer research, I learned about the toxicity of certain products and procedures. I also learned how to read product labels to evaluate and determine how many chemicals are present in the products that I chose to use. I realized that had I not had this experience, I would not have been informed enough to make the decision to go natural, or abstain from altering the natural state of my hair with heat or chemical

products. The decision to go natural is more than for aesthetic reasons: it is also for health reasons. While this project does not focus on hair stylists, it does focus on the emotional and social impacts of a Black woman wearing her hair naturally. What made the research so exciting for me was that I am also the subject and researcher: everything that I am researching directly has and will continue to impact my life.

Research Question

The research I did at Black Women for Wellness led me to my senior comprehensive research. I became interested in examining the ways Black women have been impacted by societal pressures to conform to the dominant into beauty standards. Additionally, I examine the emergence of the natural hair movement and the role of social media such as hair blogs on the Internet in creating new spaces for community building and health education among Black women.

Introduction to Methodology

I have been natural for almost two years, and I wanted to better understand the process of going natural. While I was fortunate that so many people in my life supported my decision to go natural, I know that every Black woman has not been so fortunate. When I sat down and began to seriously consider where I wanted this research project to go, I realized that how I was able to go and stay natural (apart from support of friends, family, and co-workers) was by reading and following natural hair blogs online. I then realized that many other Black women could have also been having the same experiences. I was able to transfer this information out of book and into real life via interviews.

Methodology

Interviews and content analysis of blogging sites were the core methods used for this project. For my thesis, I interviewed forty-seven women and analyzed several

blogging websites. Originally, I had planned on using survey and interviews, but interviews are the most effective method through which to gain in-depth and personal data from women about an often sensitive subject matter. I then utilized my interviews to compare and contrast how Black women think about hair as well as how they perceive hair care/hair styles. Los Angeles and New York City are the two largest metropolitan cities in the United States and have some of the highest populations of African-Americans in North America. These two cities are where I spent my time interviewing participants about their hair.

Strategy for Interviews

My first steps were to figure out who I wanted to interview. I wrote down a list of Black women that I knew and it became clear that I would be dividing interviews based on geographical location. I chose to interview Black women in Los Angeles and New York City since these are both cultural centers. I chose Los Angeles because I had conducted previous research in communities there through Black Women for Wellness a few summers ago. Additionally, Los Angeles is my hometown. I chose New York because it is a hub for Black cultural formation and in particular it has also become an important site for the natural hair movement. Through my literature review, I also learned that many bloggers in the natural hair movement are primarily based in New York City.

I made a list of potential interviewees and then began to write my interview questions. My questions emerged from my literature review. I incorporated points that stemmed from historical tensions (intercultural and intracultural conflict) and opposing perspectives that were presented in my literature review. For example, I included a question about if Black hair is truly political, or if it has been politicized by society. The academic literature on this topic is mixed with some sources arguing that hair is definitely political, while other sources argued that hair is apolitical. To see where participants stood on this debate, I asked them this particular question. This same logic was applied to many of my interview questions.

Flow of Interview Questions

Besides asking “hot topic” questions, I also wanted to gain a more personal understanding of my participants.³ I began the interviews by asking basic demographic questions to see where my participants lived. I asked these demographic questions because I believe that where a Black woman lives and in what era she grew up in significantly impacts how she wears her hair; this trend was also made clear in my literature review. Then, I followed up with questions that focused on their hair regimen, products they used, and whether they were informed about toxic chemicals in hair products. Additionally, I asked my interviewees about the frequency of reading natural hair blogs in order to determine whether or not they were familiar with online hair blogging. The longest segment of the interview focused on sociological questions about hair and social conceptions of beauty in both the dominant White society and within the Black community. The last segment of my interview focused on the natural hair movement and what it means to have natural hair.

These were the primary set of questions that I asked the majority of my interviewees. I utilized a snowball sample. I found that women were excited and curious to speak about their hair, and were eager to direct me to other women who also wanted to participate in my project. This, in itself, came to be an important finding. Many Black women have not had the opportunity to parse through the social, emotional, and cultural issues that guide them in their hair choices and participating in this interview provided them this opportunity.

I also interviewed ‘experts’ in the topic of natural hair and created a specialized subset of questions for my expert group. These experts included natural hair stylists, members of non-profit organizations who work around salon health education (or organizing around toxic products), as well as natural hair bloggers. I asked questions that

³ For more detailed information about the interview questions, I attached a copy of both the primary and secondary interview questions in Appendix 1.

pertained to the experts' line of work, and then I asked them select questions from my primary set of questions. Once I created both sets of questions for my interviewees, then I was able to go into the field and conduct my research. I spent three months interviewing forty seven Black women from Los Angeles and New York City about their "hair stories" to see how Black women from both coasts think about their hair. Each interview took between 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on how in depth the participants wanted to answer each question.

Content Analysis

Apart from using interviews, I also conducted a content analysis on hair blogs. To further contextualize my interviews, I looked at two hair blogs: Curly Nikki and Hey Fran Hey. As chronicled in my literature review, these two blogs are examples of how hair blogs help teach Black women how to care for their natural hair. Many Black women have not seen what their virgin unprocessed hair looks like since they were born. Using these two blogs as my models for how the natural hair movement incorporates health education helped solidify my argument. I analyzed the resources that are on those blogs, as well as how user friendly the blog is. Additionally, I also looked at the differences in these two blogs: Curly Nikki is one of the largest natural hair blog sites in the world, while Hey Fran Hey is a smaller blog that is rapidly gaining recognition. Using content analysis and interviews were helpful to better understand the natural hair movement.

Methodology Overview

My interviews led to a robust data set with extensive findings and I was able to support many of the claims made in my literature review. In the next section, I will be documenting as well as analyzing my findings to show what information I learned during the interview process, and what were the major takeaways I got from my 47 interviews.

BACKGROUND: THE EXPERIENCE AND IMPACT OF SLAVERY

“I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty – or lack of it – for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me. I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew Sambo and Dick, Buckwheat and Jane, Prissy and Miz Scarlett. Before I knew that my hair could be wrong – the wrong color, the wrong texture, the wrong amount of curl or straight. Before hot combs and thick grease and smelly-burning lye, all guaranteed to transform me, to silken the coarse, resistant wool that represents me. I want to know once more the time before I denatured, denuded, denigrated, and denied my hair and me, before I knew enough to worry about edges and kitchens and burrows and knots, when I was still a friend of water...” – Paulette M. Caldwell⁴

Hair is one of most important aspects of beauty culture, particularly within the Black community. In many cultures, hair is what determines a woman’s beauty. However, historically, “black people’s hair, especially that of black women, became a site for complex social and cultural politics that questioned traditional concepts of beauty and blackness.”⁵ Who is considered to be beautiful or not is laden with political messages that have influenced how Black women have chosen to conform or resist the dominant standard of beauty. As noted by Foucault, body and hair politics are the battleground for “power struggles and potentially, for resistance, as individual choices about the body become laden with political meanings.”⁶

Historically, the Black body has been used as a site for political subjugation and oppression. Colonists created racialized images of Black people, particularly Black women, to reinforce the notion that there are superior and inferior beings. The colonists observed the rich cultural traditions that were connected with hair. Across the African continent, “the hair’s value and worth were heightened by its spiritual qualities... the hair [was] the closest thing to the heavens, communication from the gods and spirits was thought to pass through the hair to get to the soul.”⁷ In order to psychologically break

⁴ Caldwell, Paulette. *Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender*, (1991) 365.

⁵ Bell, *Getting Hair “Fixed”*: Black Power, Transvaluation, and Hair Politics, (2008)1.

⁶ Weitz, *Women, Power, and Hair*, (2001) 352.

⁷ Byrd & Tharps, 4.

and control Blacks for the economic, social, and cultural project of colonialism and slavery, European colonists shaved the heads of enslaved Africans “to erase the slave’s culture and alter the relationship between the African and his or her hair.”⁸ Shaving of the hair and replacing with it a new image of beauty was one of many ways that Europeans erased African identity and rationalized slavery and the need to colonize the Black “Other.”

The development of the system of slavery included the division of the labor force by gender and skin complexion. Firstly, black male slaves were placed at a greater value than black female slaves: as noted by bell hooks, “it cost more money to buy a male slave than a female slave.”⁹ While it is impossible to place monetary value on a human life, the Europeans rationalized that economically, the male was more valued than the female in the creation and implementation of the economy. Additionally, “even though it was a widespread belief among white plantation owners that black women were often better workers than their male counterparts, only a male slave could rise to the position of driver or overseer.”¹⁰ On top of facing racial discrimination, Black women were also sexually exploited during slavery.

While sexual assault was common in the colonial period, it is important to note that “rape meant, by definition, rape of a white woman, for no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law.”¹¹ The product of colonial rape led to the creation of a new race of people: mulattos, or mixed race individuals. How the mulattos factored into slavery was by the separation of labor roles based on skin color. Even though the law decreed “all Negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves shall be held, taken, and adjudged to be real estate, in the same category as livestock,”¹² the caste system in place still favored lighter skinned individuals over darker skinned individuals.

⁸ Byrd & Tharps, 11.

⁹ hooks, bell. *Ain't I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) 15.

¹⁰ hooks, 23.

¹¹ hooks, 35.

¹² Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 13.

In fact, “white slave masters reinforced the ‘good-hair’ light skin power structure in two ways. By selecting the lighter-skinned, straighter-haired slaves for the best positions within his household, he showed they were more desirable. At slave auctions, he would pay almost five times more for a house slave than for a field slave, showing that they were also more valuable.”¹³ Beauty, specifically hair, became a huge factor in the subjugation of Blacks in slavery because lighter skinned slaves with straight hair “translated to economic opportunity and social advantage...lighter skin and loosely curled hair would often [signified] free status.”¹⁴ Field slaves observed the preferential treatment of house slaves, and realized this treatment was due to the house slaves’ skin complexion and hair texture. While it may have seemed that house slaves were spared from being humiliated by their masters,

Few Black women reached the age of sixteen without having being molested by a White male...female mulattos were actually bred and sold for huge profit on the female-slave market. Called fancy girls, pretty quadroons (one-quarter Black) and exotic octoroons (one-eighth Black) were in especially high demand and were quickly sold at “quadroon balls,” auctions held regularly in New Orleans and Charleston. A respectable White gentleman might buy himself a concubine, and when he tired of her, six months or so later, he might get himself another one.¹⁵

Despite this knowledge, field slaves still strived to give their children the opportunity for a better life. To help protect their children from the cruel realities of slavery, “some slave mothers took to wrapping their children’s hair to start ‘training’ it to go straight as early as infancy. The most mordant device used to straighten the hair was lye, mixed with potatoes to decrease its caustic nature. This creamy concoction was smeared on the hair and the lye would straighten the curls. Unfortunately, it could also eat the skin right off a person’s head.”¹⁶ This homemade remedy would later be recognized as the relaxer.¹⁷

¹³ Byrd & Tharps, 19.

¹⁴ Byrd & Tharps, 17.

¹⁵ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 22.

¹⁶ Byrd & Tharps, 17.

¹⁷ A relaxer is a lye-based cream that is applied to the roots and strands of hair. It is then left on for about 30 minutes. After thirty minutes, the hair loses its curly texture and becomes straightened. This process can last for 4-6 weeks before getting a touch-up.

Without a self-identity or the ability to relate to others, the subjugation of Africans into slaves without their consent was quickly facilitated. As noted by Julius Lester, “Of the minority groups in this country, blacks are the only one having no language of their own. Language serves to insulate a group and protect it from outsiders.”¹⁸ For this reason, the mandate for straight hair was immediately enforced as soon as the enslaved Africans were brought to the United States. The eradication of the diverse African cultures during slavery is one of the many reasons why Blacks collectively lack a language, a common food, or even common cultural practices.

BLACK WOMEN’S BODIES

Carolyn West argued that “women’s beauty image has historically been based on white standards, with greater value placed on blond hair, blue eyes, and fair skin.”¹⁹ This standard of White beauty became instituted during the period of slavery, as a means to further eradicate African identity and replace it with a new “American” standard of beauty. Few women fit into this standard already, but even fewer Black women have the features that are deemed attractive, which also came to be seen as “having light skin and more Western-looking features.”²⁰ Hair and skin color serves as cultural and societal indicators of difference, because “black people’s hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigma of blackness, second only to skin.”²¹ When factoring race into this equation, Black women are then rendered as undesirable and inferior to the White woman. As Naomi Wolf wrote in her book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Women are used against Women*, “women have always suffered for beauty.”²² It is important to assess, then, by how much and in what ways have women suffered for beauty?

¹⁸ Lester, Julius. *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!* (1968) 90.

¹⁹ West, Carolyn M. “Mammy, Sapphire, and Jezebel: Historical Images of Black Women And Their Implications for Psychotherapy” (1995) 460.

²⁰ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 27.

²¹ Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics”, (1987) 35.

²² Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth*, (1991) 3.

Within Black Communities

The black body has served as the site for “the enactment of racialized and gendered notions of difference and inferiority”²³ in the United States. This inferiority has been internalized in many harmful ways that psychologically affect Black women because “whiteness and white womanhood define and shape how black women and girls see themselves in relation to the nation.”²⁴ However, the feeling of inferiority is not limited to just the dominant white society: it is also replicated within the Black community. The phenomenon of colorism, or having prejudice based on skin complexion, is commonly reinforced in the Black community. Lighter skin Black women are the women that are showcased on the covers of magazines, the love interests in music videos, and are most frequently seen on television.



The cast of *Basketball Wives*, a popular show amongst young Black teens on VH1.

Black women who possess more European features such as light skin and straight hair are given greater social privileges than Black women who have more ethnic features. In addition, “since U.S. Black women have been most uniformly harmed by the colorism that is a by-product of U.S. racism, it is important to explore how prevailing standards of beauty affect U.S. Black women’s treatment in everyday life.”²⁵ Take for example,

²³ Caldwell, Kia Lilly. *Becoming A Mulher Negra*, (2007) 102.

²⁴ McKittrick, Katherine. “Black and ‘cause I’m black, I’m blue’: Transverse Racial Geographies in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” (2009) 132.

²⁵ Hill-Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought*, (1991) 90.

Beyoncé, whom *People Magazine* recently named as the World’s Most Beautiful Woman.²⁶



Beyoncé on the cover of *People Magazine*.

Beyoncé’s image on the cover of *People Magazine* is an example of idealized ‘Black’ beauty, or a Black woman who is light skinned, blonde, and has long flowing hair. The idea that the Beyoncé’s of the world are the most beautiful Black women is a reflection of colorism and the effect of hair politics. Images from the media reaffirm that “good” hair, which is long and ‘beautiful’ is the preferred look. The classification of hair as “good” or “bad” is based on the kinkiness of one’s hair texture, which ultimately reinforces the notions of Whiteness as beautiful. As noted in bell hook’s memoir, “Real good hair is straight hair, hair like white folks’ hair. Yet no one says so. No one says your hair is so nice, so beautiful because it is like white folks’ hair. We pretend that the standards we measure our beauty by are our own invention – that it is questions of time and money that lead us to make distinctions between good and bad hair.”²⁷ Hair is a reflection of both racial and gender identities because how a woman wears her hair matters to how she will be perceived as an individual.

At the same time, Caldwell argues that “the relationship between hair and consciousness also suggests that black women’s hair is a key site for mapping internal

²⁶ People Magazine, Beyoncé is called the world’s most beautiful woman. <http://www.people.com/people/package/0,,20360857,00.html>

²⁷ hooks, bell. “Straightening Our Hair,” (1989) 382.

struggles and transformations related to race and gender.”²⁸ In the twenty first century, more women have begun to question the validity of existing beauty standards and are beginning to challenge these traditional ideals of beauty. With the birth of the natural hair movement, Black women have started to resist the narrow definition of beauty and expand that definition to include their own natural beauty.

The Natural Hair Movement

The natural hair movement is a cultural phenomenon where Black women are shifting body and hair politics by ceasing to chemically process their hair. The natural hair movement first received major attention within cyberspace, as women formed support groups online on natural hair blogs and it is now beginning to filter offline and into mainstream society. The movement is challenging and resisting societal norms of beauty, while at the same time, reclaiming the Black body and hair as beautiful. Prior to the natural movement, it seemed impossible to “ identify positively as a Black woman when the socialization process is primarily based on the vision that ‘black is bad, ugly and dirty’ and that the ‘woman has a less favorable place.’”²⁹ However, many Black women are beginning to transition – or cut off their chemically straightened hair and embrace their natural kinky hair texture. The natural hair movement is all about helping Black women feel more empowered about their hair, beauty, as well as lead more healthier and holistic lifestyles. By accepting one’s natural roots, it “demonstrates this level of self-acceptance [that] represents a powerful evolution in black political expression. If racial politics has led to an internalization of self-loathing, then true transformation will come internally too.”³⁰

²⁸ Caldwell, *Becoming a Mulher Negra*, 104.

²⁹ Caldwell, *becoming a mulher negra*, 107.

³⁰ Saro-Wiwa, Zina. “Black Women’s Transition to Natural Hair,” (2012) 2.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prior to conducting my original research, I developed an extensive literature review based on existing information on my topic. Many of the sources I came across were from sociological journals, articles about natural hair in *The New York Times*, and articles on blogs such as *Jezebel* and *Clutch Magazine*. Additionally, I read many books on colorism, feminist theory, and novels that chronicled Black women's experiences with beauty within the United States. From my preliminary research, I divided my literature review into five main headings. These headings are reflective of general themes that I will address in my literature review as well as in the rest of my thesis.

Cultural Significance of Hair: Hair and Identity in the 21st Century

From the moment a Black child is born, the pressures to have 'good' hair, or hair that is straighter and easier to manage is already present. Similar to the moment when the doctor announces if the child will be a boy or a girl, the hair texture of a child is also crucial to how the proud parents and extended family will react to their new bundle of joy. As noted in *Hair Story*, "From day one, Black children are indoctrinated into the intricate culture of hair. Vocabulary words like *grease*, *kitchen* (the hair at the nape of the neck, not the room in the house), and *touch-up* are ones a Black child hears at a very early age and needs to learn in order to fully participate in the Black hair lifestyle."³¹ Part of this acculturation is the maintenance, and often times, concealment of Black hair. In the Black community, hair has been defined as either "good" or "bad" hair: " 'good' hair meaning that the hair looks 'European' straight, and 'bad' hair as 'woolly' or 'tough' hair."³² The pressure to either convert 'bad' hair into "good" hair, or vice versa, to convert "good" hair into "bad" hair to avoid being teased by others is very strong for young Black children, especially, young black girls.

Hair, especially for Blacks "is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed, and generally 'worked upon' by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it

³¹ Byrd & Tharps, 134.

³² Mercer, 35.

the medium of significant ‘statements’ about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don’t.”³³ As the Black child grows older, he or she learns that there is a difference in how one is treated by adults and peers if they have “good” hair or “bad” hair. However, the most important thing to remember is, “if you have hair covering your head, and it holds a style well, that is ‘good’ hair.”³⁴

How Black Women Think About Hair: Pressures and Preferences

As previously mentioned, from an early age, Black children learn the importance of having hair that is easy to manage and ‘refined.’ The need to have hair that is both beautiful and feminine is often times difficult to obtain for Black girls. “Surrounded by constant images of princesses, young girls nearly always want long hair to make clear their feminine identity.”³⁵ Young girls are pressured to have feminine hair that has to be presented in a very particular way; this usually always translates to long, straight hair. Women who possess the key to society’s genetic lottery (light skin complexion and straight hair) “are able to convert it into economic capital, educational capital, and social capital. Social capital is a form of prestige related to things such as social status, reputation, and social networks.”³⁶ Having social capital in the form of possessing European like features has social and economic implications. As noted by Kathy Russell-Cole, “hair texture, like skin tone, carries much social and historical baggage for Blacks. All things being equal, a Black woman whose hair grows naturally straight is usually thought to be from a ‘better’ family than a woman whose hair is very nappy.”³⁷ For Black women who do not have naturally straight hair, one of the more immediate fixes is to either chemically straighten hair or to purchase a weave.

The weave industry is an extremely lucrative market because of the global preference and economical demand for long, straight hair. As noted by Byrd & Tharps,

³³ Mercer, 34.

³⁴ Byrd & Tharps, 135.

³⁵ Russell- Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 109.

³⁶ Hunter, Margaret L. “If You’re Light, You’re Alright: Light Skin Color as Social Capital for Women of Color,” (2002)177.

³⁷ Russell- Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 120.

“By the late nineties, 1.3 million pounds of human hair valued at \$28.6 million were imported from countries like China, India, and Indonesia, where poor women sell their hair by the inch. Once the hair arrives in this country, already sterilized and styled, it goes on to wholesalers who sell the goods to beauty supply shops, beauty parlors, and hair retailers.”³⁸ These numbers have continued to increase into the 2000s as more women purchase human hair to be used as weaves, hair extensions, or wigs. Black women are making significant economic contributions to supporting the beauty industry because of the pressures to earn an obtainable form of social capital, or social power. For women of color, one way of having social power in a society where they are subjugated and oppressed by race and gender is to have the characteristics of dominant ideals of beauty. Since it is very expensive and also dangerous to alter skin pigment, it is relatively easy to manipulate one’s natural hair texture in order to make the hair look and appear straighter.

The first step in achieving societal acceptance for women who have kinkier hair textures is to straighten their hair. Straight hair is considered to be more socially acceptable than curly hair because “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.”³⁹ Straightening hair is a ritual and functions as a rite of passage for many young girls. As noted by bell hooks:

For each of us, getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be women...they tell me once you start you will be sorry. You will wish you never straightened your hair. They do not understand that it is not the straightening I seek but the chance to belong, to be one in this world of women.⁴⁰

The desire to belong is a universal feeling, but the eagerness to fit in a society where skin color and hair are markers of difference is unique to people of color. Especially as young children, the desire to fit in with their peers is so strong. As one interviewee noted in *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New*

³⁸ Byrd & Tharps, 95.

³⁹ Mercer, 36.

⁴⁰ Hooks, 382.

Millennium, “I always got teased by the boys and laughed at by the girls because my hair was so nappy and always stuck up in the air. I hated my hair and cried many nights. I was so glad when I got my hair straightened. It changed my whole life.”⁴¹ The struggle to fit into societal ideals of beauty never ends; it only becomes stronger and more obvious the older a Black girl becomes. The need to distinguish beauty comes from the idea that identity is based on relational difference. “Those who are defined as beautiful are only defined as beautiful in relation to other women are defined as ugly...white beauty is based on the racist assumptions of Black ugliness.”⁴² The premise of relating differences in beauty is to validate the women who encompass characteristics of the European standard of beauty. If someone else is not being defined as ‘ugly,’ then there can be no true definition of a person who is ‘beautiful.’

Dominating Views of Hair: The European Standard of Beauty

Prevailing standards of beauty claim that no matter how intelligent, educated, or ‘beautiful’ a Black woman may be, those Black women whose features and skin color are most African must “git back.” Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other – Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair. – Patricia Hill Collins⁴³

White women are the models, or examples, used to express femininity, beauty, and sex appeal in media and marketing. Indeed, “we are socially constructed through language and mediated images to believe that what makes a woman beautiful is not her intelligence or her inner beauty but her outer beauty.”⁴⁴ In the media, “images that [Black girls] see on television and in their friends’ homes prove that Black hair isn’t like White hair. White people do not typically use hot combs to make their hair straight; they don’t put oils and grease in their hair to make it shine...and it does not take as long to get it into a satisfactory style.”⁴⁵ It is also important to note that “it is clear from these beauty

⁴¹ Russell- Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 111.

⁴² Hunter, 179.

⁴³ Hill-Collins, 89.

⁴⁴ Patton, Tracey Owens. “Hey Girl, Am I More Than my Hair? African-American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” (2006) 39.

⁴⁵ Byrd & Tharps, 142.

standards that not all types of Whiteness are valued. Many Euro American women cannot measure up to the White normative standard of beauty promoted – beautiful, blond-haired, slim, tall, virginal, and upper class...only a few women are privileged to be in this ‘beautiful’ club.”⁴⁶ In fact, in 2003, only a small percentage (16%) of the American population were natural blondes.⁴⁷ The implication of this percentage is that there are gendered forms of oppression that accrue to all women. However, women of color experience gender oppression more often than white women. As noted by Rose Weitz in her study on *Women, Power, and Hair*, “there is widespread agreement that conventionally attractive hair gives women power or at least makes them feel powerful.”⁴⁸ Gaining social power in the form of having beautiful hair is one way in which socially constructed hierarchies of beauty are reinforced in U.S. society.

Women worldwide have been affected by dominant ideals of beauty. These beauty standards “are set according to a White aesthetic—from Miss America to the Barbie doll.”⁴⁹ Within the United States, the notion of straight hair as beautiful is strongly reinforced. As noted by bell hooks, “white women have lots of issues about their hair, but they also have lots of affirmation for their hair. [Black people] don’t have the overall cultural affirmation that counters the negative obsession.”⁵⁰ Although there is now a greater presence of Black women in the media, the media still continues to send images of “Black females with long hair, coupled with historical condemnation of short natural hair...many Black women believe that to be attractive to men, they have to have long, straight hair.”⁵¹ There is an overwhelming amount of images that are distributed and marketed to the Black community that primarily showcase beautiful women as women who have long, straight hair and or light skin. This is not only reinforced in the media, but also in marketing strategies geared towards Black women to purchase products that can ‘improve’ their appearance.

⁴⁶ Patton, 32.

⁴⁷ Russell- Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 52.

⁴⁸ Weitz, 355.

⁴⁹ Byrd & Tharps, 154.

⁵⁰ Byrd & Tharps, 154.

⁵¹ Byrd & Tharps, 157.

Be attractive. Throw off the chains that have held you back from prosperity and happiness that rightly belongs to you. Apply Black and White Ointment (for white and colored folks) as directed on package, to your face, neck, arms or hands. It is very pleasant to the skin and has the effect of bleaching dark, sallow or blotchy skin, clearing the skin of risings, bumps, pimples, blackheads, wrinkles, tan or freckles—giving you a clear, soft, bright complexion, making you the envy of everybody. Black and White Ointment is ahead of many other preparations, which only cover up pimples or eruptions. Black and White Ointment removes and heals them. Sold on money-back guarantee. Two sizes, 25c and 50c (large size contains 3 times as much as smaller size), sent by mail.

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Advertisements seen in The Afro-American Newspaper on May 30, 1919

Although these advertisements were from 1919, not much has changed in the way Black women are expected to alter their appearance to have lighter skin and straighter hair. Moreover, the amount of advertisements targeted towards skin lighteners and remedies for hair straighteners send the message to Black women that they “were expected to accept that their natural features were ugly, or beastly, thereby to accept that their best options for improving those features required imitating white features.”⁵² Today, more Black women are utilizing hair relaxers and exposing themselves to toxic chemicals, such as sodium hydroxide to achieve the straight sleek look.

⁵² Bell, Monica. “Getting Hair ‘Fixed’: Black Power, Transvaluation, and Hair Politics,” (2011) 6.

As noted in a study done by the Urban Initiative of Reproductive Health, “exposure to certain chemicals can cause a host of reproductive health problems such as infertility and reproductive cancers. Disparities in pregnancy outcomes among people of color, including birth defects, low-birth weight, still-birth, and miscarriage, may result from chemical exposure.”⁵³ Although a direct correlation between reproductive diseases and chemical exposures has not yet been identified, women of color who are either workers or clients in hair and nail salons have been diagnosed with these diseases at a much higher rate.⁵⁴ Since the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has not been regulating chemicals on the market, “it is legal for cosmetic manufacturers to use unlimited amounts of virtually any ingredient in salon and personal use products with no premarket safety assessment.”⁵⁵ This places the entire onus on the consumer to properly read product labels that do not clearly mark if the product contains toxic ingredients or not.

Since Black women face such high pressures to alter their appearance, they are putting their health at risk for the chance to fulfill an unattainable beauty standard. Why are Black women altering their natural hair texture with unnatural and toxic products such as hair relaxers? It is because “hair is something that can be seen and *read* immediately, especially if it does not meet mainstream standards.”⁵⁶ As noted in an interview in Rose Weitz’ study, “My hair is always the easiest way to go. It’s too expensive to buy a new wardrobe. There’s nothing you can do about your face. So your hair, you can go and have something radically done to it and you’ll look like a different person.”⁵⁷ For Black women, black hair can be more easily controlled and concealed in order to appeal to the European beauty standard by chemically altering the hair or wearing hair extensions such as weaves.

⁵³ National Women's Law Center and Law Students for Reproductive Justice. *If You Really Care About Environmental Justice, You Should Care about Reproductive Justice*. (2010), 1.

<http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/FactSheetEnvironmentalJusticeandReproJustice.pdf>

⁵⁴ National Women’s Law Center, *ibid*.

⁵⁵ The Safe Cosmetics Campaign. *Not So Pretty: Toxic Chemicals Marketed to Black Women*, (2010) 1.

⁵⁶ Bell, 3.

⁵⁷ Weitz, 355.

In essence, what the beauty culture is doing is “assigning value to women in a vertical hierarchy according to a culturally imposed physical standard, it is an expression of power relations in which women must unnaturally compete for resources that men have appropriated for themselves.”⁵⁸ With white woman being on the “top” and black women being on the “bottom” of this hierarchy, it has not only pitted women against each other, but also caused significant cultural rift inside and outside social groups. Yet as Kathy Russell-Cole has pointed out, “we know from anthropologists and others that criteria for attractiveness varied significantly from one culture to the next, and that preferences did not mirror the features of Western populations.”⁵⁹ Yet those Western preferences came to prevail. It is important, then, to also observe how individuals have resisted accepting European beauty as the only form of beauty. Within the natural hair movement, there have been efforts to reclaim variations of beauty that deviate from traditional ideas of beauty. At the same time, intracultural (or within culture) views of beauty came to reinforce the new dominant standard of beauty.

Intracultural View of Hair: The Black Standard of Beauty

“How can he not love your hair? It’s his hair too. He got to love it.” “He don’t love it at all. He hates it.” – Songs of Solomon, 315.⁶⁰

Even though African Americans comprise about 12 to 13 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, “Black women spend an estimated \$5.7 billion per year on beauty products and salon services,” as well as twice as much on skin care products than women in any other demographic group.⁶¹ One reason for this may be that “African Americans had to contend with and figure out how to respond to not only brutal racism from above, but also issues of color prejudice from

⁵⁸ Wolf, 12.

⁵⁹ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 28.

⁶⁰ Ashe, Bertram D. “Why don’t he like my hair?”: Constructing African-American Standards of Beauty in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (1995) 579.

⁶¹ The Campaign for Safe Cosmetics, (2010) 1.

within.”⁶² Within the Black community, the decision on how to wear hair is rarely made without the conscious (or subconscious) choice to please members in the community: these members are included but not limited to, family, friends, significant others, or even strangers. In relation to hair, “the concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors, and social and political contexts.”⁶³ How hair is worn also plays a huge role in the identity of Black people because “the discourses that form our identity are intimately tied to the structures and practices that are lived out in society from day to day.”⁶⁴ These discourses could be academic or colloquial, yet they still have a strong impact.

Hearing terminology such as “good” hair or seemingly harmless jokes such as “Did you Madame Walker on your head? Well, Madame need to Walker around those nappy edges”⁶⁵ leads to internalized oppression and low self-esteem for Black women who have “nappy,” or “bad” hair. The pressure to look good is reinforced by the need to be seen as attractive for Black men. Indeed, “another force on women’s body image can be men’s perspectives.”⁶⁶ As noted by Kathy Russell-Cole:

For young African-American teenage women living in a society saturated with visual media, it is hard not to notice that the love interests of African-American men on TV and in movies, or those women declared most attractive by fashion and beauty magazine editors, are almost exclusively light skinned. But it is the music videos that really drive home the message that Black guys only want light-skinned women.⁶⁷

For all women, validation is most often given in the form of male attention, and thus women abide more by the male gaze. The male gaze is a form of voyeurism when a woman becomes an object in the eyes of a heterosexual man. To fit the Black male gaze, many Black women feel pressured to fit into their qualifications for beauty. As noted by one of the interviewees in *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New*

⁶² Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 55.

⁶³ Tatum, Beverly. *The Complexity of Identity*, (2003) 18.

⁶⁴ Allen, B.J. “Social Constructions of a Black Woman’s Hair: Critical Reflections of a Graying Sistah,” (2010) 69.

⁶⁵ Allen, 72

⁶⁶ Riley, Sirena J. “The Black Beauty Myth”, (2002) 364.

⁶⁷ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 82.

Millennium, one young Black girl said, “no matter what my momma tells me about how pretty I am and not to let anybody tell me anything different – it still hurts when I hear songs like ‘Boyfriend Girlfriend’ by C-Side and Keyshia Cole, with lyrics that say they ‘love a ...redbone⁶⁸ with long hair.’”⁶⁹ As also mentioned in Sirena J. Riley’s memoir, *The Black Beauty Myth*, “I have male friends and relatives who buy into these unrealistic beauty ideals and feel no shame in letting me know where they think I stack up, so to speak.”⁷⁰ While all Black men do not have the same preferences for light skin and long hair, without a doubt, anyone could pick up on that message from watching any major Black television series or music videos.

In short, “the child is taught directly or indirectly that he or she is pretty, just in proportion as the features approximate the Anglo-Saxon standard.”⁷¹ The opinions of family members and other key characters in a person’s life can have some of the strongest impacts on self-esteem and self-image; sometimes, these voices are even stronger than the dominant society’s ideal of beauty. As noted in Byrd and Tharp’s book, *Hair Story*, “Everyone in my community looked at my nappy hair and was shocked. Also, my church felt I needed to get a hot comb⁷² and fix my hair.” For Shani Atkinson, it was her parent’s commentary about her hair that wounded her the most: ‘my father told me that my [dred]locks looked like a pile of shit upon my head.’⁷³ While it may be easy to play off comments about appearance as a harmless joke or ‘tough love,’ especially from loved ones, it does not take away the sting of those comments. Words can still harm, haunt, and hinder the development of a person’s self-esteem. Even though hair, just like skin color, is a factor that cannot be predetermined, the way people respond to an individual based on their phenotype can last in a person’s memory for life.

⁶⁸ A redbone is a light skinned (caramel complexion) Black female who most likely is of mixed heritage, and who usually has a hour glass figure. Yellowbones are Blacks who are have even more lighter skin complexion than red bones.

⁶⁹ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 83.

⁷⁰ Riley, 367.

⁷¹ Byrd & Tharps, 20.

⁷² A hot comb is a device that is used to straighten hair. It is made of metal and has teeth like a comb. When it is heated, it is combed through hair and as a result, the hair looks flat ironed.

⁷³ Byrd & Tharps, 144.

In Ingrid Banks' book, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, Banks asked her interviewees about how Black women are pressured to maintain their hair in a particular fashion. One interviewee noted, "It's like there are sisters that don't feel like they have a personal choice and they don't exemplify that and their personal choice is completely defined by what someone else tells them...Everybody doesn't have that 'cause they don't see themselves as having it. But they could, you know what I'm saying."⁷⁴ Many 'sisters,' or Black women, do not feel like they have the personal choice to wear their hair how they please because of the opinions of others. Members in the Black community told Academy Award nominee Cicely Tyson "that while she might be a gifted actress, her short natural hairstyle was detrimental to the image of Black women."⁷⁵

More recently, Gabby Douglas, the first African-American Olympian gold medalist in all-around gymnastics was brutally attacked via Twitter for the way her hair looked during the Olympics Games. One person commented, "gabby douglas gotta do something with this hair! These clips and this brown gel residue ain't it?"⁷⁶ While both Cicely Tyson and Gabby Douglas are outstanding positive examples of Black women in the media, they too are still facing intracultural pressures to fit into the dominant standard because they are of darker complexion and do not have longer hair. Other celebrities such as Beyoncé and Halle Berry, while also being great role models for Black women, have been revered for having light skin complexions and "good hair," even though Halle Berry wears a short pixie cut.

The policing and criticism of Black hair within the Black community has been chronicled in novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that "engage the black female's struggle between her own hairstyle preferences and the female hairstyle preferences of the black male."⁷⁷ In the novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist Janie is deemed beautiful because she has long flowing

⁷⁴ Banks, Ingrid. *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, (2000) 81.

⁷⁵ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 115.

⁷⁶ Williams, Vanessa. Gabby Douglas's hair sets off Twitter debate, but some ask: 'What's the Fuss?' (2012) 1.

⁷⁷ Ashe, 582.

hair and light skin that her dark skinned husband, Jody, frequently lauds. Janie's features "conform to the black version of the white ideal designated as the most important: light skin and long hair."⁷⁸ However, Janie's character actively rejects the notion that light is better than dark, yet she was still physically and verbally abused by her husband for the way she looks. Ironically, Halle Berry was casted to play Janie in the made for television version of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

In the novels *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*, author Toni Morrison uses her characters to juxtapose the ways in which Black women think about their hair. The two novels were written in the 1970s, yet still hold much relevance today. In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar believes the notion that White beauty is ideal and feminine while Pilate wears her hair short, natural, and more masculine haircut. However, in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate asks Hagar, "how can he not love your hair? It's the same hair that grows out of his own armpits...it's all over his head, Hagar. It's his hair too. He got to love it...He don't know what he loves but he'll come around, honey, one of these days. How can he love himself and hate your hair?"⁷⁹ Even in Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison addresses the psychological effects of racism and colorism that young black girls sometimes internalize as truth. Maureen Peal, a young Black girl who was characterized as having light skin and naturally straight hair, relentlessly bullies the protagonist Pecola Breedlove, solely because Pecola has a darker complexion and kinkier hair texture than Maureen. She writes:

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute – and if anything could be believed, she *was* – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it so important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then...and all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Ashe, 580.

⁷⁹ Ashe, 589.

⁸⁰ Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*, (1994) 74.

What Morrison and other Black women have sought to do is redefine female beauty. By broadening the horizon about what is considered beautiful within the Black community, “the political [and personal] connotations of hair and particular hairstyles are subject to change.”⁸¹ The importance of reducing intrapersonal pressures to have “good” hair is incredibly crucial: if the Black community doesn’t affirm and accept the diverse beauty of its own people, then who else will? Rendering people to just a skin color or a hair texture, regardless of if it is within the Black community or not is extremely problematic and painful to endure.

The Intersection of Beauty: Dominant and Intracultural Standards on the Black Psyche

The intersection of race and gender in beauty culture is frequently overlooked, even though it plays a significant role in the psychological development of women of color. As noted in Rose Weitz’ study on hair and power, she noted that “none of the women whose hair, skin, or features, marked them as members of minority groups and thus kept them from ever fully meeting dominant norms for attractiveness suggested that hair was unimportant.”⁸² While many scholars as well as celebrities have begun to have frank discourses about hair (take for example, Chris Rock’s film *Good Hair*), there is still a significant lack of discussion about the psychological impacts of not having “good hair.” Even within families, most people do not seriously consider how comments made about appearance create long-lasting memories of discontentment. In fact, “psychotherapists have noted increased reports from their black women clients of guilt, shame, anger, and resentment about skin color, hair texture, facial features, and body size and shape.”⁸³ This includes negative associations regarding standards both within the Black community as well as white society.

The struggle to mitigate the definitions of beauty within different levels of society is difficult, and as described by B.J. Allen, “yes, I wear my hair natural, but it’s easy to

⁸¹ Caldwell, 104.

⁸² Weitz, 362.

⁸³ Patton, 38.

maintain, and it looks ‘good.’ Yes, I wear my hair short, but I’m careful to adorn myself with markers of femininity and heterosexuality such as lipstick and large earrings...I realize that as a woman, my valuation of self-worth depends heavily on physical attractiveness.⁸⁴ The battle is not just about expanding the different representations of beauty within our society: it is about acknowledging the nuanced experiences of black womanhood.

The reality is that going through “hair struggles” is something common that most Black people share, even if they have the idealized hair texture. Especially for Black women, doing hair is “our ritual and our time. It is a time without men. It is a time when we can work to meet each other’s needs, to make each other beautiful in whatever way we can. It is a time of laughter and mellow talk. Sometimes it is an occasion for tears and sorrow.”⁸⁵ Part of the experience of being a Black woman is the feeling of marginalization. As noted by bell hooks, “all the myths and stereotypes used to characterize black womanhood have their roots in negative anti-woman mythology...many people have difficulty appreciating black women as we are because of eagerness to impose an identity upon us based on any number of negative stereotypes.”⁸⁶ The emotional impacts that Black women have endured about hair stem from centuries and centuries of internalized oppression and internalized dominance that White beauty is superior to Black beauty.

Trophes of Black Women

The historical context of hair in the United States has led to the high cultural value that is placed on hair in this country. Historically, images of Black women have been categorized by three trophies: the highly maternal, family orientated and self-sacrificing Mammy, the threatening and argumentative Sapphire, and the sexually promiscuous Jezebel. Each of these trophies has been portrayed in the media as accurate

⁸⁴ Allen, 75.

⁸⁵ hooks, 382.

⁸⁶ hooks, 96.

cultural representations of Black women.⁸⁷ Each stereotype established caricatures whose body and hair were constructed in various demeaning manners. For example, the Mammy is overweight, with “nappy” hair and coal colored skin tone whereas the Jezebel or the tragic mulatto “was often portrayed as a mixed-race woman with more European features, such as thin lips, straight hair, and a slender nose that tended to be closer to the White standard of beauty.”⁸⁸ Unlike the Mammy and Jezebel tropes, the Sapphire trope was created to show the attitude of Black women, and does not have as much of a coded racialized image as the Mammy or the Jezebel.

Since these three designated images have been reinforced as “Blackness,” many Black women feel as if they are ugly or undesirable. The idea that all visual representations and expressions of Blackness are ugly has permeated the minds of Black women, often from the time of childhood and all throughout adulthood. The trope of the Mammy, or the “strong black woman” is still to this day relevant; many Black women are often characterized as strong and intrinsically maternal, even though this is not true of all Black women. Films such as *Gone With the Wind* and *The Help* showcased and created the Mammy archetype to offset the negative images of slavery. As noted by Julius Lester, “the white man needed to create the image of the ‘good nigger’ for his own well-being. The irrational mind needed to think that there were happy slaves. The rational mind knew that they did not exist.”⁸⁹ The role of the help in *Gone With The Wind* played by Hattie McDaniel monopolized on the idea that

Mammies were the cheerful, loving servants, vastly content in their work and devoted to their masters, especially the children they cared for. They were obese, stupid creatures, with no breath of sexuality about them. And they were shown to be so happy to serve, that they would wither if they were to be taken from their families by nasty northern abolitionists.⁹⁰

Similar to the trope of the Mammy, the Jezebel is the only trope that is lauded as beautiful because she has phenotypical features that reflect Whiteness. However, those

⁸⁷ West, 462.

⁸⁸ West, 462.

⁸⁹ Lester, 34.

⁹⁰ David, Mayra. *The Help: Perpetuating the Mammy Stereotype & Limiting Roles in Film*, (2011), 1.

features served as a visual indicator of “exotic Otherness” that White men fetishized as a way to rationalize the sexual relations between white men and black women during slavery. Indeed, “the Jezebel was depicted as a Black woman with an insatiable appetite for sex. She was not satisfied with black men. The slavery-era Jezebel, it was claimed, desired sexual relations with white men; therefore, white men did not have to rape black women...”⁹¹ What is interesting to note is that the Jezebel trope was believed to be an accurate representation of mulatto women, whom were also feared in the eyes of white women. As noted by Byrd & Tharps, “...the plantation wives instituted a new form of punishment for them. The jealous mistresses of the manor often shaved off the lustrous mane of hair, indicating that White women too understood the significance of long, kink-free hair.”⁹² Even in the twenty first century, “the current Jezebel permutations seen in today’s music videos, [include] freaks, gold diggers, divas, and baby mamas. The modern images in music videos attempt to convey that women have more control over their sexuality. In reality, however, this professed control is tenuous.”⁹³ The images of the Mammy and the Jezebel are not the only ones that have been recreated and reproduced in the modern media: the Sapphire trope has been predominately broadcasted in the media as how “real” Black women behave.

The Sapphire trope is most commonly recognized as the perpetually ‘angry’ Black woman. Historically, the Sapphire trope was seen as “emasculating black men with frequent loud, animated, verbose fashion, and full of verbal assaults.”⁹⁴ Looking at media such as Tyler Perry films or Black women on reality television shows, the Sapphire character is often used to bring comedic relief because she is so ‘crazy’ and ‘angry’ for no rational reason. As noted by Carolyn West:

Due to personal concerns and a history of social injustices, Black women (as well as other oppressed groups) have many reasons to be angry. However, the Sapphire image can have additional implications for how this anger is expressed and experienced. For some, characteristics of this image, such as active displays of

⁹¹ Ferris State University. “Jezebel Stereotype,” (2000) 1.

⁹² Byrd & Tharps, 19.

⁹³ Townsend et al, “I’m no Jezebel; I Am Young, Gifted, and Black: Identity, Sexuality, and Black Girls,” (2010) 274.

⁹⁴ West, 461.

outrage rather than passivity, are embraced as one of the few “positive” traits available for Black women...at the other extreme of the emotional continuum; this image may result in a general avoidance or discomfort of displays of strong affect. For example as authority figures, Black women are frequently stereotyped as “pushy” or “hostile” by subordinates and efforts to be assertive are often perceived as aggressive. Consequently, when this image is internalized, Black women may assume responsibility for the discomfort and fear of others or modify their behavior in an attempt to appear nonthreatening when interacting with other ethnic groups.⁹⁵

Whenever Black women stray away from the tropes of Sapphire, Mammy, or Jezebel, they are accused of being “sell outs” or “inauthentic.” Black women throughout history have had to negotiate self-image within White standards of womanhood and beauty. On the other hand, Black women have also had to deal with criticism from within the Black community. As noted by Patricia Hill-Collins, historically, “oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if they frame their ideas in the language that is familiar and comfortable for a dominant group.”⁹⁶ The historical implications of the Black body and Black hair have lasted throughout the ages, leaving no Black women immune to the power of tropes.

How Black Women have embraced and Challenged Tropes

Tropes of Black women in the past have been used to successfully make Black women feel inferior to White women. The grotesque characterization of Black women in the media was created to show how different Black women are from White women. While the tropes mainly focused on physical bodily aspects or attitudes of Black women, the tropes still reinforce the idea that those who have traits that reflect the European standard of white beauty and femininity are the most desired, the most beautiful, and the closest to the perfection of beauty. The internalization of media images of White and Black beauty has caused irreparable damage to the esteem of Black women in the United States. Receiving messages that Black women are ugly, undesirable, and unattractive for centuries was passed down from generation to generation.

⁹⁵ West, 461.

⁹⁶ Collins, vii.

Yet, it wasn't until the twentieth century when for the first time, Blacks were collectively free as a people "to resist accepting this image" of White beauty.⁹⁷ This resistance has most commonly been documented within the Black Power movement. The Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s "boldly proclaimed that hair is both important and political. The afro directly challenged the traditional ideal of beauty that devalued natural black features."⁹⁸ While the Black Power movement sought to rectify the marginalized experiences of Blacks, the movement also managed to make hair political, helping redefine blackness as "a positive attribute."⁹⁹ For the first time, the saying 'Black is Beautiful' was acknowledged as well as black beauty and the pride to go with it.¹⁰⁰ Self-love and self-determination became the model of the movement for uplifting the self-esteem of Black folk and creating policies that ameliorated the quality of life for Black people in America.

While the Black Power movement was political, most of the emphasis of the movement was unintentionally focused on hair. This was because hair became a symbol of a certain lifestyle and the symbolic action of "taking the kinks out of your mind." During the 1960s, wearing hair in a counter-culture fashion, whether that was an Afro for Blacks or long hair for hippies, was considered to be political at the time. Particularly for Black females, "when you quit straightening, you feel free, you break the chain that you used to carry in your head before. To quit straightening is an affirmation, a symbolic act... that is why it is interpreted as an act of rebelliousness and, in the case of women, it is double rebelliousness, because these two oppressions go together."¹⁰¹

However, the Black power movement in some ways was exclusive of Blacks who were not "down" with the movement. Not being "down" meant wearing hair in a traditionally straightened fashion, which translated to those involved in the movement as

⁹⁷ Lester, 36.

⁹⁸ Bell, iv.

⁹⁹ Mercer, 37.

¹⁰⁰ Bell, 2.

¹⁰¹ Badillo, Cassandra. "When Black Is Not Beautiful: Only My Hairdresser Knows For Sure." (2001) 35.

“the most obvious marker of one’s attempt to emulate whiteness.”¹⁰² What happened to the Blacks that had naturally straight hair? They were pressured to rock the Afro look, even if it required putting chemicals in their hair to make it look nappy, or even rock Afro wigs. In short, there became an “overemphasis and narrow defining of Blackness [that] was leading to ‘increased confusion and danger [of] a game of trying to ‘out-Black’ or ‘out-militant’ one another.”¹⁰³ The policing of Blacks again proved to be exclusive and damaging to the overall progression of the goals of the Black Power Movement. While the movement did showcase a range of Black beauties, “within a relatively short period, [Afros and dreadlocks] became rapidly *depoliticized* and, within varying degrees of resistance, both were incorporated into mainstream fashions in the dominant culture.”¹⁰⁴ The Afro and other natural styles such as dreadlocks eventually became *chic*, and not political. Even non-Black people had begun to emulate styles such as dreads, braids, and Afros because it was what was “in style.”

The current day situation with hair is, in some ways, reminiscent of the Black Power Movement, but it is also situated in a time where there are more visible celebrations of diverse beauties. Who would have ever thought that Alex Wek, a dark skinned, short kinky haired model from Sudan would become one of the most successful models in the world? Today, there is a subculture ready to embrace its natural hair texture, whatever that means for the individual. The natural hair movement has rapidly spread on the Internet within the last six years; however, there has been a cultural explosion of content on and offline that is placing natural hair in the media’s eye.

Natural Hair in the Media

“Maybe one day we can get to a point when there’s no hoopla surrounded by what should be a normal occurrence: a black woman wearing her natural hair.”¹⁰⁵

In the last few years, more Black women have started to transition into natural hairstyles. The term “going natural” generally refers to “African American women who

¹⁰² Byrd & Tharps, 58.

¹⁰³ Byrd & Tharps, 58.

¹⁰⁴ Mercer, 37.

¹⁰⁵ Coco + Crème. “Natural Hair At the Oscars: Why Viola Davis’ TWA was Powerful,” (2012) 1.

decide to stop chemically processing, or relaxing their hair.”¹⁰⁶ While the natural hair movement does revoke the Black Power movement’s slogan ‘Black is Beautiful,’ it is distinct because the movement is occurring solely online. Some examples of the hair dialogue going online can best be followed via a natural hair blog, natural video log, or even on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. What is unique about the natural movement is that Black women are able to connect with others and share their hair experiences, which are commonly referred to as hair stories. As noted by Byrd & Tharps, “I think part of the stories that bind us together as Black [people] are our hair stories. I just look forward to the time when the hair stories won’t be as traumatic.”¹⁰⁷ The sharing of stories via hair blogs and video logs have created an outlet for Black women to bond over shared experiences. As noted by Jamila Bey in her *New York Times* article, “I thought, ‘Why don’t I just document my own journey to keep track of what’s working for me?...I want to contribute to the wealth of knowledge that’s out there.’”¹⁰⁸ Since many Black women have not seen their hair in its unprocessed state since birth, learning how to embrace their hair is a psychological process of growth, love, and acceptance.

Natural Hair as a Form of Political Resistance

Part of what makes the natural hair movement a *movement* is the goal of empowering Black women to reclaim and see themselves in the definition of beauty. Indeed, “change is occurring within the Black community, as more and more people embrace natural styles that emphasize the unique texture of Black hair rather than trying to hide it.”¹⁰⁹ While it may seem trite, as noted earlier, beauty issues particularly in the Black community are deeply engrained within our culture. What makes the movement so incredibly powerful within the Black community is that “over 60 percent of Black American women [wear] their hair relaxed and an estimated 5 percent [use] a hot comb to straighten it, there are precious few natural-hair role models out there for visual

¹⁰⁶ Bey, Jamila. “For African-Americans, ‘Going Natural’ Can Require Help,” (2012)1.

¹⁰⁷ Byrd & Tharps, 139.

¹⁰⁸ Bey, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Byrd & Tharps, 170.

consumption.”¹¹⁰ To see visual examples of resistance, even on a microscopic level makes the movement incredibly pertinent.

Take for example, renowned actress Viola Davis, who showed up to the 2012 Oscars with short, dyed natural hair. Her ‘teeny weeny Afro’¹¹¹ made a huge splash at the awards. In the words of Viola herself, “Step into who you are! It’s a powerful statement.”¹¹² Viola Davis has received many positive responses, from Black and White people. One person commented, “the fact that Viola Davis has gotten so much recognition and acclaim for simply just wearing her natural hair...just being yourself can be this cultural avant-garde statement...It is a wonderful time now. The Euro-centric canons of beauty are being dissolved a bit. The platform for beauty is truly expanding.”¹¹³ In this way, hair has, once again reemerged as a marker of political resistance; even an interviewee from Nigeria noted that it “was a surprise to me [that] the way you do your hair can be a political statement. I had never seen that before.”¹¹⁴ Some scholars have even argued that “it seems that a certain level of Black consciousness is necessary before a woman dares to go natural.”¹¹⁵ As noted by Zina Saro-Wawa:

But black hair and the black body generally have long been a site of political contest in American history and in the American imagination. Against this backdrop, the transition movement has a political dimension – whether transitioners themselves believe it or not. Demonstrating this level of self-acceptance represents a powerful evolution in black political expression. If racial politics has led to an internalization of self-loathing, then true transformation will come internally, too. It will not be a performative act. Saying it loud” ‘I’m Black and I’m proud’ is one thing. Believing it quietly is another. So the transition movement is much more profound and much more powerful – and I believe it offers lessons in self-acceptance for people of all hues and all genders.¹¹⁶

The ‘dare’ to go natural is one that often provokes fear in many Black women: the fear is not looking attractive or quite frankly, fearing what they will look like without

¹¹⁰ Byrd & Tharps, 162.

¹¹¹ What natural hair bloggers refer to this look as.

¹¹² Clutch Magazine. “Natural Hair at the Oscars Why Viola Davis’ TWA is Powerful,” (2013) 1.

¹¹³ Brown, DeNeen. Smithsonian’s ‘The Will to Adorn’ : Black Hair and Cultural Identity. (2012) 1.

¹¹⁴ Byrd & Tharps, 164.

¹¹⁵ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 118.

¹¹⁶ Saro-Wiwa, 1.

processed hair. In Ingrid Banks' ethnographic study on hair, one participant noted "I feel like you have to be a strong woman to wear your hair naturally when you know it may not be so popular a thing. But you have to look at yourself and know how beautiful you look and go ahead and do it, and the rest of the world seems to accept you."¹¹⁷ However, not all Black women have the support of family members or other significant persons in their lives and thus, the act of daring or resisting these norms can be more easily facilitated with support elsewhere. As Rose Weitz writes, "certainly resistance is easier if supported by others, such as husbands or friends, who place little emphasis on meeting appearance norms. Resistance to appearance norms is also easier when an alternative ideology exists that can provide a basis for challenging dominant ideologies, especially if that alternative ideology is supported by a broad social movement (as was the Afro during the late 1960s)."¹¹⁸ The natural hair movement, particularly the presence of hair blogs and video logs are some ways in which transitioning into natural hair is easier: especially if women who are transitioning lack support offline.

Natural Hair as Apolitical: Hair is Just Hair

On the other hand, going natural is not necessarily seen as a political movement for all Black women. For some Black women, "returning [hair] to its natural state was not explicitly tied to changes in her consciousness about race and racism."¹¹⁹ Even for proclaimed naturals, some argue that hair is just hair, and that in some ways, the natural hair movement isolates Black women who are either not ready or do not want to go natural. As Cassandra Jackson writes,

I do not miss the fiery sensation of chemicals caustic enough to smack the kink out of my hair. Nor do I miss treating an element as basic as water like it was napalm because it made my straight locks explode into kinky curls. I do, however, miss black beauty culture, spaces where laughter, love, information, and insight commingled freely...the beauty shop was our space, our time, our community....¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Banks, 87.

¹¹⁸ Weitz, 363.

¹¹⁹ Caldwell, 104.

¹²⁰ Jackson, Cassandra. "Is Natural Hair The End of Black Beauty Culture?" (2012) 1.

The exclusion of certain Black women is not just related to the processing of hair, but also by class. As noted in *The Color Complex: The Politics of Skin Color in a New Millennium*, “Black women who wear natural styles, like braids, cut across socioeconomic lines, but a politically defiant style like locs is generally a middle-class expression of Black consciousness. Inner-city girls and women are probably the least likely to wear locs.”¹²¹ While inclusive in many ways, the natural hair movement is not being accessed by all Black women. Some have attributed to the lack of overall mobilization to the digital divide, or the fact that not everyone has Internet access. However, with the increasing amount of mobile devices with Internet capability, it seems that the movement is strictly focused on the ‘hair stories,’ or experiences of middle-class to upper class Black women.

Moreover, it is also important to note that everyone has different definitions of natural hair. This has caused some contention within the movement, because in some ways, it isolates Black women who have not gone natural, or who have different ideas of what is considered to be natural hair. Similar to the hair dialogue going on in the Black Power movement, there have been divisions between Black women in the movement; this can best be seen on social media sites such as Twitter that uses the hash tags #TeamNatural and #TeamRelaxed. The Twitter hash tags showcase the different ‘ideals’ behind each “team”: #TeamNatural represents women who have chosen to go natural and have embraced many of the beauty ideals within the movement, whereas #TeamRelaxed are women who continue to relax their hair.

This is not to say that if a Black woman is natural or “unnatural,” that she embraces the ideology of the natural hair movement. In the words of author and professor Carolivia Herron at Howard University, “...everyone was going natural with Afros, I refused to do it because I wanted to show that I could be just as radical as they were without it being in my hair.”¹²² Additionally, as Shahida Muhammad, writer for *Clutch Magazine* noted, “in the mix of all of this, I think there is something being overlooked.

¹²¹ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 120.

¹²² Byrd & Tharps, 58.

Instead of debating about relaxed vs. natural hair, we should discuss how this movement is bringing about important cultural change in attitudes towards our hair.”¹²³ Divisions among women who consider themselves ‘outside’ or ‘inside’ the movement, have led to the distancing of Black women who could become involved or embrace the natural hair movement.

There are divisions outside of the natural hair movement with “natural” and “non-natural” women, and also within the natural movement, since there is no concrete definition of what natural means. Some have noted that even natural women have only lauded specific curl textures to be ‘natural.’ The preference for specific curl patterns is known by naturals in the movement as curlism. In her blog post titled, “How Natural is Too Natural? Jessica Andrews delves into one aspect of curlism and policing within the natural hair movement. Andrews writes, “look at the images of black women in the media – if their hair isn’t straight, it’s a very particular type of curly look meant to represent natural hair. It’s another way for the arbiters of mainstream beauty to divide our community...we often see this long voluminous curl as a lust-worthy style. It’s a societal norm that’s hard to break.”¹²⁴ On the other hand, some people within the natural community have been excluded from the movement for having ‘good’ hair. Some critics have noted that mixed race women or even Black women with less kinkier hair textures cannot truly go ‘natural.’ As noted by blogger Veronica on xojane.com writes,

While the mainstream narrative is that society isn’t always generally welcoming of the spring, coily texture of unaltered black hair (and it’s true, it isn’t), some naturals turned the table way too far in the other direction. There were more than a few discussions about whether certain women were “nappy” enough to be called natural –the equivalent of questioning whether one can be ‘black’ enough....a movement that began as a way to encourage black women to be free with their hair suddenly turned hostile to women doing just that.¹²⁵

While unwarranted, many nasty comments on hair blogs are byproducts of the anonymity that the Internet creates. Resentment towards women with less kinkier textures

¹²³ Muhammad, Shahida. “The Natural Hair Movement: Changing the Conversation. (2012) 1.

¹²⁴ Andrews, Jessica. “How Natural is Too Natural?” (2012) 1.

¹²⁵ Miller, Veronica. “Why I Stopped Blogging About Natural Hair,” (2012) 1.

is again, something that has been engrained as ‘normal’ within the Black community, which can be unhealthy and just as harmful as discriminating against women that have kinkier curl textures. Some of the hostile comments in the natural hair movement have not only been directed at other women who posts photos of their hair online, but also towards celebrities. One of the most common targets of the ‘natural hair police’ is none other than singer Solange Knowles, the younger sister of Beyoncé Knowles.

Solange Knowles: Natural Hair Darling or Enemy?

Solange Knowles is an independent artist who has been characterized as having a ‘bohemian’ soul. While Solange has been successful in her own right, she has also become the poster child for the natural hair movement. As noted in her interview with *Essence Magazine*, Knowles underwent the Big Chop in 2009 that “transformed her into a natural hair icon.”¹²⁶ It is a title that is difficult to bear, especially considering that her sister Beyoncé Knowles is considered to be the antithesis of natural beauty. In her *Essence* interview, Solange stated that she wasn’t expecting that many people to be inspired by her decision to go natural. As Solange noted, “I get women all the time on Twitter and face-to-face saying, ‘I did this [haircut] because you did.’ That’s really really humbling, and I think it’s amazing.”¹²⁷ For this reason, it is clear how Solange Knowles has challenged norms of beauty within dominant and black culture: albeit it unknowingly or not.

Despite being cherished as the natural hair darling, Solange has rejected the title of being a natural hair icon. As Solange commented, “I guess you just go through different phases in your life. I was pretty much at the point where I needed the change and I needed to focus my energy on more productive arenas...I felt like I was being distracted by something as simple as hair...I didn’t quite understand yet that my hair did not define me.”¹²⁸ However, despite the positive comments made towards Solange’s appearance, there were also many serious attacks against her decision to go natural.

¹²⁶ Corbett, Corynne. “Exclusive: Solange Knowles Shares Her Natural Hair Secrets,” (2012) 1.

¹²⁷ Corbett, 1.

¹²⁸ Dodani, Stewart. “Solange on Her Hair, “I’ve Always Been Really Fearless Change,” (2009) 1.

Within the mainstream media, some critics went so far as to say that Solange was ‘batshit insane’ for cutting her hair and accused of her of doing a “Britney”: or irrationally shaving her hair off.¹²⁹ Solange has also received criticism by people within the natural hair movement.

Some of the comments Solange has received from the ‘natural hair police’ is that Solange’s “curl type is not like other 4C’s” and that she “needs a twistout.” These comments were posted via Instagram and on blogs like Curly Nikki.¹³⁰ In response to their comments, Solange tweeted multiple tweets, the most memorable one being: “I’ve never painted myself as a team natural vice president. I don’t know the lingo and I don’t sleep with a satin cap...”¹³¹ Also, there is natural hair terminology used to describe hair procedures or styles; for example, naturalistas use words such as *twistout*.¹³² In the natural hair community, the usage of the hair texture system was created to help women find products that would best be suitable for their hair type. However, as blogger Veronica on xojane.com comments “natural hair forums divided themselves in camps according to texture – 3b, 3c, 4a,4b,4c, according to the system devised by Oprah’s hair guru, Andre Walker.”¹³³

The natural hair craze exponentially became thrust into the mainstream consumer market once Carol’s Daughter, one of the larger natural hair care companies at the time asked Solange to become their new spokesperson. Carol’s Daughter was a small business that started in 1980s in founder Lisa Price’s kitchen, which then turned into a multi-billion dollar beauty empire.¹³⁴ In 2009, Carol’s Daughter asked Solange Knowles to become their spokesperson given the attention for her new look. Once again, Solange Knowles was expected to represent thousands of different hair textures and Black women

¹²⁹ Dodani, Stewart. Solange Chops Hair, Is Called “Insane,” (2009) 1.

¹³⁰ GLAM SCOOP: Solange Knowles vs. ‘Natural Hair Police,’ (2012) 1.

¹³¹ GLAMSCOOP, *ibid*.

¹³² A twist out is referring to a maintenance style for hair. The person would make small twists (taking two strands of hair and twisting them together – like a rope) before going to bed. In the morning, they would undo the twist, thus lengthening hair and why the look is called a twist out.

¹³³ Why I Stopped Blogging About Natural Hair.

¹³⁴ For more information on the beginnings of Carol’s Daughter, watch the video about Lisa Price’s story on their website: <http://www.carolsdaughter.com/aboutus/lisastory>.

by being the ‘spokesperson’ for one of the largest natural hair care companies in the world. As Solange responded to her decision to leave Carol’s Daughter,

[We] couldn’t see eye-to-eye with messaging. I was constantly fighting for the right message to be heard. The message that the way we wear our hair is a personal choice, there’s no right or wrong way...I really, truly was not even aware that there was a natural hair system in place to measure the texture of your hair. At that point I thought to myself, ‘This is really crazy. That these people know more about my hair than the human that even carries it!’¹³⁵

While there are many positive elements of the natural hair movement, there is still so much work to be done to equalize the space within the movement. By being more inclusive of all women, even those who may not even be considered ‘natural,’ the natural hair community could be a space where women are empowered and unified. However, “it goes to show that changing your hair will do little if your mentality is still divisive and judgmental.”¹³⁶ From Viola Davis being praised for rocking her natural hair to the criticism Solange Knowles has received from going natural, there is no right or wrong way to wear hair. One of the reasons the negativity has seeped into the natural hair movement so strongly is because the anonymity and universality of the Internet.

The Role and Emergence of Social Media in the Natural Hair Movement

“Express your views on your Facebook page, or post a blog about it. Use the power of social media. Be inspired by what a collective voice can achieve...”¹³⁷

Since the creation of the Internet in 1991, the Internet has exploded with content as well as abundant resources: virtually anything a person could need or want to reference is now online. One of the reasons that the Internet is so popular is because “web-based information has distinct advantages over more traditional print resources and media: it can be updated instantly and disseminated widely.”¹³⁸ Now, more than ever, the Internet has been used as a space to mobilize people for social movements, because “online sites

¹³⁵ Clutch Magazine. “Solange Knowles On Leaving Carol’s Daughter” (2012) 1.

¹³⁶ GLAMSCOOP, *ibid.*

¹³⁷ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 246.

¹³⁸ Gay Detlefsen, Ellen. *Where Am I To Go? Use of the Internet for Consumer Health Information by Two Vulnerable Communities*, (2004) 285.

are also a source of empowerment and change...¹³⁹ Major instances of this within the last few years include the election of President Barack Obama, Occupy Wall Street, and the Arab Spring. Social media refers to “activities among people gathered online who share information using conversational media that makes it easy to create and share content in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.”¹⁴⁰ With social media gaining more of a presence, the natural hair movement has been able to spread its influences in ways that it could not have accomplished had the movement been based offline.

The most popular form of social media are social networking sites, particularly Facebook. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “the most popular social networking site is Facebook, which has over 750 million users.”¹⁴¹ On Facebook, users can create fan pages or groups that “could also be created to acquire information from a segment of the population that has experience with a particular topic. Discussions on these Facebook walls could also provide insight.”¹⁴² However, as noted by the CDC, within Facebook users in the United States, “55% are female, 50% are in the 18-34 age group, and Caucasian users make up 78% of users while 9% are African American and 9% are Hispanic.”¹⁴³ While some have argued that the Internet is an racially and gendered neutral space, statistically, it is clear that Facebook is a predominately young white female space. Therefore, it is no surprise that Black women, while still on Facebook, have used alternative spaces to communicate with one another about hair.

The natural hair movement grew from online blogs, which showcases individual “hair journeys,” or hair stories on transitioning into a natural look. Blogs receive millions of views worldwide on a daily basis, and users can share information within the blogs fairly easily. The whole concept of hair blogging highly encourages fostering virtual communities with Black women around the world. In a 2007 study conducted by Byrne,

¹³⁹ Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall, 244.

¹⁴⁰ Neiger et al, Use of Social Media in Health Promotion: Purposes, Key Performance Indicators, and Evaluation Metrics, (2012) 159.

¹⁴¹ CDC, The Health Communicator’s Social Media Toolkit, (2011) 36.

¹⁴² Neiger et al, 160.

¹⁴³ CDC, The Health Communicator’s Social Media Toolkit, 36.

he noted that there was a relative absence of culturally specific social networks for Blacks, yet he uses research that showed that Blacks are more likely to interact with one another to build community versus their White counterparts.¹⁴⁴ What is interesting to note that in his own personal research, Byrne discovered that heritage and identity were the most commonly researched and used threads on blackplanet.com, a social network forum for young Black professionals. The need for either a physical or virtual space is one that is clearly desired within the Black community, and hair blogs and video logs have successfully formed as a way to satisfy those needs.

The Emergence of Blogs and Video Logs: Social Media for the Natural Hair Movement

What has made the social media so appealing within the natural hair movement are what the Center for Disease Control and Prevention calls the three ‘p’s’ of social media. The 3 P’s are: “personalization – content tailored to individual needs, presentation – timely and relevant content accessible in multiple formats and contexts, and participation – partners and the public who contribute content in meaningful ways. Additionally, many social media channels facilitate social engagement, viral sharing of information and trust.”¹⁴⁵ The first P, or personalization, is one of the most important factors of the use of social media, particularly within the natural hair movement.

The personal nature of sharing stories about hair, whether they are positive or negative stories, helps women work through their issues and connect with other women. Blogs are “web logs [that] are regularly updated online journals that almost anyone with an internet connection can use...blogs can be used to discuss a topic that may be too complex for other channels and to give [a] topic or program a more personal and engaging presence than a website allows.”¹⁴⁶As noted by Elizabeth Simpson McKnight in her research on blogging, women who interacted online with other women “developed close friendships with a group of women who share some of her interests, and she pointed

¹⁴⁴ Byrne, D.N. Public Discourse, community concerns, and civic engagement: Exploring black social networking traditions on BlackPlanet.com, (2007)1.

¹⁴⁵ CDC, The Health Communicator’s Social Media Toolkit, 7.

¹⁴⁶ CDC, The Health Communicator’s Social Media Toolkit, 32.

out that she can confide things with them that she would never share with her family or even her best friend ‘in real life.’¹⁴⁷

For many women going natural, it is hard to maintain that lifestyle without some form of support. Without the offline support of family, friends, or significant others, the decision to remain natural becomes harder. However, with the personal nature of the blogs, women can relate to each other and have the strength to continue on their natural hair journeys. In other words, the personal nature of blogging is “...of the utmost importance because it aids in the development and empowerment of the self...”¹⁴⁸ Social media has been used as a way to mobilize people who otherwise may not be able to meet in person. Additionally, social media also has the potential to be used as a support group.

Hair blogs and video logs are frequently used within the Black female community as a safe space to discuss hair, find new products, and support in going “natural.” Hair blogs are often times the first spaces where Black women can openly talk about and with each other about their experiences going natural. As stated by Nikki Walton, psychotherapist and creator of CurlyNikki, “my career as a therapist is very important to who I am, and what I do even with my persona as Curly Nikki, it’s called hair therapy.”¹⁴⁹ Hair therapy is a great way to describe hair blogs, because it provides a forum of support for women in all stages of their transition as well as a space to talk about societal pressures to alter our hair to fit the European model of beauty. Similar to group therapy, participation on hair blogs “are helping Black women to achieve self-defined outcomes related to their spiritual, physical, emotional, and intellectual health.”¹⁵⁰ Also, a majority of Black women do not know how to care for their unprocessed hair until they have gone on a hair blog, or even YouTube tutorials for inspiration for new hairstyles. The purpose of going online to natural hair blogs or video

¹⁴⁷ Simpson McKnight. *Beyond Fig Leaves and Scarlet Letters: Women Voicing Themselves In Diaries and Blogs*, (2009) 5.

¹⁴⁸ Simpson McKnight, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Bey, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop. “The Internet for empowerment of minority and marginalized users,” (2004) 791.

logs are to learn how to manage and care for hair, and to connect with other women who are experiencing and seeking to clarify their experiences as a “natural Black woman.”

Participation

Within the natural hair movement, social media has been utilized to share hair narratives, photos demonstrating hair growth and transformation, as well as sharing tips and product suggestions. With the emergence of social media, it is becoming increasingly easier to share and access content information rapidly, especially on the smart phone (iPhones, Androids, and Blackberries). According to the Pew Research Center, almost half, or 42% of all cell phone owners own a smart phone, 87% of smart phone owners use the internet or email on their phones, and 68% of smart phone owners use their phones to go online every day.¹⁵¹ Not only that, but 76% of people between the ages of 18-29 years old and 57% of people between the ages of 30-49 years old watch online videos.¹⁵² It is clear that there is a huge demand to connect with one another and watch videos.

Hair video logs on YouTube are capable of showing how to videos with clear before and after results that are easy to utilize. Part of the appeal of making a video log instead of a blog is that “anyone with Internet access can upload, view, share, and comment on video footage...YouTube or Google video help provide an engaging experience for consumers to view and share.”¹⁵³ Participating in a hair video log allows people to see results, to comment to the video logger (who usually responds back in the comment sections), and, if they feel so inspired, to allow online users to also create their own video channels and upload content. Essentially, “using YouTube as a promotional platform [leads] to high exposure and generated strong engagement from viewers.”¹⁵⁴ For this reason, there are thousands of hair blogs and video logs online that people can access immediately.

¹⁵¹ CDC Health Communicator’s Social Media Tool Kit, 23.

¹⁵² Korda and Itani, *Harnessing Social Media for Health Promotion and Behavior Change*, 4.

¹⁵³ CDC Health Communicator’s Social Media Tool Kit, 32.

¹⁵⁴ Neiger et al, 161.

Another element of the natural hair movement involves the role of bloggers. Hair bloggers and video loggers are revered as ‘experts’ in the field of natural hair care, yet anyone can become a blogger or logger. However, not all bloggers and loggers garner significant success or in turn, can create an entrepreneurial business off of blogging. The key in gaining a stake hold in blogging is creating and maintaining an audience. The core of blogging and video logging is facilitating viral information sharing, or essentially making it easier for followers to share bloggers’ messages. Bloggers such as HeyFranHey uses social media sites such as Tumblr where a person can “reblog” or share on their own Tumblr pages the information HeyFranHey posts. Not only do bloggers help connect themselves to their audience, but they also help connect and share the work of other bloggers and loggers.

Many times on natural websites, other bloggers will give shout outs or post links that other bloggers shared, thus emulating a virtual community of bloggers. Additionally, bloggers are not just limited to a blog: many bloggers have Facebook fan pages, or uploading videos on YouTube and posting photos on Instagram. In these ways, the movement has expanded and began to make a very strong online presence. With so many bloggers and video loggers out there, followers can choose whom they wish to follow and also interact directly with bloggers via making comments or sharing visual content on social media.

Presentation of Hair Blogs and Video Logs

The concept of hair blogs is based on community and uplifting other women. The information on hair blogs is culturally sensitive and relevant, which is important in making popular education tools. Popular education, as defined by Brazilian theorist Paolo Freire is “a cultural action expanded by dialogue and growth on both sides, in search of social solutions from what one lives and exchanges, from what one learns and motivates, when dialoguing critically and creatively about life and the world.”¹⁵⁵ Freire developed

¹⁵⁵ Ebling et al, *Popular Education and Health Education: A Necessary Link in Health Practices*, (2012) 2287.

popular education tools as a way to empower lower-class Brazilians who were dropping out of primary and secondary schools.

As an educator, Freire saw that the traditional method of teaching, or a teacher depositing knowledge into student's "banks" or minds as incredibly problematic. In response, Freire proposed popular education as a tool created by a community to empower and teach other community members to utilize their own social capital: in other words, to increase empowerment "as a social action process that promotes participation of people, organizations, and communities in gaining control of their lives in their community and larger society."¹⁵⁶ The key to popular education is total inclusion and involvement of invested community members to dialogue critically about their lives and the ways in which they can personally ameliorate their lives.

For this reason, hair blogs can be considered a form of popular education because they have been created and used by Black women to teach other Black women how to care for their hair. Additionally, hair blogs help support Black women in the process of "transitioning," or going from chemically produced hair to natural looks. The overarching goal of popular education, as well as the natural hair movement is to empower marginalized people. The empowerment theory is also reflective of health education because it "helps assist people in identifying social aspects of their problems and in developing collective strategies for health enhancement through personal growth and social transformation."¹⁵⁷ Why health education is so key in marginalized populations results from lack of access to health care providers or health care materials that are culturally sensitive and relevant to target communities. Hair blogs are often the first spaces where Black women are receiving health education about how to care for their hair as well as develop healthier eating habits and promote holistic approaches to achieving wellness.

¹⁵⁶ Wallerstein, Nina. "Empowerment Education: Freire's Ideas Adapted to Health Education," (1988) 381.

¹⁵⁷ Fahlberg et al. "Empowering as an Emerging Approach in Health Education," (1991) 187.

Additionally, the information on hair blogs is culturally sensitive and relevant, which is important in making popular education tools. Indeed, “individual knowledge levels, vocabulary, and customs must all be considered in selecting both the language used and the way concepts are presented.”¹⁵⁸ As a popular education tool, the blog itself is created by Black women and uses words with colloquial meanings within the context of hair in the Black community. Words such as *breakage*, *the kitchen*, and *hair journeys* are used to express difficulties with hair maintenance strategies, difference in curl texture on the head, as well as progress, change, and evolution into a more holistic life. The presence of these words gives power to members who use cultural colloquialisms to refer to their hair instead of using the dominant definitions of Black hair, which are more often than not, negative. By using these colloquial terms, oppressed groups have the ability to frame their ideas in their own words. Reclaiming Black hair and black hair terminology is one of the many ways in which hair blogs function as popular education tools.

Case Study: Curly Nikki and Hey Fran Hey

Curly Nikki

Curly Nikki is the largest natural hair blog and was created in October 2008 by psychotherapist, Nikki Walton. As noted on her blog, CurlyNikki receives over 3 million views worldwide, making it one of the most visited and popular natural hair blogs. Walton created the blog “to make even more women aware of the hair options they believed to be non-existent.”¹⁵⁹



Photo of CurlyNikki Homepage © 2012 CurlyNikki.com

¹⁵⁸ Smolensky, Jack. *Principles of Community Health* (1982) 124.

¹⁵⁹ CurlyNikki, Biography. <http://www.curlynikki.com/2010/08/biography.html> Accessed 17 March 2013.

On her site, CurlyNikki has a plethora of information on different topics once a user clicks on the tabs as seen in the photo above. Users are also encouraged to comment and submit photos of their hair growth and transformation. What is unique to the CurlyNikki blog is that she facilitates meet-ups offline with followers. The meet-ups are hair workshops where people can meet one another offline as well as get product recommendations and hair consultations.

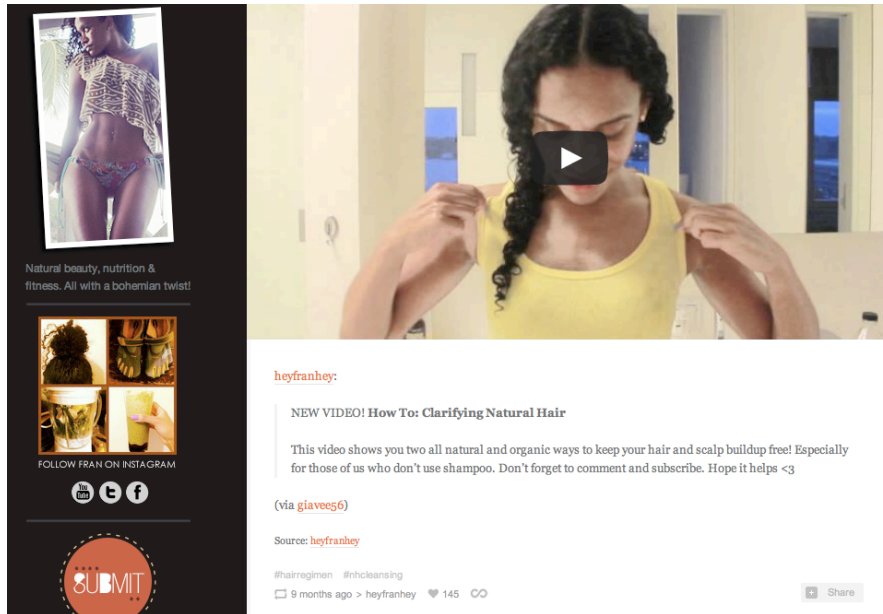
What makes separates CurlyNikki from other bloggers is that not only is her blog incredibly user-friendly (in terms of navigating her blog and connecting with other users), but Nikki Walton is also a licensed psychotherapist. As Walton notes, “people will say on this site sometimes: ‘it’s just hair, it’s not that deep,’ but they come to the site [CurlyNikki.com] everyday, so maybe it is that deep. For black women especially, it’s wrapped up in our quality of life.”¹⁶⁰ CurlyNikki is so successful because she deconstructs the psychological aspects behind hair and helps facilitate hair therapy through her blog posts and with followers in the comments section. For this reason, CurlyNikki has garnered unprecedented success in the hair blogging world and is now the author of her newest book, *Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair*. For more information, please visit her blog at www.curlynikki.com.

Hey Fran Hey

Another hair blogger who is rapidly gaining prominence is HeyFranHey, a hair blog dedicated to a more holistic way of living. HeyFranHey was created by Francheska Medina in 2011 and receives 400,000 views per month on her Tumblr page; she has been on YouTube for one year, and within that short period, she receives 35,000-40,000 views per video and has a total of 300,000 subscribers. I had the opportunity to interview HeyFranHey about her hair blog via Skype. As she described to me, her blog “seeks to make the holistic lifestyle extremely doable, [she] breaks everything down on the most

¹⁶⁰ CurlyNikki, Biography.

fundamental level.”¹⁶¹ Unlike other blogs, HeyFranHey shows the parallel benefits from living a holistic life: if one is physically healthy, the results will procure a healthier body, lifestyle, and hair growth. As she stated, “it’s a beautiful thing to have 400,000 views about me talking about cocoa butter.”¹⁶²



Screenshot of HeyFranHey’s Tumblr, ©HeyFranHey 2012.

Unlike other bloggers, HeyFranHey posts videos, photos, do it yourself all-natural remedies, recipes, hair suggestions, and workout regimens that can be easily replicated at home. HeyFranHey is incredibly popular because she makes health fun and shows how taking better care of hair is not mutually exclusive: it is just as equally important to take in healthy foods and exercise on a weekly basis. Since her blog is smaller in size and overall traffic, HeyFranHey frequently reblogs other bloggers as well as post and adds positive affirmations to the photos that followers sends her of their hair growth.

HeyFranHey really embodies the core elements of the natural hair movement, because her blog is a space that is all about empowerment, seeking inner beauty, and uplifting others. As she noted, “This blog has taught me that life is so much more than

¹⁶¹ There was not a substantial amount of personal information on HeyFranHey.com to pull from. Interview with Francheska Medina, conducted on Feb 3, 2013.

¹⁶² Interview with Francheska Medina

your personal goals and achievements. It's not just about becoming a leader so people can follow you, it's about being a leader so that people can also be a leader and empower others. I'm so humbled that people trusted me to create this community of trust and support."¹⁶³ The intimate nature of HeyFranHey's blog is what makes her blog stand out amongst larger blogs such as CurlyNikki.

HeyFranHey's blog is incredibly user-friendly and all-encompassing of many different elements of holistic living. HeyFranHey shows that going natural – in terms of hair as well as eating organic foods-- is affordable and doable. As a blogger, she also has made featured appearances with Carol's Daughter and on YouTube mini web series about hair. For information, please visit her blog at www.heyfranhey.com.

How The Natural Hair Movement has begun to take off offline

While the natural hair movement has its base online, many non-profit organizations have been mobilizing Black women around these issues. Organizations such as Black Women for Wellness, West Harlem Environmental Action Inc. (WEACT), and the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health have been helping continue the dialogue offline and communicating about hair. These three organizations have each focused on organizing around Black women and hair: Black Women for Wellness and WEACT have been mainly organizing to reduce the presence of toxic chemicals in hair products marketed towards the Black community, whereas the Arthur Ashe Institute has focused on creating salon-based health education programs. I will briefly detail what each organization has done in relation to the natural hair movement.

Black Women for Wellness

Black Women for Wellness is a non-profit community-based organization that is located in South Los Angeles. The mission of the organization is to “commit to the well-being of Black women and girls by building healthy communities through health

¹⁶³ Interview with Francheska Medina, conducted on February 3, 2013.

education, empowerment, and advocacy.”¹⁶⁴ Black Women for Wellness has two established programs: Green Chemistry and the Salon Workers initiative. The Green Chemistry program is managed by Nourbese Flint, which is working to create statewide policy that recognizes toxic chemicals as toxic and working to remove these chemicals from all products. The Green Chemistry project also teaches people how to read labels and avoid purchasing products that contain a high level of toxic chemicals. The salon workers initiative is the program that I was working on two summers ago; it involves helping African-American salon workers protect themselves from being exposed to harmful chemicals on the job. While the organization does not condemn non-natural hairstyling, both programs are seeking to make salon workers and their clients more “green,” or using less chemicals in hair products and procedures. For more information, please visit their website www.bwwla.com.

WEACT

WEACT is a non-profit community-based organization dedicated to “build healthy communities by assuring that people of color and/or low-income participate meaningfully in the creation of sound and fair environmental health and protection policies and practices.”¹⁶⁵ Similar to the Green Chemistry project, WEACT has two projects that are about accessing and using products that have little to no toxic chemicals in them. The two campaigns are called Safer Chemicals Healthy Families campaign and the Ethnic Personal Care Products campaign. I had the opportunity to speak with Ogonnaya Newman, the director of Environmental Health when I was in New York City. Ogonnaya explained to me how much of the WEACT agenda is about health education, financing, and policy change. Newman also noted that WEACT has done outreach around hair care products, but not so much offline organizing around the issue. WEACT primarily undertakes research and outreach via email to their network and to other allies such as Black Women for Wellness. For more information on WEACT, please visit www.weact.org.

¹⁶⁴ Black Women for Wellness Mission Statement, <http://www.bwwla.com/index.php/about-us/mission-key-facts>.

¹⁶⁵ WEACT Mission Statement, <http://www.weact.org/>

Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health

Unlike Black Women for Wellness and WEACT, the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health focuses on creating health education in hair salons in New York City. While I was in New York City, I also had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Marilyn Fraser-White, one of the primary persons responsible for the implementation of the project. Dr. Fraser-White along with Dr. Ruth Brown (founder of the program) wanted to replicate the program in New York after reading about its success in a salon in California. Stylists are trained for three hours about a specific health topic and talking to clients about health. Then, stylists talk with their clients about health issues as they are doing their hair. Annually, Dr. White estimated that about 300 stylists from different salons in New York City are involved with the salon health education program. Another model that the Institute is using is the Black Pearls program. This program is utilizing community health outreach and promotion in the salons by giving salons a videotape that stylists play for their clients about a health topic. At the end, stylists give clients brochures and other health information. For more information on Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health salon-based programs, please visit

www.arthurasheinstitute.org/arthurashe/programs/salon/.

Findings

“We have been conditioned to change our natural state that we have adopted that our hair is not beautiful. It’s like if Asian women were all getting perms at nine years old, it would be to communicate to the world that you don’t consider it to be beautiful, so its not beautiful. It starts with us. Come on, we’ve lightened our skin, straightened our hair, thinned our noses. I believe it all started with our skin tones...” – Cheryl Ross*¹⁶⁶

I spent three months interviewing forty seven Black women from Los Angeles and New York City about their “hair stories” to see how Black women from both coasts think about their hair. Once I had collected my research, I immediately created a table with all the results from my interviews. By creating a table of my results, I was able to code for every single interview question so that I could have a hard set of quantifiable data. Originally, I had set out to interview about ten to twenty Black women, but I realized that I needed a larger sample size in order to support my claims. Since I was successfully able to convert qualitative data into quantitative data, I could show how many Black women are truly affected by hair issues. I separated my findings based on how I structured my interviews; there are six major parts to my table: demographics, hair styling, products and toxicity, hair blogs, sociological/hair stories, and the natural hair movement. I am analyzing my findings within each section. I have attached the table in Appendix 2.

Demographics

“What I find beautiful may not be what society finds to be beautiful. Where you grew up influences what you look for in beauty.” – Mika Cribbs

Black women between the ages of 18-40 years old were the target demographic group for this project. I specifically chose to include only Black women instead of Black men in this research because of how women have been negatively impacted by social constructions of beauty in the United States. While these criterions of beauty were (and are still) constructed to reflect a European standard of beauty, they have, without a doubt, profoundly affected the self-esteem of Black women more than Black males. This is not

¹⁶⁶ This participant requested a pseudonym.

to say that Black males do not have body image issues, because they have also been negatively affected by these standards.

Although I opened my interviews up to Black women between the ages of 18-40 years old, I ended up primarily interviewing younger women. The most reported age of my interviewees was between 19 to 22 years old. Therefore, I believe the answers I received could have been different had I interviewed more older women. I was limited in this respect to older women, who may not be involved with social media. However, I did get to interview a good amount of women who were older than 22 years old, but the majority fell in this range. This could be because I used the snowball effect to garner more interviews on campus.

Besides age, I wanted to look at where my interviewees were born and raised. I believe that place does matter, and people may have different standards of beauty based on geographical location. Additionally, climate plays a large role in the decision for someone to wear his or her hair in a certain way. For example, if an interviewee lives somewhere humid, they may be less inclined to straighten their hair frequently.

Where the Participants were from

The majority of my interviewees reported being born on either the East coast or the West coast; the numbers were very close, 23 participants were from the East coast and 21 participants were from the West coast. Four of my participants were from the Midwest or from the Southwest. Two of my participants were originally born in Sierra Leone, but one lives on the East Coast and the other lives on the West Coast now. Although the interviewees came from across the country, I separated them in two groups based on where I interviewed them: Los Angeles and New York.

24 of my interviewees currently live in Los Angeles for work or for school, 16 live in New York, 3 live in New Jersey, 2 live in San Francisco, and 1 lives in Sacramento. Out of the 16 participants that live in New York, the majority currently live

in Brooklyn. I saw many women in Brooklyn wearing different natural hairstyles while I was walking down the street. As one of my participants, *Cynthia Smith¹⁶⁷, 20 from Brooklyn, NY noted, “In New York, being natural is not an issue. People are more open to being out of the box. Difference is nothing because everyone is different.” Participants from other major cities did not share the same experiences as Cynthia. However, I did notice that more participants have slowly began to embrace going natural. Sheranne Jackson, 20 from Los Angeles, CA noted that she has started to utilize resources in her community such as shopping at Simply Wholesome and using more naturally based products since going natural.

I asked my interviewees to classify their neighborhood as either urban, suburban, or rural. For the purpose of my interviews, urban is being defined as any major metropolis and a suburban environment is a residential community outside of a metropolis or urban area. A rural neighborhood is a community outside of a city or town. 21 respondents were raised in an urban community, and 15 respondents were raised in a suburban community. It was also interesting to note that some people categorized where they live as urban and suburban; this would mean they lived in an urban city but within a suburban neighborhood within the city (ex. Beverly Hills). 11 people identified themselves as living in a community that was urban and suburban. Two people noted that they lived in a rural community.

How Racial and Gender Identities affect hair

I also wanted to know how my participants self-identify themselves racially. Most participants identified themselves as Black, African-American, or mixed heritage. Other identity groups included were Black/African American (they used both interchangeably), person of the African Diaspora, mixed (biracial), or multiracial. The most reported ethnicity was West Indian. Some biracial people identified by multi-ethnicities but also identified racially as Black or African-American. Additionally, I asked my participants if they believed that race and gender affects the way they wear their hair. 78% of my

¹⁶⁷ This participant requested a pseudonym.

respondents believed that race affected the way they wore their hair, and 85% of my respondents believed that gender also affected the way they wore their hair.

Products and Hair Regimen

“A regimen is anything you do with patience, consistency, and love.” – Felicia Leatherwood

I asked my participants what hair products they use as well as the different ways that Black women take care of their hair. I started by asking participants if they did their own hair or went to a stylist. The majority of my participants reported that they do their own hair, but that they go to a stylist for touch ups or for a trim. Five people reported getting their hair done at a salon or barbershop. Out of these five participants, they reported going to the same stylist for five or seven years. This shows the trust that Black women have in their stylist to consistently go to the same person for this many years.

Additionally, I was curious to know what hairstyles my participants have had in the past. Among 47 participants, there were 30 different hairstyles reported. The most popular hairstyles were braids, press/hot comb (flat iron), perm/relaxer, or weaves/extensions. What is interesting to note is that three out of the four styles are all non-natural styles. As noted by one of my participants, Maureen Aladin, in her 30s from Brooklyn, NY, “going natural is just as much work as getting a perm, but we’ve conformed to it.”

Another participant, Khloe Warren*¹⁶⁸, 34, from Newark, NJ also commented, “the perm became a substitution on how to care of our hair. You got a perm, it was straight, and manageable. When I went to a Dominican hair stylist, she said that I had no idea how to take care of my hair.” All four styles also have labor implications: they are labor intensive and heat based procedures. Time wise, it takes hours to perfect the styles, particularly braids. The most popular natural styles on the list were braids, twists, locs,

¹⁶⁸ This participant requested a pseudonym.

and cornrows. Jazzy Hulett, 19 from San Francisco, CA has locs and commented how many people find her hair regimen to be difficult. However, she comments, “ People always ask me because I wear locs if I don’t wash my hair. I do things the same, but my daily routine is different than yours.”

Product Preferences

“My products are 98% natural.” – Alyssa Baylor

There were 91 different products that were reported as being used on a daily basis. The top five products were: Shea Moisture, coconut oil, Carol’s Daughter, Olive Oil product, and raw Shea butter. Other products that were popular were Wen, Tresseme, Cantu Shea Butter, and essential oils (specifically jojoba, Moroccan, and Pure Vitamin E oils). Since the products mentioned above are widely considered to be natural products, I wanted to see if my participants could identify any toxic ingredients in the products that they use. Often times products are often marketed as “natural” or “organic,” when in reality, they are not. I wanted to see if the interviewees were proactive consumers or if they were misinformed about what goes into the products that they use.

71% of my respondents said they could list some of the ingredients in the products they use. However, some people read the ingredients directly off their product labels or used Google on their phones to see what was in their hair products. I believe this number would be significantly lower had this not occurred and participants only responded with the information they knew off the top of their heads. Only 15% of participants could identify or recognize toxic ingredients in these products.

Thirteen participants reported being influenced to buy products by reading online reviews and taking into account word of mouth. Eight participants noted that they only rely on their stylist’s recommendations. Again, it was interesting to note how seriously Black women regard their stylist’s opinions.

Emotional and Physical Health Impacts

When talking about how the participants have experienced emotional or physical health impacts due to how they care for their hair, the most reported impacts were breakage, dryness, and depression/frustration. Alyssa Baylor, 22 from Brooklyn, NY stated, “I thought that my natural hair was ugly and unmanageable even though my parents always told me my hair was beautiful.” Similarly, Serita Robinson, 22 from Albuquerque, NM commented, “I did the Big Chop and it was too much breakage. It was really stressful, I had to cut my hair to two inches. I didn’t know how to care for my hair. It was stressful to have short hair.”

Considering how widely felt these hair problems amongst my participants, it was no shock that 84% of participants said they have been on a natural hair blog or a video log to find alternative solutions to reducing breakage, dryness, and help with feeling less frustrated about hair. However, some participants such as Khloe Warren*¹⁶⁹, 34 from Newark, NJ noted the importance of not making hair a painful experience. She noted, “What is hair? Dead skin cells. I don’t speak that natural hair language, the Big Chop. I don’t like the subculture of natural hair, they are expectations. It should be normal hair talk, not hair pain.” Many of these hair blogs are working towards turning hair pain into hair empowerment. Hair blogs provide information on how to solve many hair issues and provide a virtual community. As noted by Mika Cribbs, 18 from San Gabriel, CA, “if I didn’t have the Internet, then I would still relax my hair. I couldn’t learn about other styles, maintenance, or products without the Internet.”

Blogs

Apart from doing sporadic Google searches or using YouTube suggested videos, the three most popular hair blogs were Curly Nikki, Black Girl Long Hair, and Hey Fran Hey. When asked if going on these hair blogs was helpful in maintaining their hair, 39 participants said going on hair blogs has definitely been helpful in maintaining their hair.

¹⁶⁹ This participant requested a pseudonym.

Melissa McIntosh, 21, from Los Angeles, CA noted that “YouTube and reading hair blogs helped my hair grow back and retain my length.” Other participants noted that following hair blogs has also helped gain their confidence. Sheranne Jackson, 20 from Los Angeles, CA noted “It’s given me pride with my hair and how to take care of it and manage it as well. I also refer my younger sister to tutorials, so now she feels more comfortable with her hair.”

Another participant, Brandi Locke, 21 from Bronx, NY noted that she felt stressed out by her tedious hair process --- she would spend up to five hours getting her hair relaxed because she thought it would be easier to take care of. As Brandi noted, “I thought this was a process that I had to go through because mixed hair has to be a certain way. After seeing videos on YouTube, I started wearing my hair more natural.” Celine Joseph, 20, from Brooklyn, NY commented, “I wasn’t born knowing this knowledge.” For many people, these hair blogs are incredibly important spaces to acquire not only information, but also support in the process of going natural. As noted by Cynthia Smith*¹⁷⁰, 20 from Brooklyn, NY, “it’s good to get support that is online, because not everyone understands your hair.” Additionally, Alyssa Baylor, 22 from Brooklyn, NY commented, “ten years ago when I was in high school, there wasn’t anywhere to talk about Black hair.”

42 participants said that they believed that hair blogs fostered community between Black women, even if they had never visited an online hair blog. I had the opportunity to interview hair blogger Hey Fran Hey. She mentioned that she realized there was a serious need for blogs about fitness, do-it-yourself products, nutrition, and hair tutorials. To ameliorate this void, she incorporated all these elements into her hair blog, heyfranhey.com. Hey Fran Hey also spoke about the feeling of community that is created on hair blogs. She noted, “it’s been like a community, everyone supports and pushes one another...I’m so humbled that people trust me to create this community of trust and support.” Hey Fran Hey also mentioned how people are inspired by examples, and that with social media, people can “see the change right there in front of their eyes.” As Ella

¹⁷⁰ This participant requested a pseudonym.

Turenne, 39, from New York, NY noted, “Women [on natural hair blogs] are showing us how versatile our hair can be.”

Natural hair guru Felicia Leatherwood also noted that the community of natural hair has also spurred a group of young Black female entrepreneurs. As noted by Felicia, “people are making products at home and creating self-made businesses. I love that African American women are becoming more entrepreneurial because of natural hair. I really appreciate the bloggers and YouTube to be able to do that, to show different hairstyles and how to start them; I think it’s excellent.” To echo that statement, Veronica Jones*¹⁷¹, 21, from Washington Heights, NY stated, “It’s kind of like a hair support group. There are not a lot of resources or popular mainstream blogs for women with natural hair that are mainstream. You’ll never see natural hair styles in Cosmo.”

Additionally, it was interesting to note that it was equally easy or difficult for participants to find information on their hair texture on a hair blog. Some factors that attributed to this were that there are hundreds of natural hair blogs but no central hub to find this information. As Serita Robinson, 22 from Albuquerque, NM commented, “there’s not a ton of information out there that is more easily accessible. The information is spread out in so many places, there is no hub so things contradict. I can’t read Elle and look for useful hair tips.” On the other hand, some participants also noted that it was possible to find information about their hair texture: it was just a matter of patience. Yelka Kamara, 23 from Jackson Heights, NY said “you just really need to look, it’s just a matter of looking, dedication, and doing your research.”

Sociological Perspective/Hair Stories

“Even though India.Arie has that song, ‘I Am Not My Hair,’ sometimes, hair is everything.” – Krissy Leahy

I decided to place the sociological questions later in the interview so that interviewees would feel more comfortable opening up to me. If I had placed the questions at the beginning of the interview, then it could have triggered a negative psychological reaction -- which I tried to avoid as much as possible. The first question I asked in this

¹⁷¹ This participant requested a pseudonym.

section was what did my participants believe was the societal standard of beauty and if they believed they fit into that standard. I did not define which standard I was referring to, so it would be open to interpretation by participants. This led people to draw from both White and Black standards of beauty. Even though participants drew from both standards of beauty, the majority of participants still said that the societal standard of beauty was: light skinned, straight hair, long hair, skinny, curves, Blonde, white, tall, thin, and White beauty.

Gabbi Ncube, 19 from Tempe, AZ stated that “[my sister and I] were literally fascinated by straight hair. My mom has straight hair with blue eyes.” Other participants such as Koryeah Cobbs, 19 from Denver, CO also noted the desire to have long hair. Koryeah commented, “In high school, I felt very uncomfortable. I never wanted to wear my hair out [natural] because I had a predominantly white lifestyle, and I always noticed race immediately. I went to a small high school: there were 110 people in my class, and I was the only black girl in all of my high school. Braids were the only way to get long hair. I would be upset that I had to take out my braids. I thought that was the only way of being beautiful.” Similar to Koryeah, Brandi Locke, 21, from Bronx spoke about long hair. She noted, “I could never cut my hair, long hair is part of my identity. Older women look better with it.”

Other participants such as Jazzy Hulett, 19 from San Francisco, CA said “when you see white skinny girls with long blonde or brunette hair, it would upset me that my hair didn’t grow long. I always wanted to be like those girls with long hair, specifically to have their hair (more so with the length).” As Cynthia Smith*¹⁷², 20 from Brooklyn, NY noted, “long hair is considered beautiful across all races. The idea is that ‘you are only as beautiful as your hair.’ We are told that and it impacts our relationships.” Based on the data, it is clear that Black women are receiving messages from the media and are internalizing these ideas that White beauty is the preferred or most desirable type of beauty. This data was a bit shocking because I thought more respondents would list Black

¹⁷² This participant requested a pseudonym.

beauties such as Beyoncé or Halle Berry. Again, those women also have many of the qualities that are listed above.

Do You Believe You Fit into the Standard of Beauty?

42 participants stated that they did not fit into the standard. Only 1 person stated that she did fit into the standard in some ways because she has a lighter skin complexion, light eyes, straight hair, and is thin. However, she also felt that she was not beautiful by Black standards. When I asked if my participants felt pressured to fit into these standards (White or Black), 48% of participants said they still felt pressured to fit into the standard while 23% said they felt pressure in the past, but no longer feel the current need to fit into the standard. Most of the people who stated they feel no pressure were the older participants (30 years and older), whereas the younger participants felt the pressure to be beautiful by societal standards. I wanted to categorize these pressures into three main categories: self-pressure, familial and friend pressure, and societal pressures.

Self-perception about 'Good' Hair versus 'Bad' Hair

When I asked the participants what they considered to be beautiful hair, the seven most reported answers were: healthy hair, shiny hair, hair that is appreciated by their owner, their natural hair texture, hair that is groomed, curly hair, and hair that compliments one's face. These answers were race neutral and reflective of a more generalized observation of healthy looking hair. Allie Brown, 22 from Oakland, CA noted "What works on the person and their confidence level with the hairstyle is what makes hair beautiful." As Melissa McIntosh, 21 from Los Angeles, CA noted, "you can tell when hair is loved and nurtured."

When I asked participants what they considered to be ugly hair, overwhelmingly most people stated that there was no such thing. Other popular answers were damaged hair, dry/brittle hair, they wouldn't use the word ugly to describe hair, hair that is not

manicured or taken care of, unhealthy hair, and stringy hair. Again, these answers were race neutral. It was interesting to note that even though participants could clearly define societal standards of beauty, they did not feel that their own hair is ugly or the need to classify other hair textures as ugly. These responses most sharply differed when I asked the participants what does their family and friends consider to be beautiful and ugly hair, as well as what does society consider to be beautiful or ugly hair.

Family, Friends, and Significant Others about 'Good' vs. 'Bad' hair

Participants identified what their family and friends considered to be beautiful hair. This was in order of the most reported qualities to having beautiful hair: straight hair, natural hair, long hair, healthy hair, stylized locs, curly lion hair, and biracial hair. Manna Selassie, 20 from Trenton, NJ also noted the pressures to have long, straight hair from her friends and family members. Manna notes, “people said I would have more potential to be beautiful if I straightened my hair.” Others also noted that even if the pressure to have straight hair was not explicitly implied by family members, that they still felt the pressures to have straight hair. Mika Cribbs, 18, from San Gabriel, CA commented, “I always wanted to look like my mom, she’s Asian. I always wanted that long straight hair. Mixed hair is so difficult.”

While hair preference varied by family or friend circles, it was still important to note that straight hair and long hair were stated to be more preferred than healthy hair by a significant amount of people. As Veronica Jones*¹⁷³, 21, from Washington Heights, NY stated, “Beauty comes in all shapes and sizes, but I usually identify beauty with a certain look. In my family, that look is straight, silky, smooth long hair. I can read beauty as Afros, but I can’t read it in the same sense.... You have to qualify that beauty versus someone with ‘normal’ hair.” Similar to that response, Maya Morales, 20, from Worcester, MA stated, “My younger sister has long, wavy, almost straight hair and I have more of a curly frizzy fro hair texture. My family says that both of our hair is beautiful, but my sister has hair more like my Latina family than I do. When we go to

¹⁷³ This participant requested a pseudonym.

parties with our Latina half of the family, she gets more compliments on her hair than I do. It's the same when I visit my Black family.”

Even apart from family, significant others such as friends and boyfriends can play a huge role in how Black women think about their hair. Janel Booker, 20 from Waukegan, IL stated, “my boyfriend doesn't like my hair natural. If it's been more than three to four days with my hair natural, then he will tell me that there's no reason for it: that it's just not natural. He has even offered to take me to the salon to have my hair straightened.” Other participants such as Sumayyah Shabazz, 19, from Manhattan Beach, CA stated, “I think it really depends on how much of a deal is in your household. I grew up with not so ignorant views about hair textures.”

Beautiful hair had more racialized responses; a preference for “curly lion hair” or the big curly fro that is associated with having biracial hair was also noted. As Alyssa Baylor, 22, from Brooklyn, NY noted “a certain type of natural hair is considered beautiful, like Tracee Ellis Ross' hair.” Tracee Ellis Ross has large, voluminous curls, which is similar to what participants identified as “curly lion hair.” While having curly, biracial hair was not as preferred to straight hair, this was the first coded response that also had to do with racial or ethnic heritage.

When asked to define ugly hair, participants stated their family and friends believed that ugly hair was unhealthy hair, weaves/extensions, damaged hair, or untamed hair. This was one question that most people did not feel comfortable answering, presumably because no one wanted to think their family or friends would classify their hair as ugly. As Alex LaRosa, 22 from Simi Valley, CA noted, “I think it's rough when people don't say something is beautiful, but then they don't say it's ugly. I try to find the beauty in all things.” Again, while standards of beauty differ for each family, the desire for straight hair is still very present. Ironically, while straight hair is the preference, weaves/ hair extensions were seen as unattractive. I then had to raise the question: How does one obtain the look of straight hair without altering their hair? If unhealthy hair (fried from heat damage) and weaves are undesirable, then how could any of my

participants achieve hair that is deemed beautiful in the eyes of society? The pressure to have straightened hair was incredibly high: 18 people responded that their family found straight hair to be beautiful.

Societal Beliefs of 'Good' vs. 'Bad' Hair

When asked to define beautiful hair based on societal preference, the top seven responses were: straight hair, long hair, wavy hair, silky hair, curly (but contained) hair, Blonde, Tracee Ellis Ross, and Kim Kardashian's hair. Again, there was a clear ability to note a preference for straight hair and for White beauty. The top four answers are reflective of a more European aesthetic, versus the aesthetic that most Black women look like. As Nikki Edenedo, 21, from San Fernando Valley, CA stated, "If hair is not straight and long, then any other type of hair is not seen as beautiful." Ogonnaya Newman, 31 from Santa Rosa, CA also noted "we are moving towards everyone being the same: ethnically ambiguous, but more European looking. Look at popular urban culture. They want you to be 'Black,' but not Black." Allie Brown, 22, from Oakland, CA noted that while society considers hair like Tracee Ellis Ross curls and Beyoncé's hair to beautiful, that these standards are changing. She also commented, "people still want big boobs, big ass, and in a way, that is still black is beautiful. It will always be subliminal."

However, it was interesting to note that Tracee Ellis Ross, Diana Ross' daughter made the list as well as Kim Kardashian. Both women are not White and non-traditional beauties, but their look still reflects the societal norm. As Ogonnaya Newman, 31 from Santa Rosa, CA noted, "constructs shape how we do things." Tracee Ellis Ross has large, luscious, contained curls and Kim Kardashian has straight, silky, long hair. Again, these responses were racialized. It was clear that what is considered to be ugly hair has covert racial meanings.

Participants noted that ugly hair was: nappy and frizzy, natural hair, kinky hair, coarse hair, super short hair, braids, or hard to manage. As Cynthia Smith*¹⁷⁴, 20, from Brooklyn, NY noted, "Standards are made to make people less intimidating, to control

¹⁷⁴ This participant requested a pseudonym.

people, and to make people look the same. Look at TV and clothes: whiteness is the norm, and if you're not white, then you're not normal." These are all adjectives that have been used historically to define Black hair as unattractive or ugly. It also was clear that my participants were clearly receiving messages from society that Black hair is ugly. This was a very racialized response, and shows that the stigma of having "Black" hair still holds weight and significance, even in 2013.

Categorizing and Constructing Hair Types

Then, I asked my interviewees how they felt when I was asking them to construct or categorize hair types as beautiful hair or ugly hair. I also asked them how they felt when people use the terms "good hair" or "bad hair." An overwhelming 89% of participants did not believe that people should categorize or construct hair types as "good" or "bad." As Maureen Aladin, 30s from Brooklyn, NY succinctly put it, "good hair is healthy hair."

Other participants spoke about the long lasting traumas of categorizing hair. As Ella Turenne, 38, from New York City, NY stated "categorizing hair textures is incredibly destructive in the Black community. It was a tool used to put people in their place: 'house slave' versus 'field slave' translated into 'nappy' and 'kinky' hair, which are socially placed and stigmatized. There is emotional trauma because of labels. We need to place people. We haven't done it to ourselves, but it has stuck with us for a long time." Similarly, Yelka Kamara, 22 from Washington Heights, NY noted "it's not something that you forget easily, it's something that's engrained...people even choose their spouses over hair type." Other participants such as Nikki Edenedo, 21 from San Fernando Valley, CA noted "how can you have good hair or bad hair? If you have hair growing out of your head, how can one party deem you as less presentable or less desirable than other groups who have different hair? You can't homogenize every culture, every standard of beauty into one little niche and make people want to conform. It's not the way it works, you have to be aware of the other type of people out there.

African-American males and beauty standards

I asked if there are different standards of beauty for African-American males, or in other words, do African American males face the same pressures to have “beautiful” hair that women do? The responses were varied. As Cynthia Smith*¹⁷⁵, 20 from Brooklyn, NY said “If I had only short hair all day, this wouldn’t be a problem.” Similar to Cynthia*, Riana King, 21, from Folsom, CA noted, “the standard for male beauty is different. It’s not looked down upon as women with other hair textures.” Allie Brown, 22, from Oakland, CA noted that “Black males do not have the same freedom that we do, most have fades, not too many are in dreads. I can come to work with different hair styles, men have to have short hair and keep it close to their scalp.”

However, other respondents such as Yelka Kamara, 22, from Jackson Heights, NY stated, “Black men are obsessed with having ‘waves.’ What are waves? Does our natural hair have waves? They carry the brush around to impress significant others, since attraction is based on if they have good hair.” In addition, Maya Morales, 20, from Worcester, MA stated, “no hair is good hair for Black men. You don’t see hair texture unless you’re mixed and black, and then you see the curls.” Similarly, Ella Turenne, 39, from New York City, NY stated that “my brother was more obsessed with hair than I was.” Some participants spoke about black men and beauty standards in the workplace. Participants such as Melissa McIntosh, 21, from Los Angeles, CA commented, “dreads and a suit don’t match.” Nonetheless, the responses were equally split: 15 participants agreed that Black men face the same pressures and 15 participants disagreed that they face any pressures to be beautiful.

Gender roles expressed in hair

I also asked my interviewees if they believed that gender roles were expressed in hair. This means that a feminine expression of hair would be to have longer hair, and a masculine expression of hair would be to have shorter hair. 79% of my participants said

¹⁷⁵ This participant requested a pseudonym.

gender roles are expressed in hair, but noted that these roles are changing. Some respondents also stated that gender roles in relation to hair are not the same in the Black community. As Ella Turenne, 39, from New York City, NY stated, “it is more acceptable for women to have a shaved head than a man with long hair. Long hair questioned sexuality.” Many people said that long dreadlocks on a man are not seen as feminine, and likewise, short pixie cuts or women with baldheads such as Halle Berry and Amber Rose are still seen as feminine.

However, some responses argued that gender roles are still very much traditional when relating to hair. Ayana Foster, 20, from Oakland, CA stated, “Men don’t see having short hair as being a woman.” Danielle Greirson, 21 from New York City, NY also stated, “gender roles are predicated on whiteness, because to be feminine is to be white. White women have long silky hair, and they have the same right to assert what is beautiful because of that.”

The Bluest Eye

“...Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world” (Morrison, 62).

I included a free response question that was based on the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. The plot deals with a young Black girl with dark skin and kinky hair who intensely desires blue eyes so she can feel beautiful. I gave a preliminary summary of the book and what part of the story this quote was extracted from. Then, I asked people to tell me how they felt about the quote listed above in bold text. Some of the responses were very poignant and moving:

“We have changed language around beauty but if nothing changes mentally, we will still run into the same issues.” – Cynthia Smith*¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ This participant requested a pseudonym.

“It wasn’t so much the doll, but the impression on her psyche and her identity is expressed... everything else that the world tells that child is expressed through the doll.”
– Alyssa Baylor

“These are messages sent to us by people over time; we can eliminate dolls but can’t escape how Mom tugged at my hair and that feeling.” – Ella Turenne

“The doll is easy to destroy, but these images of beauty are so deeply engrained. My grandmother grew up in a time when it wasn’t ok to be Black, and [society] made being as White as possible to get by [the norm]. These ideas were passed on by generations: “good hair” equals straight hair and natural hair got throwback.” – Serita Robinson

“It’s about recognizing difference in attractiveness. All people go through it, men even go through it. It’s a process of how you appear and where you fall in the eyes of the other. Some people just win the genetic lottery. You can let the Maureen’s of the world be a big weight on you, or you can find what is special about you.” – Khloe Warren*¹⁷⁷

“You can break the doll, but you can’t escape your family. If your family doesn’t think you’re beautiful, it can really affect you. Positivity, especially for little girls, really affects you. You are able to break the doll, but you can’t break what your family says is beautiful...that stays with you all the time. This happens a lot in families of color, not just black families.” – Allie Brown

“It makes sense. The way we are socialized to think about hair (dolls, toys, TV, social media) is just one facet of it, and we hear it from young ages from our parents and peers. And the pressure to fit in is really strong. Really really strong. I hated straightening my hair when I was little. It hurt.” – Veronica Jones*¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ This participant requested a pseudonym.

¹⁷⁸ This participant requested a pseudonym.

From these responses, it was clear that young black girls can easily pick up on societal preferences for lighter skin and straighter hair textures. The responses from my participants mirrored the earlier remarks about familial and societal pressures to fit into the standard of beauty. Although this question was based off the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, many participants were triggered by the quote and ended up reminiscing on childhood memories, where they were made to feel like Pecola Breedlove. As Yelka Kamara, 23 from Jackson Heights, NY stated, “there is an internal struggle with natural hair. As strong as we are, we can’t ignore how other people think and feel about our image. I know natural hair is beautiful because it’s my true self, but there is a societal value that is constantly telling you otherwise. You can’t shut them out, they’re constantly there.” Other participants were made to feel like Maureen Peal. As Alex La Rosa, 22, from Simi Valley, CA noted, “I am nervous that I am that light skinned girl because of the privilege that I have.”

Perceptions of Beauty

After hearing these responses, I wanted to see how these social norms affected my participant’s self-esteem. I asked the question: Do you believe you are beautiful? 96% believed that they were beautiful. I then asked my participants if they believed that others find them to be beautiful. 96% answered that others did find them to be beautiful. I thought this was a high percentage considering how clear in their previous responses that White beauty is recognized as beautiful. However, it made me extremely happy to see that despite these norms, Black women have developed a strong sense of worth and self-esteem about themselves even though they are outside of the norms of what is considered to be beautiful.

Association between skin color and hair texture

One of the major themes in *The Bluest Eye* is colorism: The protagonist Pecola Breedlove is dark skinned and has “bad” hair while the antagonist, Maureen Peal has light skin and “good” hair. *The Bluest Eye* showed the powerful effect on dark skin girls

that being told, “light is right” was detrimental to their self-esteem. Since *Bluest Eye* discusses colorism, I thought it was important to address the issue of colorism in the interview.

I asked if respondents believed that there was an association that exists between skin tone and hair texture: that if you are born with lighter skin, you will automatically have “good” hair, and if you are darker skinned, and you will automatically have “bad” hair. 86% said the association clearly existed within the Black community. Some participants such as Asia Canady, 22, from Sacramento, CA stated, “The association is real, but it’s also ignorant as well. I know a light skin girl with my hair texture, and I grew up with chocolate girls with hair down to her back naturally.” Interestingly enough, participants only spoke about experiencing colorism from within the Black community and not within white society.

As Sumayyah Shabazz, 19 from Manhattan Beach, CA stated, “I feel judged more within my own community. Black guys are way more critical of my hair.” In terms of colorism, participants such as Janel Booker, 20, from Waukegan, IL spoke about how darker skinned girls often times disguise their natural hair. Janel said, “Nappy hair has negative connotations. Kelly Rowland has nappy hair, but she has tracks and still looks nice.” Kelly Rowland is a darker skinned woman, yet she is never seen wearing her natural hair. As Melissa McIntosh also commented, “people with kinkier hair textures are less inclined to be natural because of the stigmas attached to their hair texture.”

Most people shared stories of either being teased for their color because they had a darker complexion or reverse, for having a lighter complexion. As Jazzy Hulett commented, “my family friend is Jesse Williams on Grey’s Anatomy. One time that came up in conversation, and someone told me that ‘light skinned black people with green eyes are the best types.’” Participants overwhelmingly noted that while the association exists, it is simply not true. Many stated that they have seen many exceptions to this such as a girl with lighter complexion having what is considered to be “bad” hair, or a darker girl with “good hair.” In fact, many of my participants were those exceptions,

or have people in their family who contradict this idea. Some people also noted it's all a matter of genetics; it has nothing to do with anything else.

Conscious of skin color and hair texture

Since respondents acknowledged that there was a clear association between skin tone and hair type, I wanted to see where they noticed this association the most. I asked the question: Do you ever feel conscious of your skin color and your hair, and in what contexts or settings is this most apparent for you? Out of 43 participants who answered this question, 86% of women said they were conscious of hair and color. The places they felt most aware of this are at: school, work, people of all race in one setting (usually all White), or all Black settings.

As noted by Uriah Johnson, 21, from the Bronx, NY, "I feel more conscious of my hair at school. I am more comfortable to do what I want with it, because you can define Blackness at Oxy without people trying to impose ideals on you." Other participants such as Yelka Kamara, 22, from Jackson Heights, NY stated that "I feel more conscious about my hair around black people. There is a sense of policing of hair and even policing of what is beautiful in terms of complexion. I feel like you're always being judged." The participants that responded to this question also talked about the pressures of having to blend into work or social environments, and that it can be difficult when their color or hair stands out from the other people in those spaces.

Do successful African- American women have to straighten their hair?

"This is the politics of being a Black girl. My skin color doesn't define me, so why should my hair?" – Asia Canady

When I asked if African-American women with straight hair are viewed as more successful and more attractive than African American women who wore their hair in a non-straightened style, 89% said that this was true. Many respondents noted that prominent Black women in the media such as Michelle Obama, Condoleezza Rice, women in music videos, and other Black women on television all have straight hair.

Koryeah Cobbs, 19 from Denver, Colorado said “There is more privilege based on straightened hair. Look at the Basketball Wives. They have lighter skin, straighter hair. Both the producers and themselves are styled that way so when Black people watch the show, they think ‘wow, they look like that and can get an NBA player.’”

Similar to Koryeah, Maureen Aladin, social media personality noted that “you only see relaxers in the hair of powerful women. The Essence editor-in-chief is going natural, but relaxed hair is in the media and the news. It hasn’t completely changed yet. Michelle Obama would get nasty comments if she went natural. Younger generations are seeing this change, this is the new normal.” However, many people noted that this association was sad and not necessarily valid. Jazzy Hulett, 19, from San Francisco, CA stated, “it has to do with the idea that a woman in a position of power has to conform to the gender norm, which is having ‘typical’ white hair (standard of hair). They already have two strikes against them: being a woman and being black. Look at Michelle Obama. There’s not many women in power with natural hair.”

Some participants also noted that apart from high profile Black women, regular Black women still face these pressures. As Chardonnay Madkins, 20, from Sacramento, CA stated, “Black women go through a phase of being natural during college, but after that, they go right back to pressing their hair. It’s easier for Black women with straight hair to blend in. It’s more about business than hair. White people can’t tell if our hair is a weave or not. They just see that straight hair is like me, and then they can relate to us.”

On the other hand, there were participants that could list many successful Black women who wear their hair naturally. Felicia Leatherwood, a natural hair guru and celebrity hairstylist commented, “Halle Berry isn’t rocking an Afro, but that’s fine. There’s people rocking afros, curly afros, there’s people on TV, who are on commercials, singers...there are a lot of naturalistas! If they’re expecting Beyoncé to roll out with an Afro in more than 2 days, I don’t think that will happen. Her baby has a cute ‘fro though. In terms of successful Black women having to wear their hair straight, it is a myth and an illusion: if you have an excellent job in corporate America, it doesn’t matter. I’ve had

twists, dreads, braids, etc. I always had great jobs, they never had a problem with my hair because it had nothing to do with my work abilities. We gotta get over that insecurity.”

Some also noted that other-non-Black people may view Black women this way, but that this idea of having straight hair to be successful is not true. Others also noted that some Black people feel this way about Black women and again, that’s not fair or true. As Janel Booker, 20, from Waukegan, IL stated, “Black people can’t stand together as a whole to say ‘this is beautiful,’ that who I am naturally is beautiful. When that happens, then things can change. How can we be divided within the world and our own race?” In addition, some respondents claimed that this was largely dependent on the attractiveness of the woman. People such as Solange and India.Aire were referenced as being beautiful but also not ascribing to the standard of having straight hair to be beautiful.

Pressured to straighten hair

I then asked participants if they felt pressured to straighten their hair. Out of 45 participants, 84% felt pressured to straighten their hair mainly by family, school mates, or significant others. Participants shared personal stories about being teased for wearing their natural hair; some stories were more extreme than others. I was curious to see that participants reported having high self-esteem, yet they also reported feeling pressure from dominant society and internally from family, friends, or significant others. I wanted to see when and by whom was participants being affirmed or pressured by.

Praised or Teased for their Hair

I asked if participants had ever been praised for their hair and what did it look like when it was praised. 100% of participants stated that they have been praised, and it was mainly when it was natural, straight, or curly. Although natural hair came before straight hair, most people said this was only most recently but in past, they were mainly praised for having straight hair. On the other hand, I wanted to see if respondents were teased because of the way their hair looked. 80% reported saying they were teased about how

their hair looked, mainly when it was natural, relaxed (chemically straightened), or in braids. Participants referenced specific childhood memories, but some also talked about reactions in their family to having their hair in a natural style now.

Bell Hooks Quote

“For each of us, getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be White. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is our sign of our desire to be women” (Hooks, 382).

The last question in the sociological section was another free response question. I asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with the quote listed above in bold text. Out of 42 responses, 50% agreed with the quote although there was still a lot of criticism of the quote. Here were some of the responses:

“No one says a white girl is trying to be black when she takes a curling rod to her head.”
– Sumayyah Shabazz

“ I think its biased, not everyone feels that way: it’s her quest. I believe being a woman is being naturally who you are; not everyone wants to straighten their hair.” – Jessica Simon

“Traditional expectation that Black women have to do something with hair to make it presentable.” – Alyssa Baylor

“What is she equating womanness too? Straight hair? It’s sad that straight hair is closer to womanhood.” – Maureen Aladin

“Black people [straighten hair] more for whiteness to be praised. Straightening hair is a rite of passage, and sharing stories is a way of affirming Blackness. For example, saying,

‘it took three hours’ to get my hair straightened shows the effort it took do my hair like that.” – Ayana Foster

“It’s a part of the process of appearing feminine and buying into what that means.” – Brandi Locke

“The reason for a person to straighten their hair is to look pretty, but to look pretty in a White context. No one consciously thinks that, but then why is it that more people don’t grow out fros?” – Chardonnay Madkins

“For women in general, hair is an accessory; women have the right to do with it as they please. There is a notion that straight hair is emulating Whiteness, but in my case, it was easier to manage straightened.” – Mika Cribbs

“This is a very gendered quote; Black women are made to feel that to be a woman or of a certain stature is to straighten your hair. Why can’t you be a woman with natural hair?” – Alex LaRosa

“I would like to see unprocessed hair as particularly special. Most women in the world are natural. Everyone changes hair, but we had a cultural mandate to put that stuff in our head to change the ways our grows.” – Khloe Warren*¹⁷⁹

“I feel that its missing the point that beautiful and White in America is historically synonymous.” – Sheranne Jackson

“We don’t need to be pressured to be confident. Women want to press their hair and they shouldn’t have a stigma attached to that. Women should be beautiful no matter how they want to wear their hair, and they should be allowed to do that. Hair is just hair, and we

¹⁷⁹ This participant requested a pseudonym.

need to allow women to not make it so heavy and identify who we are because of the texture of our hair. It should just be.” – Cheryl Ross*¹⁸⁰

Similar to the Bluest Eye quote, the participants drew from personal experiences when answering this question. The Bell Hooks quote was where participants had very different stances on the question itself. However, the diversity in responses provided a more well-rounded finding.

Natural Hair and the Natural Hair Movement

“I don’t even remember what my hair looked like before having a relaxer. There’s nothing you can figure out. We’re relearning what our hair is like.” – Gabbi Ncube

The last segment of my interview was about natural hair and the natural hair movement. I wanted to know what images or people came up in respondent’s mind when they think about natural hair. There were 74 different images that were reported. The fifteen most popular images were: Afros, dreads/braided hairstyles/Bantu knots/twists, Black people, Black women, Solange, India.Aire, people like me, Black people at Oxy, women who are smart, confident, and empowered, Angela Davis, freedom, hair bloggers, kinky hair, different textures of natural hair, and Tracee Ellis Ross.

Definition of Natural Hair

I asked participants to define natural hair, which I did not define for them. This time, I received 37 different definitions of natural. The top eleven responses were: no chemicals, your God given hair, no heat, freedom, embracing who you are, little to no product usage, confidence, wearing your hair however your natural hair is and taking care of it, being yourself, beautiful hair, and not straightened hair. It was important to note that there is no one unified definition of natural. I believe this could be why there were so many definitions, some which contradicted other definitions.

¹⁸⁰ This participant requested a pseudonym.

Natural or Not?

When I asked participants if they considered themselves naturals, 45 respondents considered themselves to be natural based on their personal definition. It was also interesting to note that 15% of these respondents said they were both. Participants who noted this said they still flat ironed their hair, but abstained from using chemicals in their hair. I also wanted to see how long they were natural for. Most people who identified as being natural have been natural for 1 year, their whole life, 3 years, 4 years, or 2 years. It was interesting to see that most people that I interviewed had either just went natural or have been natural for a while.

Natural Hair Movement

When I asked participants if they were comfortable with the term *natural hair movement*, 91% of respondents said that they were comfortable using that term. 80% of participants also believed that the natural hair movement was indeed a real movement. As Ella Turenne, 39, from New York City, NY mentioned, “if we call it a movement, it sounds urgent. It makes people pay attention. Movement implies changing, getting coalition by-in around a certain issue. It implies a sense of community, it’s the best result of positive community in healthy, self-affirming ways.” However, some people were uncomfortable using the term *movement* to describe what is going on now with the re-emergence of natural hair. Ayana Foster, 19, from Oakland, CA comments, “I love my hair, I don’t want to be part of the next ‘new’ thing.”

Is Black Hair Political or has it been Politicized by society?

Out of 45 respondents, 42% believed that Black hair is political, whereas 40% believed Black hair has been politicized by society. This was one of the most difficult questions for many people to answer in my interview. Many people cited different reasons for responding in the way that they did. Most people noted despite whatever answer they chose, that it’s only Black women who have their hair constructed in this

way. As Ayana Foster, 19, from Oakland, CA noted, “I don’t feel like part of the natural hair movement. I didn’t want to have a receding hairline, but I also didn’t want to do my hair constantly.”

Overall, all the participants who answered this question believed that the way they choose to wear their hair should not be making a statement. As Uriah Johnson, 21, from the Bronx, NY stated, “When I wear my hair natural, I’m not trying to make a political statement. I’m trying something new or different.” Jazzy Hulett, 19, from San Francisco, CA also commented that, “you can never be just a woman with natural hair.” Other participants noted that it was inorganic and not accidental that Black women have to deal with this issue, that it serves a societal purpose to delineate who is beautiful and who is not. As Alex La Rosa, 22, from Simi Valley, CA noted, “the moment that women feel the need to change their hair to be acknowledged is political.” Additionally, some participants noted that not only was Black hair politicized by the dominant White society, but that within the Black community, hair is still highly politicized.

Is the Natural Hair Movement inclusive?

The following question was geared more specifically to the natural hair movement. I wanted to know if participants believed that the definition of natural and the natural hair movement to be inclusive of all people who self-identify as Black, including but not limited to persons of the African and Caribbean diasporas, biracial or mixed raced individuals, and Afro Latinas. 70% of my respondents believed that the definition of natural and natural hair movement was inclusive. However, many respondents stated that there were some problems within the movement.

These biases were mainly described as dividing natural women by hair texture or by ostracizing women who chose to chemically straighten their hair. As Felicia Leatherwood, natural hair guru commented, “it’s like a pair of black slacks. Everyone has black slacks, but we have different types. Expanding what it means to people, a lot of people have natural hair; it’s new for a lot of people. People with relaxers can be

conscious of their hair too, it makes them think of what they thought of themselves.” To follow up with that, Ella Turenne, 39, from New York City, NY commented, “there is a genuine attempt but we live in a society where there are parameters. Women who are not natural feel excluded just because they don’t have natural hair, doesn’t mean that they’re prescribing to an idea. There’s work to be done to include more women affected by colorism and classism.”

Some mentioned the Twitter hash tags #TeamNatural and #TeamRelaxed which according to some respondents, are reproducing and reaffirming the idea of “good hair” versus “bad hair.” As Ogonnaya Newman, 31 from Santa Rosa, CA noted, “There are people on ‘Team Natural’ but they’re still using parabens. It’s a process, and we haven’t gotten there yet.” Overall, respondents believed that the natural hair movement achieved the goal of being inclusive of all people.

Solange Knowles

The last few questions focused on Solange Knowles, because many of my sources in my literature review were about how she has served as the face of the natural hair movement. However, Solange neither chose nor accepted this role. I wanted to see how my participants felt about Solange being praised and criticized by the natural hair movement.

I asked respondents if they believed if it was fair for Solange Knowles to assume the role as the poster child of the natural hair movement, or if it was a given because she is a Black celebrity. Out of 42 respondents, 50% said that it was fair that Solange has been made into the “face” of the natural hair movement. Many people noted that Solange doesn’t care about the movement or never explicitly asked or agreed to be the face of the movement. As Ella Turenne, 39, from New York City, NY stated, “I don’t want [Solange] to speak for me. She doesn’t mirror my experiences. It’s a burden to her and us.” Additionally, many participants noted that Solange was not the first Black celebrity to go natural, but has been revered as such because her sister, Beyoncé Knowles. Asia

Canady, 22, from Sacramento, CA “everyone needs a face of the movement. Solange wasn’t the first to be in that space – there was Diana Ross, Grace Jones. However, she’s great for bringing this movement into the mainstream and is a good juxtaposition between her and her sister, Beyoncé. Other people could do it, but Solange is ok for now.”

I asked a question about the hair texture classification system as a lead-in to my final question. On many natural hair blogs, there are quizzes that people can take to determine what is their specific hair type, which is deemed by a number or a letter (ex. 4B/4C is my hair texture). Based on the results, the blog will suggest certain products that might be more compatible with a person’s hair texture. Most participants were familiar with the hair texture classification system, although some found the system to be problematic in some ways.

The final question was about Solange being criticized by people within the natural hair movement. Some critics have attacked Solange for saying her hair type is a 4C, when photographically, her hair appears to be that of a 3A/3B texture. 3A/3B is a hair texture most commonly seen and associated with women who are of mixed race or mixed ethnicities. 100% of my respondents agreed that it was unfair for Solange to be criticized by anyone for the way her hair is. As Uriah Johnson, 21, from the Bronx, NY noted, “no one should be able to tell you how you should do your hair.” I ended the interview by asking for final questions, comments, and other people that I could interview. These were the primary findings that I was able to extract from my interviews.

Recommendations

I created the following recommendations based off my findings. After I analyzed my data, I was able to see where there was a need for practical solutions. These recommendations are what I believe could best ameliorate the situation for natural hair in the United States.

1) Products and Toxicity

Solution: Create sections on natural hair blogs that explains how to read product labels.

Only 15% of my participants could identify or recognize toxic ingredients. So far, popular (or identifiable) toxic chemicals are sulfates, alcohol, and parabens that now, many products make sure to label that their product is “sulfate free.” Large scaled corporations are seeing economic responses to demands for natural products, since consumers will not purchase products that have sulfates or parabens in them. Now, companies are taking out these toxic chemicals. Therefore, it is important to keep raising awareness online to influence offline policy such as Toxic Substances Control Act.

Policy Component

Solution: Keep economic pressure on companies to not put hazardous chemicals in products that are targeting people of color.

The Toxic Substance Control Act (TSCA) was “designed to address the hazards related to the introduction of new chemicals into the market.”¹⁸¹ TSCA passed in 1976, yet there are still loopholes in the policy. As noted by Safer Chemicals, Healthy Families: “Over 80,00 chemicals have been on the market and available for use since the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) was enacted in 1976. EPA has required very few of these to be tested for their impacts on human health and the environment.”¹⁸²

In recent years, legislation such as the Safe Chemicals Act have been created to help close the loopholes from TSCA. The Safe Chemicals Acts of 2010 requires chemical

¹⁸¹ Gottlieb, Robert. “Reducing Toxics: A New Approach to Policy and Industrial Decision-making. (1995) 41.

¹⁸² Statistic used from What Is TSCA? <http://www.saferchemicals.org/resources/tsca.html>. Accessed 2 April 2013.

companies to develop and make publicly available basic health and safety information for all chemicals; requiring chemicals to meet a safety standard that protects vulnerable sub-populations, including pregnant women and children; a new program to identify communities that are “hot spots” for toxic chemicals and to take action to reduce exposures.”¹⁸³ Additionally, doing outreach/health education around toxic chemicals offline can be very helpful; this is currently being done at Black Women for Wellness in Los Angeles and West Harlem Environmental Action Inc. (WEACT) in Harlem, New York.

2) *Centrality of blogs/information*

Solution: Bloggers should form caucus groups online so that people can find information that is relevant to them specifically based on hair texture and geographic location. This could help facilitate offline meet ups.

Many of my participants wanted to see a natural hair hub so that they could receive information that was not in contradiction with other blogs. By creating caucus groups online, the information can become more condensed. Many bloggers know one another and often post links to other bloggers’ pages. This could be helpful in facilitating the creation of a natural hair blog center. Additionally, making blogs grouped together by regions can bring women together online who could actually meet each other in person offline.

Another suggestion is to make information on blogs that is more universal or specify what hair textures the blog is catering to. Participants wanted to see more blogs for women with fine textured hair and or naturally straight textures, as well as for multiracial women. These three groups came up the most between participants who felt they could not find information about their hair type online.

3) *Emotional Support*

Solution: Create a guide or booklet with specific strategies for Black women to find support offline in transitioning from processed to natural hair.

¹⁸³ Pulled from Landmark Chemical Legislation Introduced to Protect the health of American Families. <http://www.saferchemicals.org/2010/04/landmark-chemical-legislation-introduced-to-protect-the-health-of-american-families.html>. Accessed 2 April 2013.

48% of my respondents said they felt pressured to fit into societal standards of beauty, mainly by family, friends, and significant others. This booklet would serve as a guide to help women transition and continue being natural offline. Many of the women I spoke to who were natural said they felt pressured by people in their personal lives to straighten their hair. There could also be a guide created for families to help them learn to embrace natural hair, even if that aesthetic is not for them. 89% said that it was not okay to categorize or construct hair types as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ The booklet would not be a mandate for people to go natural; rather it would be used to help work around the individual to rethink the language we use around beauty culture (ex. ‘good’ hair vs. ‘bad’ hair).

4) Destigmatizing natural hair in the workplace

Solution: Showcase trendy styles that can be done with natural hair and that can be worn in the workplace.

86% of participants said they were conscious of hair and color, particularly at school and at work. 84% of respondents also said they felt pressured to straighten hair. Additionally, a staggering 89% of respondents said they believed that African American women are viewed as more successful and attractive with straight hair. If more women felt that they could wear their hair in natural styles in the work place, then they would choose to wear their hair natural. There were some misconceptions that natural hair automatically means unprofessionalism or untamed hair.

However, if women could see trendy styles that can be done with natural hair that are workplace appropriate, then I believe this would change. This is currently being done on natural hair blogs, and now there are more women with natural hair on TV and in the media. With that being said, it is also important that family and friends affirm Black women for natural hair at work and outside of their work environments.

5) Making natural hair blogs accessible to lower income Black women

Solution: Offline community organizations such as BWW, WEACTION, and Arthur Ashe can hold free natural hair workshops.

As I found in my literature review and through my interviews, it is clear that low income Black women are being isolated by the natural hair movement. If community organizations hosted free natural hair workshops, then more Black women could learn about these issues. In the workshops, there could be hair tutorials, showing how to care for hair naturally, finding products in their community that are inexpensive/how to better care for hair, etc. In essence, these workshops are presenting the choice to low income Black women on alternative hairstyles and also less toxic ways to achieve the styles that they would like. On these organization's websites, they could have links to blogs or RSS feed from certain blogs. Organizations then could form partnerships with bloggers in their cities to provide geographically relevant information.

6) *Implementing more Salon health education programs*

Solution: Give health education to Black women in a space that is deemed safe and comfortable and receiving education from someone whom they trust will make them more willing to try alternative solutions to caring for their hair.

Salon health education is one way that Black women can receive education about becoming natural apart from going on hair blogs. This model of education is currently being done at the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health in Brooklyn around various health issues, primarily breast cancer prevention. The inspiration for the salon health education started in California, and since it has been successful in New York City, it is definitely possible for this model to be recreated in salons in other major metropolitan cities.

As noted by Ruth Browne, a physician at the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban health, “historically, beauty salons represent one of the few businesses black women in the United States could start and gain economic independence. In many ways, salons are like places of worship in communities – places of refuge and healing...the relationship between the customer and her stylist is a key factor...Most black women have a regular source of hair care, but not medical care.”¹⁸⁴ Salon health education helps create community buy-in because people are invested in becoming healthier and improving the

¹⁸⁴ Browne, Ruth C. “Most Black Women Have a Regular Source of Hair Care – But Not Medical Care.” (2006) 1.

community. Additionally, “patrons who are either waiting for or receiving services are a captive audience for on-site health education and health-promotion presentations.”¹⁸⁵

While clients are waiting to get their hair done, they can receive other health information. This information does not only have to be about natural hair care: it can also be about eating healthy, exercising, basic preventative health education to reduce harm. This has also been done in barbershops around increasing physical activity to reduce hypertension and was very successful (Linnan et al, 2010). This model can then be used to implement lifestyle changes in health behavior (i.e. getting screened for breast cancer).

Other Recommendations

Apart from the more practical recommendations listed above, ideally I would like to see more avenues of support for Black women who want to go natural. I wanted to think more about how the community on natural hair blogs can be replicated offline. Aside from community organizations, another powerful source is the media. If the media portrayed more Black women with different hairstyles and skin complexions, then a more diverse range of beauty will be represented. I do believe that this could be helpful in developing positive self-esteem and images for young Black girls growing up who see models, actresses, and women in positions of power who look like them.

Additionally, social media pages such as Facebook fan pages can help link Black women together across the world and organize for the creation of more policy interventions. Facebook is also a great way to disseminate knowledge about toxic products, and groups such as Occupy Monsanto frequently post photos or articles about their cause; I believe the same thing can occur for raising awareness around natural hair.

¹⁸⁵ Brown et al. “Assessment of Preventative Health Knowledge and Behaviors of African-American and Afro-Caribbean Women in Urban Settings.” (2006) 1.

Conclusion

“I see it as a journey and it’s not done yet. I’m more comfortable when it happens organically. I’m not experimenting anymore, I can’t care about what others think.” – Ella Turenne

This project found that Black women, regardless of geographical location, age, or occupation are still negatively impacted by the dominant European standard of beauty. While the European standard of beauty in itself is problematic, what is equally damaging is the reproduction of this standard within Black families and by significant others who are holding Black women to an unattainable standard of beauty. This came up in my findings and is something that needs to change immediately. Black women are emotionally and physically suffering for beauty. As documented in my findings, common side effects of straightening hair led to dryness, hair breakage, and feeling depressed and or frustrated by their hair. This conflict is not something new that Black women are now just experiencing: beauty issues have affected us since the year of 1619. That is 394 years of being denigrated and denied the right to be beautiful. There is a real need to incorporate the diverse beauties of Black women, who range from caramel browns to shades of dark mocha. There is a real desire between Black women to celebrate the straight, the kinky, the curly, and the wavy hair textures that grows from our heads.

Fortunately, our healing process is beginning now with the renaissance of the natural hair movement. What this project discovered is that Black women are yearning to be healed and to be affirmed for their natural beauty. Across the world, hair bloggers and subscribers alike are starting this healing process. While this holds true, there is still a gap of more positive and uplifting spaces where Black women can communicate with each other about their hair stories offline. In the future, the next steps have to include a broader audience. The natural hair movement is an empowering space to be in because it feels good to be surrounded by people who are going through the same struggles. However, Black women need the help of other non-Black people to promote this beauty on a larger scale.

More Black women can be featured in fashion advertisement and television shows that look more ethnic, instead of casting the same ethnically ambiguous models and actresses. On a larger scale, beauty companies can spend less money promoting skin lightening creams and hair straighteners, and better allocate that money to researching ways to using chemicals that are not as toxic to our hair or our bodies. It is not too late to change the beauty standard or demand for more organic and healthier products.

As the natural hair movement gains more of a presence, more people have begun to respond positively towards its goal of uniting Black women and uplifting our natural beauty. Now more than ever, there are more Black women on television with natural hair and natural hair products are in major stores such as Target, CVS, and Walgreens. While there is still more work that needs to be done, both on a microscopic and macroscopic level, it appears that society is leaning towards accepting natural beauty to be just as beautiful as the dominant ideals of beauty.

Last Thoughts

This project has been a life changing experience for me. Ever since my research with Black Women for Wellness, I have developed a passion for natural hair as well as a newfound dedication to bringing environmental justice to communities of color. Through the natural hair movement, I have learned how to love my natural hair and to share that joy with everyone that I come across.

Additionally, going natural has proven to be a very profound experience for me and I have met hundreds of naturals in the process of going natural and while conducting this research project. I feel honored to have had the experience to share my story, to learn from other's stories, and to publish this research so that more women can have access to this information that can ultimately empower them and change their lives, as it has mine.

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www.curlynikki.com

www.heyfranhey.com

Appendix 1

General Interview Questions

Demographics:

- What is your name? Age? City of birth? Where do you currently live (apart from Oxy)? Where were you raised? What environment were you raised in (suburbs, rural, urban)?
- How do you identify racially and or ethnically?
- Do you believe your race and or ethnicity affects how you wear your hair?
- Do you believe your gender affects how you wear your hair?

Hair Stylist Questions:

- Do you do your own hair or do you go to a stylist?
- If stylist: how long have you been going to your stylist?
- What procedures do you do to your hair? (i.e. coloring, straightening, trim/cut, etc.)
- What procedures have you done to your hair in the past?
- What products does your stylist use in your hair?

Products and Toxicity:

- What products do you use?
- Can you list any ingredients in the product you use?
- Do you read customer reviews on products online before purchasing products? Do you just go to the store and test a product?
- Have you experienced any physical or emotional health impacts due to how you handle/care for your hair? (i.e. depression, hair breakage, scalp burn, headaches, etc.)
- Would you like to elaborate?

Blogs:

- Have you ever researched how to care for your hair in alternative forms of media such as blogs, online forums, etc?
- If yes: What blogs do you go on?
- How has looking on hair blogs been helpful in maintaining your hair?
- Do you believe alternative forms of media are successful in fostering community between Black women?
- If no: Would you consider looking at hair blogs or video blogs?
- Do you have access to the Internet?
- Do you believe that there is a digital divide?
- Can you easily find information about your hair on these hair blogs?
-

Sociological Perspective/ Hair Story Questions:

- What do you believe is the societal standard of beauty? Do you consider yourself to fit into that standard?
- Do you feel pressured to fit into societal standards of beauty?
- What do you consider to be "beautiful" hair? What do you consider to be "ugly" hair?
- What do people in your family and/or immediate friend circle consider to be "beautiful" or "ugly" hair?
- What does society consider to be "beautiful" or "ugly" hair?
- How do you feel about categorizing or constructing hair types as "beautiful" or "ugly" or "good" hair vs. "bad" hair?
- Do you believe there are different standards for African- American males and beauty? (In other words: Do you think that Black men face the same pressures to have "beautiful" hair as women do? Do you believe Black men face different pressures?)
- Do you believe that gender roles are played out in hair? (ex. Feminine expression of hair = long hair, masculine expression of hair = short hair).
- How do you feel about this quote?: "...dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world." – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
- Do you believe that you are beautiful?
- Do you believe that other people find you to be beautiful?
- What do you believe the association between skin tone (light and dark) and hair type ("good" hair and "bad" hair)?
- Do you ever feel conscious of your color and hair? In what contexts/settings is this most apparent for you?
- Do you believe African-American women with straighter hair are viewed as more attractive, more successful, etc. vs. African-American women with "nappy hair"? (In other words: Do you believe that African-American women with straightened hair gain more privilege and acceptance than African women with non-straightened hair?)
- Have you ever felt pressured to straighten your hair?
- Have you ever been praised for the way your hair looked? Have you ever been teased for the way your hair looked?
- Do you agree or disagree with this quote: "For each of us, getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is our sign of our desire to be women." – Bell Hooks from *Straightening Our Hair*

Natural Hair Movement

- When you hear "natural" hair, what images/what type of people come into mind?
- What does "natural" hair mean to you? (could be definition, lifestyle, etc.)
- Are you "natural?": If you are natural by this definition (abstaining from heat and chemicals).
- If yes: for how long?

- If not: Have you ever considered going “natural”?
- Do you feel comfortable with the term “natural hair movement?”
- Do you believe there is a real movement? If so, what does the “natural hair movement” mean to you?
- If not: Why not?
- Do you believe Black hair is truly political or do you believe that Black hair has been politicized in our society?
- Do you find the definition of natural and the “natural hair movement” to be inclusive of all Black women, or people who identify as Black?
- If identified as mixed: Do you find the natural hair movement to be inclusive of women of mixed race?
- Solange Knowles has been praised by many within the natural hair movement and seen as a positive inspiration/affirmation of natural beauty. Do you believe this is a fair assumption of her role as a Black woman?
- Are you familiar with the different hair types? (1ABC, 2ABC, 3ABC, 4ABC: 4 being the most kinkiest, 1 being the straightest).
- Additionally, Solange Knowles has been criticized by some in the natural hair movement for saying her hair type is 4c when photographically, her hair appears to be more of a 3a/3b texture. Thoughts?
- Do you have any final thoughts?

Specified Interview Questions

I interviewed Black women who I deemed “experts” in the field of natural hair. I asked them separate questions from the ones that I asked the majority of my interviewees. This would account for the difference in answer responses. These women include:

Maureen Aladin, social media personality
 Francheska Medina, “Hey Fran Hey” blogger personality
 Felicia Leatherwood, natural hair guru
 Tomiko Fraser Hines, model and actress
 Marilyn Fraser White MD,
 Oogonaya Newman, ED of West Harlem Environmental Action Inc. (WEACT)
 Shanequa Hammock, playwright of *Kinky Roots* (produced at Occidental College)

Maureen Aladin, social media personality

- 1) What does she do?
- 2) What work does Twelve18media produce?
- 3) What content has Twelve18media produced about the natural hair movement, or natural hair in general?
- 4) What inspired you to get involved with social media?
- 5) In your opinion, in the context of the natural hair movement, how has social media helped encourage health education?
- 6) How have you been empowered by the work you do?

7) How have your followers been empowered by the work you do?

Hey Fran Hey

- 1) Who she is/ What inspired your blogging?
- 2) What do you blog about?
- 3) What has inspired you to blog?
- 4) How did you begin blogging?
- 5) How has running a blog about natural hair and beauty (and lifestyle) influenced your personal life?
- 6) Did you see your blog as a resource to help other women?
- 7) How many followers or readers do you get per month, yearly, or daily? Is there any way to track followers?
- 8) Do you believe your blog could be used as a platform of change?
- 9) In your opinion, how does your blog address challenges and or needs for health education in the Black community?
- 10) How can social media build community and encouragement in a virtual space?
- 11) Do you believe that your blog is a form of popular and health education?
- 12) In what ways have you been empowered by the work you do?
- 13) In what ways have your readers been empowered by the work you do?
- 14) How do you come up with blog posts?

Felicia Leatherwood, natural hair guru and hair stylist

- 1) What inspired you to begin your work with natural hair/natural hair care?
- 2) How did you come to create the hair empowerment philosophy?
- 3) What made you interested in styling hair?
- 4) How has natural hair care and products responded to corporations creating “natural products?”
- 5) How did you decide to pursue natural hair care/styling?
- 6) What inspired you to create the Mind, Body, Hair blog?
- 7) How many subscribers follow your blog or vlog (if applicable)?
- 8) Can you describe a typical hair workshop experience?
- 9) How can natural hair blogs and other forms of social media be used to inspire change?
- 10) In what ways has doing this work changed your life? How has doing this work empowered you?
- 11) How has this work changed your client’s life?
- 12) In my interviews, many women have expressed a lack of Black celebrities, especially Black women, with natural hairstyles that they can aspire to. Is this true?
- 13) Do you believe that natural hair care could be a type of health education?
- 14) How can social media build community and encourage community health engagement in a virtual space?
- 15) In what ways does your blog and or workshop address the need for health education in the Black community?
- 16) How can hair blogs be utilized as a type of resource for health education?
- 17) Do you believe that natural hair care could be a type of health education?

18) How have your workshops helped encourage health empowerment in Black communities, especially for Black women?

Marilyn Fraser White MD

- 1) What type of work does Arthur Ashe Institute do around health education?
- 2) What is her role at Arthur Ashe Institute?
- 3) What inspired you to work for the organization?
- 4) How have these programs helped encourage health empowerment in the Black and Latino communities?
- 5) How did AA come up with the salon education program?
- 6) How are stylists trained to educate clients? Do clients ever become a part of the education process? (i.e. becoming 'teachers')
- 7) Would you say that the salon based program is more traditional educational format (teacher/student) or embodies elements of popular education (no teacher/student, everyone works collectively and shares knowledge based on their life perspective)?
- 8) What is the criterion to become a part of the program?
- 9) How many people are currently participating in all the salon based programs?
- 10) Does AA do any community organizing around toxic chemicals in hair products?
- 11) Is natural hair care a component of the salon based programs?
- 12) How does the salon based programs, particularly Black Pearls, address challenges and or needs for health education in the Black community?
- 13) How can health education encourage community engagement?
- 14) Does AA do any online organizing?
- 15) How can social media build community and encourage community health engagement in a virtual space?
- 16) How can hair blogs be utilized as a type of resource for health education?
- 17) How has running a successful program such as Black Pearls about hair and health education influenced your personal life?
- 18) Do you see the salon based programs expanding nationwide?
- 19) Do you believe that these salon programs could be used as a platform for change?
- 20) In your opinion, is health education considered to be a social movement?
- 21) In what ways have you been empowered by the work that you do?
- 22) In what ways have others been empowered by the work that you do?

Tomiko Fraser Hines

- 1) What inspires you to be natural?
- 2) How did you get involved with the natural hair movement?
- 3) Do you follow any hair blogs?
- 4) Have you felt pressured to straighten your hair as a model, or has natural hair been acceptable for some shoots?

Ogonnaya Newman (WEACT)

- 1) What does WEACT do?
- 2) What is her role at WEACT?
- 3) How does WEACT create health education?

- 4) How does WEACTION create or influence public policy?
- 5) Does WEACTION do any organizing or target prevention with toxic chemicals in hair products?
- 6) How has WEACTION served the surrounding community to help empower people about their health?
- 7) How does WEACTION address challenges and or needs for health education in the community?
- 8) How can health education encourage community engagement?
- 9) Does WEACTION do any online organizing?
- 10) In your opinion, can health education be considered a social movement?
- 11) In what ways have you been empowered by the work you do?
- 12) In what ways have community members been empowered?

Shanequa Hammock, Occidental College

- 1) What inspired you to write your play?
- 2) How long did you spend researching the subject?
- 3) How did you make the character Stephanie relatable to the natural hair movement when it is seen as a Black women's movement?
- 4) How did you receive support when you were natural?
- 5) How did you develop the characters Toni and Monica?
- 6) How did A Girl Like Me influence your work?
- 7) Why did you use "Kinky curly beautiful" versus "nappy and happy?"

Appendix 2

Coding Table

This is the table that I generated to convert my interview questions into analytical data.

Demographics:

- What is your name? Age? City of birth? Where do you currently live (apart from Oxy)? Where were you raised? What environment were you raised in (suburbs, rural, urban)?
- How do you identify racially and or ethnically?
- Do you believe your race and or ethnicity affects how you wear your hair?
- Do you believe your gender affects how you wear your hair?

AGE:

31, 20, 18, 21, 21, 26, 21, 20, 30s, 25, 22, 21, 19, 19, 20, 19, 20, 19, 21, 38, 20, 18, 20, 22, 34, 20, 22, 19, 22, 20, 44, 30, 23 , 20, 51, 22, 21, 44, 24, 21, 19, 20, 21, 20

CITY OF ORIGIN:

Santa Rosa, CA
Los Angeles , CA
Manhattan Beach, CA
Los Angeles, CA
Brooklyn, NY
Jersey City, NJ
Brooklyn, NY
Manhattan, NY
Queens, NY
Baltimore, Maryland
Brooklyn, NY
New York, NY
Oakland, CA
Sierra Leone, raised in Colorado (adopted)
Bristol, PA and Trenton, NJ
San Francisco, CA
Waukegan, IL
Oakland, CA

San Francisco, CA
New York City, NY
Houston, Texas
San Gabriel, CA raised in San Diego, CA
Sacramento, CA
Simi Valley, CA
Newark, NJ
Newark, NJ
Houston, Texas , raised in Carlsbad, New Mexico
Panorama City, CA, raised in the San Fernando Valley
Sacramento, CA
Tempe, AZ
New York, NY
New York, NY
Freetown, Sierra Leone, raised in Jackson Heights, NY
Worcester, MA
St. Augustine, Florida
Los Angeles, CA
Berkeley, CA
New York City, NY, raised in Washington Heights and the Bronx
Los Angeles, CA
Denver, Colorado
Philadelphia, PA
Portland, OR
New York, NY, raised in South Orange, NJ
Los Angeles, CA, raised in the San Fernando Valley
Redondo Beach, CA, raised in Kansas City, KS and Long Beach, CA

CURRENTLY LIVING IN:

New York – 15

- Brooklyn – 9
- Queens – 3
- Manhattan – 1
- Bronx – 3
- Westchester – 1

New Jersey – 2
Los Angeles – 24
Sacramento – 1
San Francisco – 1

RAISED IN WHAT ENVIRO:

Suburban – 14
Rural – 1

Urban – 19
Urban and suburban – 11
Suburban and rural – 1

Self identifies as:

Black – 17
African American- 13
Black/African American- 6
Mixed heritage (ethnicities) – 12
Person of the African Diaspora -- 1
Mixed (biracial) – 5
Multiracial – 1

Race affects hair:

Yes- 35
No- 10

Gender affects hair:

Yes – 38
No- 7

Hair Stylist Questions:

- Do you do your own hair or do you go to a stylist?
- If stylist: how long have you been going to your stylist?
- What procedures do you do to your hair? (i.e. coloring, straightening, trim/cut, etc.)
- What procedures have you done to your hair in the past?
- What products does your stylist use in your hair?

Does own hair

20

* some people noted that it depends on the style

Goes to stylist/barber

5

Going to stylist for:

7 years – 2
1 year – 1
5 years – 2
6 months – 1

8 years –1
3 years -1

Both

18

**most people said both because of location; i.e. if they go to school, they can't go to their stylist so they do their own hair. Others said they do their own hair but go to the stylist for trims.*

Some people also noted that it depended on the style (i.e. braids)

Other

2

** Mom does hair*

Past Styles

Afros –6

Locs – 4

Big Chop –3 ****define this**

Weaves/extension – 17

Press/hot comb – 22

Perm/relaxer – 22

** Everyone had different forms of perm or relaxer treatments. This ranged based on the person's racial and or ethnic identification, although the desired effect and most likely chemical content is essentially the same.*

Pixie cut – 4

Bob – 2

Braids – 26

Curly – 3

Wigs – 3

Coloring/Dye – 4

Twists – 11

Dreads – 1

Dyed – 4

Texturizer – 1

Cornrows – 4

Bantu knots – 1

Wave Nouveau – 1

Wash n Go – 1

Ponytail with braids – 1

Relaxed and no heat – 1

Afro puffs – 2

Wash n go -1

Natural styles – 3

Brazilian blowout – 3
Dominican blowout – 2
Bangs – 2
Keratin treatment – 1
Natural in transition styles – 1

Products and Toxicity:

- What products do you use?
- Can you list any ingredients in the product you use?
- Do you read customer reviews on products online before purchasing products? Do you just go to the store and test a product?
- Have you experienced any physical or emotional health impacts due to how you handle/care for your hair? (i.e. depression, hair breakage, scalp burn, headaches, etc.)
- Would you like to elaborate?

Products Used

Nature's Blessing -1
Makes own products – 2
Wen products – 4
Olive oil product – 5
Herbal Essence Shampoo – 1
Carol's Daughters products – 5
Tresseme products – 3
Clairol Cellophane – 1
Coconut oil – 6
Dax Hair Pomade – 1
Cantu Shea Butter – 3
Crème of Nature – 1
Shea Moisture products– 8
Giovanni conditioner – 1
Kinky Curly Leave in Conditioner – 1
Shea butter – 5
Curlbox – 1
Nothing but the Conditioner (cleansing conditioner) – 1
KG Hairfood – 1
African Hot Six Oil –1
8 Wander Shea Oil spray –1
Jane Carter products –2
V05 conditioner – 1
Burt's Bees products –1
L'Oreal Sulfate Shampoo -1
Herbal Essence Conditioner (blue bottle) –1
Indian Hemp by Swiss Jarden – 1

Cream mayonnaise –1
Black Vanilla Shampoo – 1
BP products –1
Organic products –1
Jojoba oil – 3
Hair mimosa shine – 1
French products -1
Paul Mitchell live in conditioner – 1
Keracare – 1
Nioxin – 1
Grease – 2
Moisturizing cream with gel – 1
Water – 2
Moroccan oil – 3
Argan oil- 2
Leave in conditioner -1
Aloe based shine spray – 1
Mango Twist and Lime –1
Lush shine spray – 1
Sami products – 1
Garnier Fructis triple nutrition – 1
Aussie 3 minute miracle Deep Conditioner – 1
Taliah Waajid products – 1
Styling gel – 1
Nexxus Moisturizing Shampoo – 1
Infusium Moisturizing Conditioner – 1
Motions hair spray – 1
Pure Vitamin E oil – 2
Fantasia products – 1
Shampoo, conditioner, heat protectant cream, deep conditioner cream -1
Mizani – 2
Palmer's Olive Oil – 1
Pink Scurl – 1
Moisturizers and oils – 1
Organic Root stimulator edge conditioner – 1
Black Jamaican castor oil – 1
Peppermint oil – 1
Organix products – 1
Pink – 1
SportyAfros – 1
Curlz – 1
Komaza Coconut Hair Pudding – 1
Rosemary oil – 1
Mixed Chicks shampoo and conditioner – 1
Silk Elements Mixed – 1
Argan Oil deep conditioner –1

Hair Rules – 1
Kinky Curly products– 2
Optimum 6 miracle oil – 1
Hot six oil – 1
Mixed Chicks products – 1
Organix Moroccan Oil Curl Clarifying Conditioner – 1
Aloe Vera (from the plant) – 1
Avocado oil – 1
Smoothing serum – 1
Anti-breakage spray (used pre and post procedures involving heat) – 1
Aveda shampoo and conditioner – 1
Spray on gloss – 1
Dr. Palmer’s – 1
Miss Jessie’s – 1
Curl’s Lotion (Pure Shine) – 1

Ingredients in Products

Could List Some – 30

Could not List Any – 13

Could identify or recognize toxic ingredients – 7

Reads Product Reviews online, Word of Mouth, both?

Reads online reviews – 12

Word of mouth – 6

Stylist recommendation – 7

Word of mouth and reviews – 10

Other – 5

- magazines
- read product labels
- Process of elimination → just test drives a product to see how it does in her hair
- Message boards

Emotional Health or Physical Health Impacts

Breakage – 25

- Everyone noted breakage from excessive hair straightening and due to over perming /relaxing hair.
- Some noted breakage because of pulling hair in an updo
- One person noted thinning around hairline and edges

Scalp burn- 5

Dryness – 11

Headaches – 0

Depression/Frustration- 10

*related mainly to frustration and or teasing around hair

Other (list) – 9

- Stress
- Excessive shedding
- Excessive dandruff
- Eczema → prescribed a special shampoo to fix one person's stress spots
- Hair falling out
- Emotional stress → not feeling comfortable enough to wear hair natural at her job
- Shrinkage
- Scalp damage
- Sometimes has allergic reaction to oils and breaks out

Non-applicable – 3

Blogs:

- Have you ever researched how to care for your hair in alternative forms of media such as blogs, online forums, etc.?
- If yes: What blogs do you go on?
- How has looking on hair blogs been helpful in maintaining your hair?
- Do you believe alternative forms of media are successful in fostering community between Black women?
- If no: Would you consider looking at hair blogs or video blogs?
- Can you easily find information about your hair on these hair blogs?

Ever been on a blog or vlog

Yes – 35

No – 7

* All noted that they would consider looking at a blog or vlog

What blogs or vlogs do they visit?

Google search – 9

YouTube suggested videos – 7

Clutch Magazine – 2

Essence Magazine – 2

Curly Nikki – 9

NikkiMay- 2

Chaje – 1
KimmyTube – 1
GlamTwins –2
TheIcing – 1
XGoldn – 1
LongHairDontCare – 2
Blackgirllonghair -- 3
Simply Yonique –1
ToyaBoo – 1
WhoisSugar –1
Naturalsistas – 1
Tumblr – 1
MopTopMaven - 1
LuvsNatural – 1
HeyFranHey – 3
Naptural85 – 2
Pinterest –1
Chescaleigh -1
Facebook fan pages about hair bloggers/hair -- 1
Bronzeqt –1
K is for kinky – 1
Kinkycurlycoilyme – 1
Carol’s Daughter blog – 1
Felicia Leatherwood’s website – 1
Fashion blogs but not specific hair blogs – 1
Urbanbushbabes – 1
Madame Noire – 2
TarynGuy – 1
MopTopMaven -1
Curly Hair Beauties – 1
Shannon Bootran – 1
Those Girls Are Wild – 1
Angela the Healthy Hairstylist – 1
BritneyNGray -1
Product websites – 1
LadyKeys – 1

Helpful in maintaining hair (if applicable)

Yes – 37

No- 5 (not applicable)

Fostering community with Black women

Yes – 41

No – 2

Easily find information about hair on these blogs

Yes – 20

- one person noted however that there is no hub for all this information, and some information is contradictory.
- Some people noted that it was possible to find their hair texture, its just a matter of patience
- One person noted that hair blogs have conflicting messages of having “full” or “long” hair which is not achievable for all hair textures

No- 20

* One person noted that she could not find information on Black women with naturally fine hair

n/a – 3

Sociological Perspective/ Hair Story Questions:

- What do you believe is the societal standard of beauty? Do you consider yourself to fit into that standard?
- Do you feel pressured to fit into societal standards of beauty?
- What do you consider to be "beautiful" hair? What do you consider to be “ugly” hair?
- What do people in your family and/or immediate friend circle consider to be “beautiful” or “ugly” hair?
- What does society consider to be “beautiful” or “ugly” hair?
- How do you feel about categorizing or constructing hair types as “beautiful” or “ugly” or “good” hair vs. “bad” hair?
- Do you believe there are different standards for African- American males and beauty? (***In other words:*** Do you think that Black men face the same pressures to have “beautiful” hair as women do? Do you believe Black men face different pressures?)
- Do you believe that gender roles are played out in hair? (ex. Feminine expression of hair = long hair, masculine expression of hair = short hair).
- How do you feel about this quote?: “...dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world.” – Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
- Do you believe that you are beautiful?
- Do you believe that other people find you to be beautiful?

Societal standard of beauty (terms that came up most frequently) note: a lot of people drew from both White and Black beauty standards –

- *define question, it was open; didn't define society/societal so its open to interpretation*
- *how people feel pressured by both dominant and target community norms*
- *Many people noted that these standards are changing*

Eurocentric – 3

Ethnically ambiguous – 1

Skinny – 9
Long hair – 13
Thin features – 1
Fit – 1
Straight teeth – 1
Tall – 7
High cheekbones – 1
Big butt – 1
Boobs – 1
Voluptuous (body) – 2
Curves – 8
White – 7
Thin – 6
Luscious hair – 2
Light skinned – 13
Straight hair – 13
Blonde – 7
Blue eyes – 2
Barbie type – 1
Kerry Washington – 1
Light eyes – 1
Silky – 1
Depends on the society – 4
Voluptuous hair – 1
Makeup- 1
White beauty – 5
Light colored hair – 1
Asian like her mom – 1
Racially ambiguous – 1
Blendable beauty – 1
Wavy hair – 3
Big mane (Black community) – 1
Dainty – 1
Androgynous – 1
Mixed “exotic” beauty – 2
Big hair – 1
Tan – 1
Youth – 1
Hair that is easy to manage – 1
Healthy and holistic – 1
Effortlessly chic hair, particularly a bun – 1
Educated – 1
Maintained and groomed – 2
Weaves – 1

Fit into standard

Yes – 1

*in some ways, yes (she has light skin, light eyes, straight hair, thin but she's not by Black standards)

No – 38

- A lot of people noted that the standard is shifting but even with that shift, they believe they would fall outside of that standard.
- Some people also noted that in some ways that had some qualities (i.e. they were tall), but not enough of the majority of the other qualities to qualify as beautiful by societal standards (ex. light skin, straight hair, refer to the list).
- One person stated that she is the antithesis of beauty.
- One person stated that she does not associate or try to live up to that standard.

Pressured to fit in standards

Yes, current pressure – 18

Yes in the past, now no – 13

A little pressure -

No pressure – 9

_older women (30+) said they had no pressure versus younger (18-20s)

Beautiful hair (self) – terms that came up most frequently

Wearing hair with confidence - 2

Healthy – 15

Shiny – 6

Thick (with volume) – 2

Being appreciated by the owner – 5

More versatile – 1

Big curls – 1

No such thing – 1

Unique – 1

Compliments face – 2

Bouncy – 1

Natural hair texture – 4

Different textures – 1

Well cared for – 1

So many beautiful textures – 1

Loc styles (ex. Yarn locs) – 2

Didn't know – 1

Long – 1

All same length – 1

Curly hair – 4

Wavy – 1
More creative – 1
How comfortable someone is with their hair –1
Everyone has beautiful hair – 1
Full – 2
Kardashian hair: thick, black, full, and bouncy – 1
Voluminous – 1
Hair that grows out of the head of a beautiful confident woman – 2
Your own hair – 1
Versatility – 1
Hair that is groomed – 4
Whatever works for you – 1
Hair that appears to look natural – 1
Black hair – 1
Short hair – 1
Mermaid hair – 1
Moisturized – 1
Consistent in what state its in – 1

Ugly hair (self) – terms that came up most frequently

More of person of color – 1
Dirty – 1
Not manicured or taken care of – 5
Stringy – 4
Wouldn't use that to describe hair – 5
Dry/brittle – 6
Damaged – 5
Fake hair/extensions – 2
Unhealthy – 4
No such thing – 8
Unhealthy – 1
Breakage – 1
Boring –1
Thinning –1
Highlights –1
Really short –1
Not tame –1
Straight – 3
Permed – 1
Dreadlocks – 1
Unloved – 1
Unnatural hair colors – 2
Greasy – 1
Flimsy – 1
Hair that is ungroomed – 1
Unnatural hair – 1

No definition -1
Oily hair – 1
Lack of hair (no hair) – 1

Beautiful hair (family and friends) – terms that came up most frequently

Locs (styled and kempt) – 3
Depends on race of friends – 1
Straight –17
Long – 10
Natural – 15
Curly lion hair – 3
White girl hair – 1
Weaves – 2
Don't care – 1
Thick – 2
Relaxed hair -- 2
Dreads -- 1
Perm/relaxed hair –1
Manageable – 2
Ethiopian long and wavy hair – 2
Not nappy hair –1
No idea –1
Maintained hair – 1
Never talked about hair in their family – 2
Mixed girls' hair – 1
Wavy hair – 2
You tried to do your hair – 2
Stylized natural hair – 1
“Put together” – 1
Lighter colored hair – 1
Healthy – 5
Biracial hair – 1
Soft – 1
All hair is beautiful – 2
Silky – 1
Very short hair – 1

Ugly hair (family and friends) – terms that came up most frequently

Uneven – 1
Weave – 2
Dirty – 1
Unhealthy – 3
Breakage – 1
Unkempt curly hair –1

Straight hair – 1
Natural hair – 1
Nappy hair –1
Thin and stringy hair –1
Brittle – 1
Damaged – 2
Frizzy – 1
Untamed – 1
Unnatural colors – 1
Unnatural lengths – 1
Dry – 1

*Beautiful hair (society) – terms that came up most frequently
Some people brought up there was a difference in beautiful hair based on society vs.
racial groups.*

Long – 20
Wavy – 7
* as in beach waves
Fine – 1
Textured -1
Mixed curly hair – 1
Straight – 21
Thick – 2
Flouncy hair (flowing and bouncy hair) –1
Tangle free – 1
Long loose curls – 1
Depends on where you are – 1
Whiteness is the norm – 2
Weaves --1
A certain type of natural hair (ex. Tracee Ellis Ross) – 1
Silky – 5
Presentable –1
Blonde –3
**Garnier Fructis: long strong durable shiny – 2
Beautiful – 1
Kim Kardashian hair – 2
Tracee Ellis Ross Hair – 1
Shiny – 2
Curly (but contained) – 5
Permed hair – 1
Luscious hair – 1
Full – 2
Bouncy – 1
Quicker to accept European hair – 1
Voluminous – 1

Light colored – 1
Proper – 1
Western hair textures – 1
Anything not kinky -1
Beyoncé's hair – 1
Nice, curly, moisturized full locks – 1
Locs – 1
Upkept – 1
Biracial ringlets – 1

Ugly hair (society) – terms that came up most frequently

Nappy hair and frizzy hair – 5
*one of the 3 noted there was a stigma that still exists around nappy hair
Short, knotty, ethnic hair – 1
Coarse – 4
Dry – 1
Brittle – 1
Tangly – 1
Tight – 1
Thick – 1
Hard to manage – 2
Not controlled –1
Crazy –1
My hair – 1
Super short – 3
Braids – 2
Anything outside of beauty norms – 1
Dreadlocks – 1
Unkempt – 1
Natural hair if they don't know how to take care of it – 1
Vibrant colors – 1
Locs – 1
Kinky – 5
Curly hair that doesn't go down unless you straighten it– 1
Unruly – 1
Hair all over the place – 1
Nappy – 1
Natural hair – 4
* this person noted that natural hair is exoticified

Categorizing and constructing hair types

Doesn't think its good – 38
It happens – 5

African American males and beauty

Same pressures – 13

*Some people noted that the same pressures exists but that they are not frequently talked about

* One person noted that Black men have less resources (there are no hair blogs for men), but at the same time, Black men are validated by all types of women for being beautiful regardless of hair and that natural hair is viewed as “cool”

Same pressures but less enforced – 9

Different pressures – 4

* one person noted that pressures varied based on where a person grew up

No pressures – 15

- the older women have been responding as not as many pressures

Gender roles expressed in hair

Yes – 32

- people noted that these roles are now changing, but said yes they are in existence
- One person noted that gender roles are predicated on whiteness (to be feminine is to be white because white women have long silky hair)

No – 6

Both – 1

No Answer – 1

Depends on individual –1

Bluest Eye Quote (responses)

“ I live in a black world” – O.Newman
parents center her around a different idea of beauty

“We can rebel and break doll but we seek approval from others;” “Impressions are everything;” “You can break a doll but you can’t break what people feel is beautiful” – P. Bryant

“I know people who had been the favored sibling based on color and hair” – S. Shabazz

“Black people are not really Black people on commercials, they don’t look like me.” – S.Shabazz

“People blindly following doll as what girls look like or aspire to be.” – M.

McIntosh

“I think less of hair and more about childhood. I would break dolls’ heads but it sent a message; my mom only bought me Black Barbie dolls.” – U. Johnson

“We cannot destroy how people view us, but we can destroy our dolls.” – I. Opara

“Claudette received a white doll and she knows she’s not white with dark hair and she’s angry. You can break the doll but you can’t ignore self.” “Knows she will never be white and accepting of herself.” – C. Joseph

“We have changed language around beauty but if nothing changes mentally, we will still run into the same issues.” – M. Hayes

“Who you are and who your character is will always be a reflection; your outer appearance is not as important as your internal self” – M. Aladin ; “you can be beautiful on the outside and ugly on the inside” – m. Aladin

“You can enhance yourself with weaves and makeup, but you will always be who you are when you look in the mirror. And you have to love that person, and the reflection you see.” – M. Aladin

“You can’t destroy what people think about their opinion.” – J. Simon

“It wasn’t so much the doll, but the impression on her psyche and her identity is expressed... everything else that the world tells that child is expressed through the doll.” – A. Baylor

“It means that she doesn’t fit into any particular category and reproduced in different spaces and different people.” – B. Locke

“ I can personally attest to this quote; I was taught by family that I don’t have good hair, and the attention on women who are the Maureen Peals of the world.” – E. Belachew

“It’s very true with what is beautiful by US standards, look at Beyoncé.” – K. Cobbs

“It’s about internal view of self and society versus what society is giving you.” – M. Selassie

“Light skinned Black people with green eyes are the best types” – J. Hutlett * referring to the exotification of light skinned blacks

“You can break down barriers of dolls and not break standard.” – R. King

“There are messages sent to us by people over time; we can eliminate dolls but

can't escape how mom tugged at my hair and that feeling." – E Turenne

"the norms of what beauty is is determined by what your parents say." – Y.Cooper

"Dolls can be destroyed but people's opinions more than what society wants because people around you influence what you want to look like." – M. Cribbs

"Dolls are based off beauty standards but you can't break dolls. The counter culture is still affected by it and when it consciously affects you, then you are allowing it to." – C. Madkins.

"You can break the doll and reinforce ideas that you can't escape" – A. LaRosa

"Its about recognizing difference in attractiveness. All people go through it, men even go through it. It's a process of how you appear and where you fall in the eyes of the Other. Some people just win the genetic lottery. You can let the Maureens of the world be a big weight on you or you can find what is special about you." – Aesha

"The doll is easy to destroy, but these images of beauty are so deeply engrained. My grandmother grew up in a time when it wasn't ok to be Black, and [society] made being as White as possible to get by [the norm]. These ideas were passed on by generations: "good hair" equals straight hair and natural hair got throwback." – S. Robinson

"Tearing the doll is like tearing a photograph or ignoring media, but people will believe the lies and put it on other people. The binary is there: if a person who has 'better' looks, they will use it against others who don't. We need to change the media and change how people view self to others." - H. Moran

" I think about childhood and consumption. There is a bond with mother and child while doing hair, but its also an attack against culture. People have been straightening hair for generations, and its [seen as] shaking world order. You are able to make it without straight hair; its not necessarily a beauty thing, its more about being taken seriously or in other words, assimilating as much as possible, which is not my goal." – A. Canady

"I could not have white dolls but I can still hear images of people when they see Black females with dark skin. I always got black dolls, and I was upset because I wanted the White doll: I wanted to take care of that doll, and I look back on that sadly now." – G. Ncube

"How you are perceived, as strong as we are, we can't ignore how other people think and feel about our image. There is an internal struggle with having natural hair. You know its beautiful because its your true self, but there is societal value

that is constantly telling you otherwise; you can't shut them out, they're constantly there." – Y. Kamara

"It made me think of that study with the white and black dolls. When I was younger, my nana got me a black doll and I always wanted the white doll. The doll is the metaphor for trying to have control over your personal mind set, but you can't change the way society sees that girl." – M. Morales

"It's a very sad commentary on how these images and the voices of ugly and beautiful are stuck in my head. The voices don't have as much power as they did when I was younger. I'm 51 years old now and they're not as strong in my head, and now I understand that the people who are speaking those words and those people know they have those insecurities." – Lachanze

"It makes me kind of sad. It makes me think of people including myself that I love will let themselves feel insecure because of bullies like that." – S. Jackson

"You can break the doll, but you can't escape from your family. If your family doesn't think you're beautiful, it can really affect you. Positivity, especially for little girls, really effects you. You are able to break the doll, but you can't break what your family says that you are beautiful...that stays with you all the time. This happens a lot in families of color, not just black families." – A. Brown

"It makes sense. The way we are socialized to think about our hair (dolls, toys, TV, social media) is just one facet of it, and we hear it from young ages from our parents and peers. And the pressure to fit in is really strong. Really really strong. I hated straightening my hair when I was little. It hurt." – T. Santos

"I identify as dark skin even if other people don't let me. It's so true and indicative of all the colorism in our community. Reading natural hair blogs and the experiences of being natural are so empowering, but it doesn't transfer offline. Not everyone is living in the world of blogs. You can see in their eyes what they think of you, and how they analyze who you are, especially for dark skinned people. They look at you like 'Are you trying to make a statement?'" – K. Lewis

"We can't change the way people are and what people say and the way they perceive things, but we can change our own. Dolls are representatives of how we see ourselves, you can buy a new doll, you can change how you perceive things, but you can't change other people and their own ideas." – S. Hammock

"Beauty is in the eye of looking. When people see Maureens of the world, they are more attracted and pleased to see that image." – R. West

"You can dismember dolls but family and peers hold you to societal standards, and you can't break that. You're one person versus something bigger and intangible. It's an uphill battle. You cannot resist but you can't win, and if you

do, you will receive judgement and pushback.” – A. N’Diaye

“It makes me sad to see that because its not so long ago that this was the standard. This is what young black girls and women have to deal with. If you’re darker and kinkier hair, you’re ugly. If you are lighter and have the ‘good hair’ that’s easy to manage, that was so much better. I feel bad for Maureen, you can’t really escape those stereotypes that light equals good and dark equals bad.” – N. Edenedo

“Even though we can control to a certain extent (breaking doll), the reality is that people are trying to change you. Well intended voices could be harmful as well. It comes from everywhere.” – J Brand

Finds self to be beautiful

Yes- 41

No - 2 (one person noted she was not beautiful based on other insecurities, not on hair)

Others find her to be beautiful

Yes- 41

No- 2

- What do you believe the association between skin tone (light and dark) and hair type (“good” hair and “bad” hair)?
- Do you ever feel conscious of your color and hair? In what contexts/settings is this most apparent for you?
- Do you believe African-American women with straighter hair are viewed as more attractive, more successful, etc. vs. African-American women with “nappy hair?” (***In other words:*** Do you believe that African-American women with straightened hair gain more privilege and acceptance than African women with non-straightened hair?)
- Have you ever felt pressured to straighten your hair?
- Have you ever been praised for the way your hair looked? Have you ever been teased for the way your hair looked?
- Do you agree or disagree with this quote: “For each of us, getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is our sign of our desire to be women.” – Bell Hooks from *Straightening Our Hair*

Association between skin color and hair

Exists – 35

- people also noted that the association exists but again it has been reversed (i.e. a dark skin girl with “good” hair)

- also noted that it was more on genetics
- One person considered herself to be borderline because on some days she has hair that is considered to be “bad” hair and other days to be “good” hair

Doesn't Exist – 6

Conscious of color and hair & what settings

Conscious

Yes- 35

- one person said that she was not conscious of her light skin as much as her hair in context
- Another person stated that she was conscious of her hair in situations involving water, sweat, etc.
- One person stated she felt self-conscious of who directors felt was the most beautiful woman in the room during acting auditions
- One person stated that she was conscious when she's on social media and sees hash tags such as #TeamLightSkin or #TeamDarkSkin that makes her reflect what “team” she is on, and how that reflects the younger people who talk to her
- One person was conscious of her hair more so than her skin, although when she was younger, other kids made her feel ashamed of her lighter complexion

No – 6

* one person who said no said they were not conscious of hair, more so skin color in spaces where she is the only woman of color

Settings-

All black settings –5

People of same race all in one setting – 8

*usually all white spaces

Work – 7

School – 11

- Most people noted going to predominately White schools.
- Many noted they never thought about hair or color as much until they came to Oxy; they were made aware of it through comments from peers, both Black and White.

All white male spaces – 1

Corporate settings –1

Water (sweating, pool parties, swimming) – 2

Black men – 1

Family- 1

Fashion outlets – magazines, films, movies (lack of Black people who look like me) – 1

When she is the only Black or Hispanic girl in the room- 3

Everywhere – 3

Formal occasions – 1

Transition stage (roots of her hair “new growth” vs. straight hair) – 1

African American women viewed as more successful with straight hair vs. nappy hair

Yes – 37

- Many people also noted that this association was sad or not necessarily valid but that it is true and does exist; noted that prominent black women do not have natural hair in the media ***
- Some noted that other non-black people may view them this way, but not necessarily resonating within the black community
- One person noted that there is a spectrum of natural, and not sure what to do with you if you don't fit into that spectrum easily
- One person noted that successful black women in the media all have the same image: straight hair (permed)
- One person noted that it was largely depending on the attractiveness of the person at hand
- One person noted that there is now more of an appreciation for curly hair, but only if you are of a lighter complexion
- One person noted they are seen as successful but she knows that there are a lot of successful women who are natural as well; noted that the reason why they might be seen as less successful is because natural is a fresh idea.
- One person noted that it's changing, but women in politics (i.e. Michelle Obama and Condoleezza Rice) all have straight hair and are very clean cut because they're not trying to push the envelope since it took time to get to the top.
- One person that Black scholars and authors (people she defines as successful) rock their natural hair.

No – 5

- one person noted it might be important for jobs but it wasn't that important
- One person noted that she has seen successful African American women with straight or natural hair
- One person said that straight hair was viewed as more acceptable and that it's not a matter of being more successful or attractive (ex. Beyoncé and Michelle Obama)

Pressured to straighten hair

Yes- 37

No- 6

- mainly pressured by family members
- Some people felt pressured by school mates that made direct comments
- One person stated her boyfriend does not like natural hair and that if it's been more than 3-4 days of non-straightened hair, he will ask her if he can pay to get it done
- One person noted their stylist pressured her to straighten her hair
- One person stated that some people at Oxy pressured her
- One person stated that she had more pressure to curl and straighten her hair versus straightening it
- One person said she was also pressured by white friends to go natural

- One person said that her teacher told her she needed to straighten her hair to be more professional when she served as ASB President; she also said she felt pressured when going on acting auditions
- One person noted that she has received a lot of pressure now to stop straightening her hair

Praised for hair

Yes- 42

No –

What did it look like when praised?

Straight hair – 15

Particular style – 5

Natural- 19

All styles – 7

Curly – 5

Weaves –1

Long – 1

*this person said people mistook her naturally long curly hair for a weave

Just done by a beautician – 1

Teased for hair

Yes- 33

No- 9

What did it look like when teased?

Natural – 19

- Two people noted people were curious to see what her “natural” hair looked like and always to know why her hair didn’t go into an Afro

Relaxed – 3

Braids – 2

Period when hair is not straightened enough (need to go to get hair done) – 1

Avant garde “messy” hair – 1

Cornrows – 1

Short hair – 1

Straight – 1

Bell Hooks quotes

Agree – 20

Disagree- 13

Both – 6

Other – 1

*did not answer the question

Thoughts:

“thinking through layers;” “grown up with pressed hair;” “conflict → pressed hair subscribing to societal standards (look up to role models)” but on same token, versatility with self-representation” “straighten to be white by could have affinity for that look” – O.Newman

“You feel like you’re coming into your own womanhood” – Bryant

“No one says a white girl is trying to be black when she takes a curling rod to her head” – S. Shabazz

“There is something womanly to get hair done, but doesn’t necessarily need to get hair straightened to be a woman.” – M. McIntosh

“Straightening hair is a very important mother and daughter ritual.” – U. Johnson

“The natural community says straightening hair is trying to be white but maybe it’s just hair straightening” - I.Opara

“It’s a rite of passage to alter your curl pattern.” – C. Joseph “I’m not against relaxing, but have the knowledge of how to care for your hair.”

“I wish people didn’t look at my hair and think I was a certain way.” – M. Hayes

“What is she equating womanness too? Straight hair? It’s said that straight hair is closer to womanhood.” – M. Aladin

“I think its biased, not everyone feels that way: it’s her quest. I believe being a woman is being naturally who you are; not everyone wants to straighten their hair.” - Simon

“ Traditional expectation that Black women have to do something with hair to make it presentable.” – A. Baylor

“ It’s a part of the process of appearing feminine and buying into what that means” – B. Locke

“We have the ability to change hair so easily.” – E. Belachew

“What it means to be a woman and perceptions of beauty.” – K. Cobb

“Commentary on straight versus curly hair and what type of person you are and how refined you are.” – M. Selassie

“Straight hair does not make you a woman. I went from straight hair to natural hair.” – J. Booker

“Black people [straighten hair] more for whiteness to be praised. Straightening hair is a rite of passage, and sharing stories is a way of affirming Blackness. For example, saying, ‘it took three hours’ to get my hair straightened shows the effort it took to do my hair like that.” – A. Foster

“Not just a woman thing, you do it to feel beautiful,” – R King

“Now I realize that I wanted hair like my mom, she was the person who had beautiful hair. Older women have the straightened style, we want to be the prescribed feminine way of being.” – E Turenne

“It’s a personal choice” – Y. Cooper

“For women in general, hair is an accessory; women have the right to do with it as they please. There is a notion that straight hair is emulating Whiteness, but in my case, it was easier to manage straightened.” – M. Cribbs

“The reason for a person to straighten their hair is to look pretty, but to look pretty in a White context. No one consciously thinks that, but then why is it that more people don’t grow out fros?” – C. Madkins

“This is a very gendered quote; Black women are made to feel that to be a woman or of a certain stature is to straighten your hair. Why can’t you be a woman with natural hair?” – A. LaRosa

“I would like to see unprocessed hair as particularly special. Most women in the world are natural. Everyone changes hair, but we had a cultural mandate to put stuff in our head to change the way our hair grows.” – Aesha

“Beautiful hair is however you feel most happy and comfortable, but not when its coming from a place of ‘I want’ versus ‘they want.’ Beauty is constructed in some ways.” – S. Robinson

“Pressed hair was traumatic for me as a kid. I didn’t like how it looked after and it didn’t last very long. I was limited by activity so I didn’t ‘sweat out my hair’ and was often burned by the hot comb. Hair doesn’t have to do with being a woman, being a woman comes with emotional ties, maturity, and physical ties. Hair is not as defining.” – H. Moran

“Taking care of your hair is the same as shaving your legs, waxing, accessorizing: its a part of beauty. It’s not always about assimilating, it had roots in that but no more.” – A. Canady

“You desire to be feminine in the way that society want you to be feminine. [Straightening hair] was not a ritual, it was annoying: it took hours to do alone.” – G. Neube

“I believe that Bell Hooks is of another generation of women, who are older than myself and younger woman of today. I believe she is speaking to the time when I was coming up. It would be timely of the way women of color felt about their hair.” – T. Fraser

“ That already speaks volumes; pressing your hair means being a woman? That in itself speaks more to me. I want to be a woman, I want to look good, or you can’t be a woman or look good if your hair is not pressed?” – Y. Kamara

“I feel like the quote is contradictory. What does that mean? If it’s not a question of beauty, then what does that mean? How does that directly correlate to straightening your hair if its not about beauty? Its clearly a sign of feminine and beauty to be beautiful and that is a contradiction. Whoever said this is denying one side of what it means to be a woman in this quote. The whiteness, its not about being white but then it kind of is. White beauty is a strong standard of beauty, and that’s about having straight or wavy or long straightened manageable hair. It’s not about being white, but its kind of matching up with the standard of beauty of being white.” – M. Morales

“We do not need to be pressured to be confident. Women want to press their hair and they shouldn’t have a stigma attached to that. Women should be beautiful no matter how they want to wear their hair, and they should be allowed to do that. Hair is just hair, and we need to allow women to not make it so heavy and identify who we are because of the texture of our hair. It should just be.” – Lachanze

“I feel that its missing the point that beautiful and White in America is historically synonymous.” – S. Jackson

“It’s fun to be a girl. I want to wear my hair natural one day, the next day I will straighten my hair. Sometimes I want to straighten my hair. It used to be a ritual until I realized it was completely unnecessary.” – A. Brown

“That resonates with me; there was at one point because I wanted it to be straight so that I could be pretty. I felt very autonomous but I felt like I had to fit into this standard of beauty. The pleasure of getting my hair straightened is for me. I feel more womanly, but I feel that way whether I am wearing straight hair or curly hair. Straightening hair is one way where I felt womanly.” – T. Santos

“Far too often people associate hair straightening with being White or that you’re not natural. It’s the versatility thing again. I like that I can straighten my hair or wear it natural. Straightening hair was very ritualistic for me; my mom did my hair not to be white, it’s a femininity thing. It doesn’t make you any less Black or any less natural.” – K. Lewis

“It wasn’t about being a woman, it was about being beautiful. There’s that point in middle school when girls started getting their hair straightened. Some sense, about being older and not so much about being a woman.” – S. Hammock

“Straight hair does not mean being a woman. Not everyone enjoys straightened hair. I’m so accustomed to doing my hair that its not an issue for me anymore. I never learned how to straighten my hair.” – R. West

“It was a rite of passage when my hair was pressed. I get my hair done in Philadelphia, a stylist who has been doing my family’s hair for forty years has been doing my hair. My hair wasn’t my own, it was the property of my stylists and my parents. I never got to choose what to do with my hair until last summer.” – A. N’Diaye

“Getting my hair straightened even before I knew what that was all about was my mom’s desire to blend in with anyone else. My mom tried to relax my hair when I was 5 and it broke off all my hair. I didn’t know what the point of all of that was. Once I started straightening, I got burned and it was a long ass process. It wasn’t about wanting to be a woman. It was my fear that if my hair isn’t straight, I will look like a pickaninny or a freak. I didn’t want to be viewed as ugly and that is why I did it (straightened hair for so many years).” – N. Edenedo

“The only reason we feel the need to straighten our hair the need to straighten it. Our hair is the exact opposite of White hair. I believe in the past we overcompensated for that, but now, I don’t think so, but it was historically rooted in that.” – J. Brand

- What does “natural” hair mean to you? (could be definition, lifestyle, etc.)
- Are you “natural?: **If you are natural by this definition (abstaining from heat and chemicals).**
- If yes: for how long?
- If not: Have you ever considered going “natural”?
- Do you feel comfortable with the term “natural hair movement”?
- Do you believe there is a real movement? If so, what does the “natural hair movement” mean to you?
- If not: Why not?
- Do you believe Black hair is truly political or do you believe that Black hair has been politicized in our society?
- Do you find the definition of natural and the “natural hair movement” to be inclusive of all Black women, or people who identify as Black?
- If identified as **mixed**: Do you find the natural hair movement to be inclusive of women of mixed race?
- Solange Knowles has been praised by many within the natural hair movement and seen as a positive inspiration/affirmation of natural beauty. Do you believe this is a fair assumption of her role as a Black woman?
- Are you familiar with the different hair types? (1ABC, 2ABC, 3ABC, 4ABC: 4 being the most kinkiest, 1 being the straightest).

- Additionally, Solange Knowles has been criticized by some in the natural hair movement for saying her hair type is 4c when photographically, her hair appears to be more of a 3a/3b texture. Thoughts?
- Do you have any final thoughts?

Natural hair (images or people) – phrases most commonly came up

Black people – 5
 Solange – 3
 Erykah Badu – 4
 Black Panthers – 1
 Dreads, braided hairstyles, Bantu knots, twists – 3
 No heat – 1
 Hippies – 1
 Earthy, New Age people – 1
 Raw, organic people – 1
 Spectrum -1
 Afro – 7
 Kinky hair – 1
 Bloggers – 2
 Brown people –1
 Black women – 5
 Tracee Ellis Ross –2
 Women on the street in NYC – 1
 People of color - 2
 Angela Davis – 2
 Natural curly locks –1
 Picking hair out –1
 People like me – 3
 Free – 2
 Dark skin – 1
 India. Arie –3
 Harriet Tubman –1
 Frederick Douglass – 1
 Black people at Oxy –2
 Ledisi – 1
 Mixed race person – 1
 Curly hair – 2
 Tomiko Fraser Hines (cousin) – 1
 Women who are confident, empowered, and smart – 2
 Blowouts – 1
 Dreads – 2
 Less curly Black women with straight hair – 1
 Alicia Keys – 1
 Most of her friends at Oxy – 2
 Different textures of natural hair -1

Locs – 1
 Joy – 1
 Volume – 1
 Texture – 1
 College educated women of color (mainly Black) – 1
 Multiracial women – 1
 Those who chose to wear their hair natural – 1
 Urban educated community – 1
 Wavy hair – 2
 Healthy hair – 1
 Natural vs. processed hair --1
 Dark hair (brown and black) – 1
 Women of color – 1
 Natural textures – 1
 Black hair textures – 1
 Pictures from Tumblr – 1
 Sistas- 1
 Cool girls – 1
 Confidence -1
 Girls who are aware of the world around them with cool styles, into different types of music – 1
 Soulful – 1
 Stereotype of free, earth loving, good food, healthy food from the ground – 1
 Nappy hair -1
 Looks many different ways – 1
 Her play (Kinky Roots) – 1
 Courage – 1
 Full natural hair – 1
 Ethiopian model in the 90s – 1
 Tracie Thoms’ twists -1
 Gorgeous women with gorgeous curly hair – 1
 Image of light skin woman “biracial hair” – 1
 Image of dark skin woman with kinky hair as depicted in the media – 1
 CurlyNikki – 1
 Twist outs - 1
 Shaved head – 2

Natural hair (definition) – phrases most commonly came up; I did not define natural hair in the interviews

No chemicals – 11
 Little to no products (natural based products only) – 3
 Twists, Bantu knots, braids – 1
 Well taken care of with organic products, no heat; anything without chemical process or what your hair would look like when it is wet – 3
 Not straightened – 2
 No heat – 4

Can occur with basic instruments – 1
 Your God given hair – 5
 Non altered curl pattern – 1
 Being yourself –2
 Loving who you are – 1
 Wearing your hair however your natural hair is and taking care of it – 2
 Freedom – 4
 Experimenting –1
 Challenge – 1
 Not really rebellion, but no really fitting into standard of beauty – 1
 Comfortable with self and expressing culture –1
 Embracing who you are – 4
 Being healthy physically and mentally –1
 What you want your hair to be – 1
 Carefree – 1
 Cheap – 1
 Beautiful hair –2
 Being the best/ doing the best that I can for my hair – 1
 Security – 1
 Unique – 1
 What grows out of your head – 1
 Strength – 1
 Confidence – 3
 *one person noted it takes a different type of confidence to be natural, accepting what type of hair you have, and feeling beautiful
 Easy and simplicity – 1
 Hasn't been styled in any way – 1
 It means so much – 1
 Power, confidence, acceptance, owning yourself – 1
 The way you were born -1
 A black woman being comfortable with her hair as it grows out of her head -1
 Not entirely altering her appearance from the way it grows out naturally – 1
 A black woman embracing herself, part of who she is – 1

Considers self-natural

Yes- 31

No- 3

Both – 7

*people who said both tended to flat iron or straighten their hair on a daily or weekly basis but did NOT use chemicals in their hair

* one person is transitioning from processed to non-processed hair

Unsure – 2

* trying to be natural or unsure of stance/current stage of “naturalness”

Years of being natural:

Whole life – 5

1 year – 7

2 years -2

2 ½ years – 1

3 years – 3

6 years – 2

7 years – 1

11 years – 1

12 years – 1

9 years – 1

4 years -- 2

Comfortable with term ‘natural hair movement’

Yes- 38

No – 4

Is there a real movement?

Yes – 33

- people noted that they did not want the movement to appear not real because they were into what the movement stood for; has potential to be a real movement

No – 7

Both – 2

* Two people noted that it is a movement because you a part of a group of people going natural, but at the same time, not sure if a huge wave of people are doing this

Black hair political or politicized by society?

Political- 19

- One person noted that she wasn’t sure if hair was actually political or not

Politicized- 15

- most people said it was politicized by society (dominant White society), but some people also noted that Black people also politicized hair within Black society
- One person noted that it’s only Black women who have their hair constructed in this way, and that the way she wears her hair shouldn’t be making a statement; she also stated it was inorganic and not accidental that Black women have this issue, it serves a societal purpose to delineate who is beautiful and who is not.

Both- 7

Definition of natural and natural hair movement to be inclusive

Yes – 28

- but noted that there was some resentment and or stigmas with certain

No – 12

- one person noted that a mixed race person isn't really in the movement because no matter what they do to their hair, they will still be pretty
- Others noted that existing bias are reproduced "good" hair vs. "bad hair"; also the divisiveness "#TeamNatural" and "#TeamRelaxed"
- One person said she felt excluded because other "naturals" will tell her she's not natural even when she herself identifies as natural; she said both sides are judging each other and making assumptions.
- One person felt it was racially exclusive of people outside the African American community

Solange as role model

Fair – 20

*many people also noted that Solange does not care about the movement/being a "part" or "spokesperson" for the movement

* Many also noted that she was not the first person to ever go natural

* Many also noted the importance of her being natural considering her sister is Beyoncé, or the antithesis of natural beauty (as defined by the respondents).

Not fair – 11

* many people noted that Solange never actually said she was the "face" of the movement

Both – 3

No opinion – 6

* some of these answers were not as clear for no opinion; mentioned that they appreciate what she's doing but did not directly answer the question

Hair types system (ex. 4A, 2B, 3C)

Knows/familiar with – 26

Doesn't know/not familiar with – 17

Solange and critics

Fair (can tell what her hair type is) –

Unfair (can't tell what her hair type is) – 44