“I LOVE THIS COTTON HAIR!”: BLACK WOMEN, NATURAL HAIR, AND (RE)CONSTRUCTIONS OF BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this thesis is to investigate the current natural hair movement among African American women in the United States as a space where beauty standards are simultaneously contested, reified, and reshaped. Here, the "natural hair movement" is the recent trend of Black women consciously ending the habitual chemical straightening/ processing of their natural hair texture. The study is guided by the following research questions: 1) To what extent does the "natural hair movement" participate in/ endorse Eurocentric standards of beauty? 2) How are Black women utilizing the natural hair movement to (re)define, (re)shape, and (de/re)construct meanings of beauty and Black womanhood? Utilizing theories of beauty culture/ standards of beauty and Black feminism, this study explores these research questions by way of discourse analysis. The subjects of this study consisted of four internet-based natural hair care spaces: 1) The official website of Carol's Daughter brand natural hair care products 2) CurlyNikki.com, the world's most popular natural hair blog (Walton) 3) Popular video blogger Naptural85's YouTube channel and 4) A Twitter and Tumblr page within the 4C hair type sub-grouping. The language and images within these spaces were sorted and analyzed, to reveal patterns surrounding the ways that beauty is theorized within the natural hair community, via discussions of natural hairstyles, lengths, and textures. Ultimately, the study suggests the natural hair movement is a space where negotiations of identity are occurring, as Black women have created their own space to (re)shape meanings of Black female beauty, while at times influenced by deeply embedded Eurocentric standards of beauty.

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"Whether the natural hair movement helped the Black community progress beyond painful paradigms of 'good hair' remains a matter of debate."

-Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*

*"I'm just gonna champion for the girl[s] with nappy a** hair, and show them that their hair is healthy!"*

-Joulzey, video blogger

Beginning in the late 2000s, African American women in the United States created their own Internet-based "natural hair movement." Countless women stopped chemically straightening their hair via "relaxers," and began wearing their hair "natural," as it grows out of their head without chemical processing. The natural hair movement is rooted in ideas of wellness, self-love, and self-acceptance. For New York Times writer Zina Saro-Wiwa, "this movement is characterized by self-discovery and health." For some Black women, the journey from chemically relaxed hair to natural styles can be incredibly powerful and emotional, due to the cultural significance of hair within Black communities.

For Black women, hair has always been important to identity formation. It provides a way for them to connect and communicate with other Black women (Jacobs-Huey). It also provides a space for embodied, creative forms of self-expression (Mercer). Black women's hair is also often politicized (Mercer, Owens Patton, Byrd and Tharps) within a larger patriarchal and white supremacist cultural landscape. Within this space, Black female hair is hyper-scrutinized, and held to longstanding and narrow Eurocentric standards of beauty (Patton, Mercer, Byrd and Tharps, Robinson, Rooks, hooks, Jacobs-Huey, Banks). But does this Eurocentrism exist even in the recent natural hair movement, a movement shaped by the notion of Black self- acceptance?

This paper explores African American women's recent "natural hair" movement as a site of contestation, where Black physicality is simultaneously neutralized and affirmed. While the natural hair movement in some ways recreates colorism adjacent hierarchies of "good" and "bad" hair, it also creates a space for Black women to reframe and reshape meanings of Black femininity and beauty. The natural hair movement has flourished precipitously and provided a space for renewed acceptance of Black female hair. However, particularly as the movement has become more commodified and commercialized, there appears to potentially be a problem of the marginalization of certain hair textures, styles, and lengths.

My aim is to explore and analyze the visuals and language used within advertisements, YouTube videos, blog posts, and social media in order to assess constructions of beauty within natural hair, and the extent to which they both reify and challenge Eurocentric standards of beauty. I also aim to explore the unique spaces that Black women have created autonomously in response to this context, particularly the Internet spaces created by and for women who self-identify with the 4C hair type.

This project will be guided by the following research questions:

- To what extent does the "natural hair movement" participate in/ endorse Eurocentric standards of beauty?
- How are Black women utilizing the natural hair movement to (re)define, (re)shape, and (de/re)construct meanings of beauty and Black womanhood?

Because it is relatively new, few scholars have analyzed the recent natural hair movement of the late 2000s. While bloggers and journalists have briefly discussed the marginalization of kinky hair textures, the notion has not been considered within academia. While Byrd and Tharps's *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* briefly suggest that

hierarchal “good hair”/ “bad hair” discourse does exists within the natural hair movement, no one has more specifically analyzed the images and words within this movement for the reifying of Eurocentric beauty standards.

This work is important because Black hair has always been important to Black people for informing and shaping concepts of Black identity. It has often served as space for assimilation and measurement of proximity to whiteness for Black people. However, hair has also consistently been a space for creativity, autonomy and self-expression among Black people, particularly Black women. This study interrogates some racialized biases and assumptions of a space like the natural hair movement, but also aims to record and give voice to the ways that Black women have critically considered their marginalization, and created their own spaces of community, support, and self-love. The findings from this research will help us better understand more about the Eurocentric beauty standards pressed onto Black women, and how Black women understand, subvert, or relate to these beauty standards—which are often antithetical to their own embodiment as Black women.

Mapping The Natural Hair Movement

Before the current natural hair movement, there was another moment within the US context when natural hair was in vogue. In the 60s and 70s, the Black Power movement and the slogan “Black is beautiful” were made symbolic by images of the afro (Byrd and Tharps, Mercer, Dash, Patton, Muther). Then, the afro was sometimes called the/ a “natural,” and it was often associated with Black beauty, Black pride, and Afrocentrism. However, a reemergence of conservativeness in the 1980s caused the afro to consequently fall out of fashion (Byrd and Tharps, Mercer). Accordingly, during the 1980s, braids were even being banned in many workplaces, as with the infamous 1981 American Airlines lawsuit, in which a woman named

Renee Rogers was fired for wearing cornrows (Byrd and Tharps, Caldwell). Indeed, Black hair was a site of contestation, as many Black women faced the constant pressure to assimilate in the workplace. Hair was policed in ways that continued on into the early 2000s, such as with the US Army's banning of many natural hairstyles (Henderson and Butler).

The eighties also brought the rise of the "curly perm" or the "Jheri Curl." Byrd and Tharps state:

> The Curl was the pinnacle of the intersection between a consumer market looking to explore new visual avenues and a beauty manufacturing industry looking to regain some of the ground it lost during the product-deficient Afro days. The style was heralded as a low-maintenance, versatile wake-up-and-go epiphany. (Byrd and Tharps 106)

In some ways, it seems the Jheri curl emerged as a way to neutralize the politicized afros of the decade before. It was new, it was textured, and it was relatively easy to style and maintain. On the Jheri curl, cultural critic Kobena Mercer states:

> Hairstyles such as […] the curly-perm of the 1980s are syncretic products of New World stylization. Refracting elements from both black and white cultures through this framework of exchange and appropriation, imitation and incorporation, such styles are characterized by the *ambivalence* of their meaning. (Mercer 115)

The eighties also brought about the rise of new hair care products such as mousse and gel, which allowed for Black women to start experimenting with new hairstyles. Many wanted "big" hairstyles, a la 1980s Oprah Winfrey's hair. Meanwhile, the eighties also brought about a different, more sub-culture rooted natural hair presence—dredlocs. According to Byrd and Tharps, the popularity of reggae music in this moment brought an introduction of locs, "the style popularized by Rastafarians, [and] the result of hair that has not been combed and has grown into

ropelike pieces" (Byrd and Tharps 121). Though not as widespread as the afro during the "Black is beautiful" era, locs in this moment also served as a symbol of Blackness and counterhegomony. A critical mass of Black people, particularly those inhabiting politically conscious, liberal, or subversive spaces, continued consistently wearing their hair loc'ed into the 1990s and 2000s.

By the time the nineties arrived, there were many options available for Black hairstyles. Indeed, "By the middle of the 1990s, more than two decades after Black Pride and the Afros had appeared, Black people were overwhelmingly taking the liberty of wearing their hair however they wanted and basically hoping their employers didn't complain," Byrd and Tharps state. Weaves, the afro, perms, wigs, locs, and flat ironed hair were all up for grabs, and each style often had a different symbolic significance for both the wearer and the onlooker. However, the natural hair movement was just around the corner, and it would change the way many Black women viewed their own unprocessed locks.

It is difficult to mark a specific beginning to the current natural hair movement, because the trend began largely via the Internet, by way of Black women communicating to each other. However, many of the dates and figures discussed in the following charting of the movement begin around 2008 or 2009. Around this time, a critical mass of Black women stopped chemically relaxing their hair ("relaxing" meaning chemically straightening), and began wearing natural hairstyles (Byrd and Tharps, Muther, Yawson, Saro-Wiwa). From 2008 to 2013, chemical hair relaxer sales decreased from $206 million to $152 million (Muther). From 2008 to 2013, there was a steady growth in all Black hair care products except chemical relaxers (Muther). The World Natural Hair Health and Beauty Show, which occurs every year in Atlanta, went from drawing about 8,000 visitors in 2006 to about 50,000 in 2011—nearly five times the

number of visitors (Bey). Because Atlanta is known for its large and diverse Black population, it was likely among the first and most thriving natural hair scenes.

The movement has not been conceptualized as overtly political, but more about self-love, self-acceptance, and a creation of safe spaces that center Black women (Lemieux, Saro-Wiwa, Muther). Journalist Zina Saro-Wiwa notes:

> It is not an angry movement. Women aren't saying their motivation is to combat Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Rather this movement is characterized by self discovery and health. 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. (Saro-Wiwa)

Saro-Wiwa's use of "transition movement" and "transitioners" to describe the natural hair movement and its participants is deft, because it speaks directly to intentionality. As the previous historicizing hopes to show, some Black women have been wearing their hair without chemical straightening, in "natural" hairstyles, well before what we now know as the current natural hair movement. However, the natural hair movement speaks to the large number of Black women who have consciously chosen to *"transition"* from chemically relaxing or straightening their hair to wearing it natural.

Celebrities and the media have played a major part in the development of the natural hair movement, particularly throughout 2012. In February of 2012, actress Viola Davis's natural hair debut caused a buzz online and on television. The then forty-seven year old actress wore her own natural, very short, and golden brown afro on the red carpet of the Essence Black Women in

Hollywood celebratory Oscars luncheon. Black women everywhere voiced their support of the look, and Davis's choice to deviate from the straight hairstyles and long extensions typical of Black women (and most women) at formal red carpet events. "As a woman with an afro, I applauded her, and thought she looked stunning," wrote the editor of MadameNoire, a blog that centers Black female perspectives and celebrities. Davis said her choice to start wearing her natural afro out at professional occasions was inspired by her husband, calling it a "A powerful statement" (MadameNoire).

Figure 1 Viola Davis's red carpet natural hair debut

However, Davis's decision to wear her natural afro was not supported by all. Many questioned whether afros/ natural hair could be "formal" enough for a Hollywood red carpet event. Additionally, Black female celebrity-driven talk show host Wendy Williams commented negatively on Davis's afro on her show, making a joke that suggested the hairstyle was outdated, and made Davis appear more masculine. Many Black women spoke out against Williams's statement, including MadameNoire:

> …She could have easily said, 'I wasn't really feeling the look, but I'm happy Viola is comfortable in her skin. I just couldn't have done it.' But no, she chose to take a dig at

her look and give the impression that yes, being natural and yourself in all facets isn't welcomed on Hollywood's biggest night. I guess if you left it up to Wendy, we would all be rocking heavy wigs and struggling to keep our heads up on the red carpet. (Madame Noire)

Indeed, Viola Davis's wearing of an afro on the red carpet caused an array of reactions, because it was (and still is, Lupita N'yongo withstanding) incredibly rare to see short, kinky, natural hair in formal Hollywood spaces—particularly on darker skinned women. Many praised and admired the choice. Others liked the look, but questioned if it was formal or appropriate enough for an Oscars related Hollywood function. Still others, such as Wendy Williams, disliked the look. This array of reactions reflects the ambivalence many Black women face by their colleagues, significant others, corkers, and family members after "going natural." The ambivalence also reflects the sorted and complex ways beauty standards and social norms are mapped onto Black female bodies, by way of hair politics.

Also in 2012, hugely successful talk show host, producer, and owner of the television network *OWN,* Oprah Winfrey, wore out her own natural hair on the cover of her own *O* Magazine's September issue. After spending decades of episodes on her talk show *The Oprah Winfrey Show* wearing wigs, straightened hair, and curling iron enabled curls, Oprah's natural debut in print was surprising and significant. The blogs took notice, as one writer wrote, "Have you seen the September issue of *O* magazine? Oprah is wearing her hair natural, and boy is she rocking it!" (Flewellen).

Finally, it is difficult to think about the spreading of the natural hair movement in the US without thinking about Solange Knowles—particularly Solange's 2012 hair looks. Solange Knowles is an indie recording artist, and the sister of R&B/ pop international superstar Beyoncé

Knowles-Carter. In 2009, Solange told Oprah Winfrey in an interview that she would no longer spend large amounts of money and time manipulating her natural hair. She said after cutting her hair off and going natural she felt "free" (Lau). By 2012, she was wearing her natural afro, and serving as the spokesperson for Carol's Daughter natural hair care line—a position from which she eventually stepped down.

In May 2012, Solange did an interview with popular Black woman's magazine *Essence* about her hair and the change. "I honestly was just tired of the energy surrounding my hair," she said, "So when I cut it, I didn't think about what anyone else would think" (Corbett). In the interview, Solange notes that she was pleasantly surprised by the number of Black women who said that her natural haircut has inspired them. She states, "I think many people, especially from other cultures, just don't understand the role hair plays in Black women's lives. I can now transform the energy surrounding my hair into something way more productive" (Corbett). In regards to the decision to go natural, the singer suggests, "If it's something you truly feel strongly about and it's going to represent you in lifestyle, hair care and health, then it's a worthwhile journey to take. I stand for people who are firm in their journey" (Corbett).

Figure 2 Knowles's Natural Hair in 2012

Later, in June of 2012, Solange responded on Twitter to critics of her natural hair. Critics called Knowles's hair "dry as heck" and "unkempt," suggesting that it needed more definition and styling. Solange responded to the insults with a series of tweets defending her hair. She admonished these online critics, who she viewed as having nothing better to do than complain about her hair. "My hair is not very important to me… so I don't encourage it to be important to you" Knowles tweeted (Lau, Steinman). Similarly to actress Viola Davis's sporting of an afro on the red carpet, Solange's afro seemed to illicit an array of reactions that ranged from praise, wonder, and disgust. Also like Davis, Solange navigated this contentious space between self-expression, normalized beauty ideals, public Black female embodiment, and agentic choices of self-adornment.

In September of 2012, the artist chose to leave her position as the spokesperson for natural hair care line Carol's Daughter. She stated that the messages produced by Carol's Daughter did not seem to mesh with her own viewpoints regarding hair. For Knowles, the notion of hairstyle as a personal choice of self-expression was not reflected by the Carol's Daughter company. She stated:

> I'm actually no longer a part of Carol's Daughter, but throughout my entire time working with them, 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; one way doesn't make us more intelligent, or more superficial, and everyone makes that choice for very different reasons. (Essex)

Like Solange, some Black women do not want their decision to discontinue using a relaxer and "going natural" to be politicized. They ultimately do not wish their choice to stop relaxing their hair to position them within a larger "natural hair movement." "I have never

painted myself as the Team Natural Vice President," Solange tweeted in June 2012, "I don't know the lingo" (Lau, Steinman). Huffington Post writer Contessa Gayles takes a similar position in her July 2012 piece "Going Natural Without Join The Movement." For Gayles, going natural now comes with the weight of being potentially labeled Afrocentric" or a "free-spirit." Gayles notes that in general, she pushes back against "categories," particularly those pertaining to "ethnic identity," due to the "limiting stereotypes and preconceived notions that never seem to fit [her] diverse heritage and upbringing, and preference for self-determination" (Gayles).

While it appears Gayles affirms her own autonomous decision to go natural, she is also reluctant to identify with the "natural hair movement" label. Here she suggests that she is reluctant to be placed in a box, particularly a racialized one. It seems for Gayles the natural hair movement reifies more essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman of African descent with natural hair. Accordingly, Gayles points out other reasons a Black woman might be coerced into going natural, other than those linked to purposely subverting beauty norms or joining a sisterhood of naturalistas. Some of these reasons include convenience, budget, and/ or not having access to a hair stylist that a woman trusts enough to relax her hair. Ultimately, Gayles argues, "For many natural women today, self confidence trumps racial pride and self-discovery takes priority over sisterhood" (Gayles). Contessa Gayles's position engenders more complexity and multiplicity when it comes to attempting to define the boundaries of the natural hair movement. Is "going natural" a state of mind, as well?

Whether or not natural hair movement has indeed established itself as a "movement" is also disputable. Blogger Kaye Flewellen's August 2012 piece, "Natural Hair: Fad, Trend or Movement?" takes up this issue. Flewellen argues that the natural hair movement is indeed a movement, due to its scope and links to social change. "The forerunners of the natural hair

movement took on the issues of self-love and inner beauty, which ultimately lead to outward expressions," Flewellen notes. She argues that the proliferation of Black women "going natural" has caused many companies to shift from ignoring natural hair care products to mass producing them. "Additionally, wearing natural hair is now so prevalent that cosmetology boards in some states have even adjusted their licensing requirements for those desiring to become natural hair specialists," Flewellen notes. Like Flewellen, this paper posits that the natural hair movement is indeed a "movement," due to its scale, prevalence, and potential ability to subvert. From here forward, the natural hair movement will indeed be referred to as a movement.

This movement has largely spread via the Internet. Linguist Lanita Jacobs-Huey speaks to how Black women have used the Internet to exchange ideas about hair; thus, the "natural hair community" falls in line with a slightly longer trajectory. Many Black women have created and utilized blogs, YouTube channels, Instagram pages, and Twitter pages to trade pictures, suggestions, product reviews, and tutorials regarding natural hair. Accordingly, Byrd and Tharps's 2014 *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* theorizes and conceptualizes this movement as #TeamNatural, a common hashtag used on Twitter and Instagram to connect and share web links, tutorials, articles, and pictures related to natural hair. Byrd and Tharps note, "By 2013, there were thousands of blogs about Black hair. Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube also has countless pages and channels dedicated to discussing its significance, care, and versatility" (182). They later note, "Through this online community, a culture developed. It went by the Twitter handle #teamnatural and had its own vocabulary to describe styles and grooming techniques" (182). The culture gave way to natural hair meet ups, Happy to Be Nappy parties, and even hair cruises (Byrd and Tharps 182).

Predictably, since its inception, the natural hair movement has since been commodified and commercialized. Market researchers predict that the overall sale of organic hair and body products will surpass $13 billion in sales by 2016. In 2007, the brand Jane Carter Solutions alone made $1.7 millions dollars (Byrd and Tharps). The naturally found/ organic products that Black women were mixing, sharing, and using on their own hair (jojoba oil, shea butter, argan oil, coconut oil, for example) are now used as points of marketing for larger corporations. Byrd and Tharps state "Mainstream manufacturers, witnessing the introduction of natural hair products in the marketplace by mostly Black female entrepreneurs, responded by taking their already existing products and changing the packaging, perhaps adding some exotic-sounding oils or fruit juices to their shampoos and conditioners" (208). Tharps and Byrd specifically mention Procter and Gamble, who promptly developed a line called Relaxed and Natural, and accordingly switched their packaging for these products from white to brown. Many major companies (ironically, several that have sold chemical relaxers for decades) now market "natural hair" product lines. Indeed, it has perhaps never made better business sense to "go natural."

In 2014 and beyond, the natural hair movement has now changed the landscape of the ways Black women's hair is being discussed, cared for, and marketed to. *Essence,* a widely popular Black women's magazine, now has a reoccurring "natural" hair column, which features products, personal narratives, and lifestyle advice. Famous Black females such as actress Tamara Mowry have used social media as a platform to share their own natural hair journey with their thousands of fans. Popular blogger Nikki Walton's book *Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair* has sold many copies, and was nominated in June 2014 for the 45th NAACP Image Awards (broadcasted on TV One channel) for "Outstanding

Literary Work- Debut Author." It appears that natural hair is here to stay and has made a major imprint on business, media, and culture both within and outside of Black communities.

Chapter Two

Standards of Beauty/ Beauty Culture

For many years, feminist scholars have written about the ways that narrow, hegemonic beauty ideals harm women and perpetuate sexism. Perhaps the most well-known text regarding this issue is Naomi Wolf's seminal 1990 text *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women.* Wolf argues that social gains for women resulting from feminist movements have engendered a backlash she calls the "beauty myth." This beauty myth involves the pursuit of a constructed notion of "physical perfection," which leads to self-loathing, self-consciousness, and unrealistically high aspirations for women. Sexism allows for women's bodies to be evaluated more harshly, and this physical evaluation alone often indicates the woman's worth. Wolf writes:

> We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth. It is the modern version of a social reflex that has been in force since the Industrial Revolution. As women released themselves from the mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it waned to carry on its work of social control. (Wolf 10)

Sandra Lee Bartky conceptualizes these kind of hegemonic notions of femaleness in part as the "Femininity Project." She argues that society expects women to be particularly "docile bodies" who regulate themselves and their behavior according to a socially created and perpetuated idea of "femininity." She argues that the Femininity Project manifests itself through expectations of women's 1) body size and configuration 2) movement and 3) ornamental décor. When discussing women's bodies as an ornamented surface, Bartky details some of the long and

expensive processes wrapped up in beauty culture, which involves the pampering and primping of women's hair, skin, and make-up application.

Ultimately, all of these pursuits involved in the Femininity Project do not result in a higher social standing, or respect towards women. In fact, women are often ridiculed for caring so much about such "frivolous" endeavors. Society expects women to work towards these unrealistic feminine beauty ideals by placing a huge importance on females' outer appearance. However, these efforts are not rewarded with admiration or social progress, but instead they are often mocked and depreciated. Also, women are perhaps more unable to focus on forming sisterhoods or making radical change because the nature of the Femininity Project requires competition and judgment by and towards other women. Meanwhile, capitalism rains supreme and big business profits millions of dollars from these female insecurities.

Bartly references sociologist Michel Foucault in mentioning the "Panoptical Male Connoisseur." She relates prisoners who self-regulate, due to fear of being watched by a guard, to women who self-regulate their bodies and appearance through the eyes of a male gaze. For example, no one has to force women to purchase or apply make-up daily. Nevertheless, they may due so routinely, in order to avoid looking "average," "tired," or even "ugly" through the eyes of others—men in particular.

Meanwhile, women of color have complicated these notions of beauty culture further, by pointing out the ways that limited notions of "beauty" and "perfection" are also linked to racism and white supremacy. Terms such as "Eurocentric" or "white supremacist" beauty norms or ideals reflect the ways that mainstream beauty culture has socio-historically privileged features associated with whiteness—light skin, straighter hair, thin noses and thin body frames (Byrd and Tharps, Hunter, Lake) Accordingly, features associated with Blackness have often denigrated

socially—darker skin, wider noses, larger lips, and kinky hair textures. Though this discussion centers Blackness in an American context, Eurocentric beauty ideals have been documented across populations of people of color, and across the African diaspora.

Margaret Hunter's *Race, Gender, and the Politics of Skin Tone* argues that Eurocentric beauty standards are another standard used to serve the interest of two privileged social groups: whites and males. It allows whites continue to be perceived as most beautiful of all, while maintaining patriarchal society, as women divide, torment, and compete with themselves over who can be seen as beautiful within the eyes of the majority (Hunter). Hunter also notes, "Because race and gender can only be understood together, it follows that there must be a gender component to colorism itself. Light skin, in addition to being high status, is also regarded as more feminine, refined, or delicate" (Hunter 3). In a world where qualities such as beauty, femininity, and delicacy are often lauded in women, these abstract and socially constructed standards of beauty ideals manifest themselves constantly.

These social standards are reflected in the fact that Black hair has been socio-historically divided into categories of "good" and "bad" hair. This hierarchy is linked to European-centered standards of beauty, as "good" hair is typically defined as hair with a more wavy or loosely curled texture, while "bad" or "nappy" hair is kinkier and afro textured (Patton, Mercer, Byrd and Tharps, Robinson, Rooks, hooks, Jacobs-Huey, Banks). Scholar Kobena Mercer's piece "Black Hair/ Style Politics" states, "'Good' hair, when used to describe hair on a black person's head, means hair that looks European, straight, not too curly, not that kinky. And, more importantly, the given attributes of our hair are often referred to by descriptions such as 'woolly,' 'tough' or, more to the point, just plain old 'nigger hair'" (Mercer 101).

Historically "tests" were done to determine if Black people's skin was light enough, or their hair was "good" (wavy/ loosely curly) enough to be accepted in certain social spaces. While tests like the "brown paper bag test" functioned to police skin tones, tests like the "comb test" concurrently policed hair textures (Byrd and Tharps). Scholar Obiagele Lake's *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America* depicts advertisements for products as far back at the late 1800s that promised to make "kinky hair grow long and wavy" (Lake 54). The good hair/ bad hair dichotomy is also linked to questions of maintenance, as some Black women feel that "bad hair" needs to be straightened and styled, while "good hair" is more ready-to-wear (Robinson).

As Tracey Owens Patton states, this hierarchy of hair textures "does not come solely from the African American community but also from the Euro American community, which promotes the acceptable standard of beauty" (Patton). Patton says that this standard of beauty privileges "very light skin," "blue or green eyes," and "long, straight or wavy hair" (Patton 39). Relatedly, Robinson's 2011 article "Hair As Race: Why 'Good Hair' May Be Bad for Black Females" makes key these links by connecting "good" and "bad" hair to the concept of colorism. Robinson defines colorism as "an intra-ethnic hierarchy that communicates light ethnic superiority" and is "a system of privileges, benefitting Blacks and other people of color with phenol-typical features commonly found among Whites, particularly lighter skin color and straighter hair textures" (Robinson 362). Robinson and others like her argue colorism's link to western standards of beauty. Accordingly, Robinson links colorism and hair hierarchies as forms of racialized beauty standards.

Relatedly, "good hair" as previously defined by loosely curly or wavy hair texture is often attributed to bi-racial, or multi-racial ancestry (Bell, Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux, Robinson,

Tate). Here, beauty standards and colorism are mapped onto hair textures. While "good" hair is often conceptualized as a marker of bi-racial and multi-racial identity, nappy afro-textured hair is accordingly associated with people who are "fully" Black (Bell, Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux, Robinson, Tate). Accordingly, Byrd and Tharps define the dichotomy by stating that during slavery, "Good hair was thought of as long and lacking in kink, tight curls, and frizz. And the straighter the better. Bad hair was the antithesis, namely African hair in its purest form" (Byrd and Tharps 18).

As was discussed in the previous subsection *Mapping the Natural Hair Movement*, this association of nappy hair with people who are "fully" Black functioned strategically throughout the 60s and 70s. In this moment, the Black Power movement and the slogan "Black is beautiful" were accompanied by images of the afro (Byrd and Tharps, Mercer, Dash, Patton, Muther). The afro functioned as a symbol of Black beauty, Black pride, and Afrocentrism. Prolific scholar and social justice activist Angela Davis recalls herself being referred to as "the Afro," (Davis 37) as her own politics were consistently associated with her large, kinky textured afro hairstyle. Patton conceptualizes this era as a "counter-hegeomic creation" and a "resistant strategy" (Patton). Sex symbols of the mid-70s such as Blaxploitation film star Pam Grier and the character Thelma from *Good Times* allowed room for the arguably revolutionary notion that Black women in Black communities with natural Black afro hair could be sexy and alluring (Byrd and Tharps, Muther).

Mercer complicates this moment by arguing, "it should be clear that what we [are/ were] dealing with are New World creations of black people's culture" (114) and that there has been "no preexisting referent" for the Afro hairstyle in any "actually existing' African cultures" (114). He also asks, "The historical importance of Afro and Dreadlocks hairstyles cannot be

underestimated as marking a liberating rupture, or 'epistemological break,' with the dominance of white-bias. But were they really that 'radical' as solutions to the ideological problematization of black people's hair?" (104) Mercer responds to his own question by discussing how each of these styles "became rapidly *de*politicized and, with varying degrees of resistance, both were incorporated into mainstream fashion within the dominant culture" (105). Byrd and Tharps's *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* also discusses how the afro was subsumed by the mainstream, and decimated by the growing conservativeness of the 1980s.

The policing of Black women's hairstyles in accordance with standards of beauty and notions of "professionalism" and/ or "polish" has been consistent throughout history. At times this policing is even legislated and regulated. Braids and other natural hairstyles have been regulated within many offices, businesses, and work spaces. For example, the aforementioned 1981 case of Rogers vs. American Airlines involved the rights of employees to wear braids in the workplace (Caldwell). In this case, and many like it, Black women are told to unbraid their hair, disguise their braids by wearing a bun, or covering them with a wig. Of cases like these, scholar Paulette M. Caldwell says, "This latter solution—the forcible covering up of a black woman's hair—connotes a demeaning servitude that persists even in the face of changes..." (Caldwell 390).

Despite this deeply and socio-historically politicized context, Black women have always been creative, autonomous, and varied in terms of their hairstyles (Mercer, Tharps and Byrd). Mercer notes, "On the political horizon of postmodern popular culture I think the *diversity* of contemporary Black hairstyles is something to be proud of […] because this variousness testifies to an inventive, improvisational aesthetic" (128). Black hair is a space for self-expression and innovative ideas for styling.

Commodification, Hair Hierarchies, and the Rise of the "Curls"

Having considered both the commodified natural hair movement and beauty culture, we can now begin to understand potential relationships between the two. The expansion and commodification of the natural hair movement has allowed it to expand to now include/ target many non-Black women who have "curly" hair. Many blog names and product names function under the "unifying" banner of "curly" hair (Lemieux, Tharps and Byrd, Yawson).

Texturemedia Inc. (TMI), a social platform that engages a multicultural community on hair care, released its fourth annual report, "Texture Trends," in December 2014. TMI did not release the report to the public, but did publish a few insights. The survey involved 6,000 participants with "textured" hair via Naturallycurly.com and CurlyNikki.com on topics regarding hair care (Cyk). According to the survey, about ninety-two percent of Black participants described their hair as "coily curly," while six percent said "curly" and only one percent said "wavy." Meanwhile, about forty-four percent of multi-racial participants called their hair curly, and about sixty-seven percent of the white participants. Additionally, "curly" haired consumers were more likely to purchase products with "curl" in the title, while women with more "coily" hair were most likely to buy products that said "natural" (Cyk). These numbers suggest that the opening of the natural hair movement to women with curly hair also equated to an opening of the natural hair movement to multi-racial and non-Black women. Women of more races are more likely to respond to use of the word "curly," while women who identified their hair as "coily curly," over ninety percent of the Black women, were more likely to respond to the word "natural" than "curly."

Accordingly, brands like "Curls" and "Curls Unleashed" products market to all women with "curly" hair. Also, brands such as Mixed Chicks and Miss Jessie's products were some of

the first natural hair products on mainstream shelves, and were also designed by and for bi-racial race women (Tharps and Byrd). This opening up of the natural hair movement to non-Black women arguably allows more room for the domination of "curly" textures. Accordingly, writer Ama Yawson notes, "The curl hegemony makes me fear that one day the natural hair movement will be synonymous with curly hair and kinky textures will be completely eliminated" (Yawson). Let us again revisit the notion of a hierarchal relationship between "good" and "bad" hair, but this time as mapped onto the natural hair movement.

As Byrd and Tharps point out during their discussion of the natural hair movement, hierarchies of "good" and "bad" hair still exist within this space. The existence of the hierarchies within the natural hair movement may feel a bit unlikely and ironic, given the aforementioned association of "the natural" with Black pride and self-love. Byrd and Tharps mention a vlogger named Naskesha Smith who they state:

> …Became an online hit for pointing out that a good/ bad hair mentality exists in one of the most unexpected areas: the natural hair movement. In 2010, Smith released a video on her popular YouTube channel called "You Natural Hair Girls Make Me Sick!" which claims that there are not enough women with "real African, textured hair" present on many natural hair sites. (Byrd and Tharps 190)

Similarly, popular YouTube vlogger Jouelzy posted a video in April 2014 called "So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination." This video has gained 126, 382 views, and garnered several video responses that engage Jouelzy's assertions. In this video, Jouelzy discusses the ways in which she feels she has been overlooked and marginalized by advertisers, sponsors, and some viewers because she has self-described "nappy" hair. As her video states, she was so deeply affected by what she perceived as unfair treatment within the

natural hair community that she now predominantly blogs about pop culture and politics, rather than natural hair.

It is within this context that we can more aptly consider the proliferation of "hair typing" within the natural hair movement. Originally found in a 1998 book by Oprah's hair stylist Andre Walker, Byrd and Tharps describe "hair typing" as:

> The numerical system [that] goes from one through four with A, B, and C variations. The straighter the hair, the lower the letter and number. Most Black women fall somewhere between 3B and 4C, though there are many, like Smith, who argue that a substantial amount of natural hair sites spend a lot of time focused on the threes. (Byrd and Tharps 190)

Curlier textures are "3s"; more kinky textures are "4s." The "kinkiest hair" is often classified as "4C." These designations have pragmatic use, as they can help members of the natural hair community find others with similar hair textures. However, for some, this "typing of natural hair" is controversial. Byrd and Tharps quote scholar Yaba Blay who says, "It is no different than talking about 'grades' of hair. When we talk about the politics of beauty, it is aligned with and reflective of White power and White supremacy. And this exists in the natural hair community" (191).

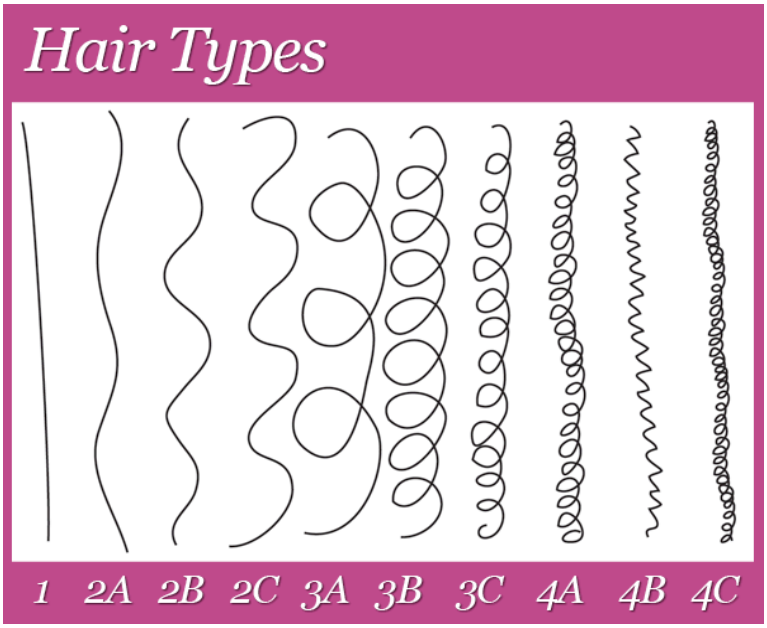

Figure 3 Hair typing

Like hair textures socio-historically named as "good," the coveted "3" hair types are often associated with bi-racial or multi-racial people (Byrd and Tharps, Lemiux). Lemieux maintains, "there has been too much representation of sisters who have what has been described as 'multicultural hair'" and that the natural hair movement is "most powerful" when it encourages the celebration of "all […] biologically-determined hair textures, not just the ones seen in rap videos" (Lemieux).

Byrd and Tharps briefly discuss the bi-racial actress and daughter of Diana Ross, Tracee Ellis Ross, and how many Black women participating in the natural hair movement have coveted her hair. Byrd and Tharps note, "What was rarely discussed was that Ross has a White father, meaning that part of the secret behind her big, bouncy curls was not what she found in a bottle but what was in her gene pool" (191). Imani Dawson, creator of a natural hair Web site called A Tribe Called curl, also states; "big, biracial hair" is often the "unspoken goal" of many members of the natural hair community (Byrd and Tharps 191).

Echoing these sentiments, a meme circulated online throughout 2014 that poked fun at these aspirations, and the subsequent disappointment many Black women felt after "going natural" and realizing that their own hair texture was much different from bi-racial Ross. Ross responded to the meme on her Instagram page, stating that Black women should appreciate their own natural hair. She began a short-lived YouTube campaign called "#HairLove," in which she asked Black women to describe what they loved most about their hair. The aforementioned meme, and Ross herself, are below:

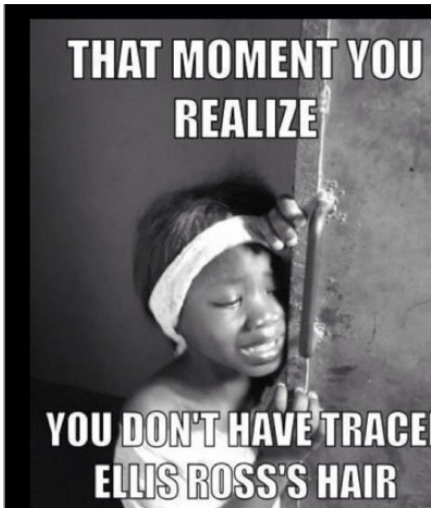

Figure 4 An Internet meme

Figure 5 Actress Tracee Ellis Ross

The natural hair movement, then, has derived from a socio-historical context in which Black female hair has loaded meanings and social implications. Black hairstyles and textures are consistently compared to their white counterparts, and are sometimes susceptible to

commodification and absorption into the mainstream. When considering dominant beauty standards, Black hair has been divided into hierarchal divisions of "good" hair (looser/ wavy curl patterns) and "bad" hair (kinkier, more "nappy" afro texture). The former is often lauded, fetishized, and associated with mixed race ancestry; meanwhile, the latter is often associated with Blackness, which allows room for it to be strategically utilized as a symbol of Black pride or Black beauty.

It is within this context that the natural hair movement of the 2000s exists. While aspects of Black pride and community have influenced the natural hair movement, some within the movement have critiqued it for its commodification, and tendency to privilege certain hair textures.

Black Women Respond to Beauty Culture

In spite of the hegemonic and pervasive nature of Eurocentric beauty standards, Black women have always responded to and reshaped dominant narratives regarding beauty, femininity, and womanhood. Black women continue to build communities, construct narratives, and make their own meanings of these concepts. Ultimately, Black women continue to assert their own "agency," which bell hooks defines in *Feminism is For Everybody: Passionate Politics* as a woman's "power to be self-defining" (hooks 95). Indeed, Hershini Bhana Young's chapter in *Representation and Black Womanhood* notes, "No mechanism of power can foreclose all possibilities of disruption, intervention, and transformation" (Young 58). The question of agency involves autonomous enacting of one's own self, in spite of oppressive forces.

Prolific Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins discusses this enacting of one's own self as "the power of self-definition." In her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, she notes that "the overarching theme of

finding a voice to express a self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme of Black feminist thought" (Collins 94). She discusses the importance of "safe spaces" for Black women to exist among each other, as well as the importance of "self-valuation" and "respect." She notes:

> By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (Collins 107)

For Collins, Black women defining themselves on their own terms affirms their power as agentic human beings. By defining themselves, Black women are consequently engaging with the power dynamics that have attempted to define themselves for themselves—they are rejecting the "authority" of larger forces that attempt to shape their identities for them. Mapping Collins's ideas onto beauty culture might suggest that by Black women defining beauty for themselves, they are questioning the permanence and salience of what is "assumed" by dominant culture to be beautiful. What does it mean that Black women are constantly reshaping for themselves what it means to be beautiful, when normative beauty standards that are often defined in opposition to their embodiment?

One text in which Black women have done this work is called *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips, and Other Parts*. Edited by Ayana Byrd and Akiba Solomon, the anthology combines the voices of scholars, celebrities, and Black female writers

narrativizing the ways they view their bodies and selves. Recording artist, poet, actress, and Grammy-winning songwriter Jill Scott references colorism in her piece, and the sorted ways that slavery has left many focused on color. She speaks of how the media makes even her, a well-known star feel inadequate at time. While she is constantly navigating that space, Scott completes her piece by noting:

> I feel most beautiful when I'm not really sweatin' it, those times when I'll walk past a mirror and think, 'There's a pretty girl there.' Because this is who I am. My fingers work, my toes work, my ears are pretty good, and I can see it in both directions. My freedom comes with knowing that this body has been blessed. (Scott 148)

Meanwhile, spiritual life coach, best-selling author, and television personality Iyanla Vanzant has a different take on Black women, embodiment, and beauty culture. She states:

> I don't care what Black women's bodies represent to America. I only care what they represent to Black women. America has not included Black women in its ideal of what is beautiful. And when they do, it's a select few of us […] So it's of absolutely no significance what America thinks of our bodies. The problem is getting black women to recognize that fact. (Vanzant 239)

For Vanzant, focusing on the dominant Eurocentric standards of beauty, and the ways Black women may or may not measure up, continues to decenter them. Instead, Vanzant urges Black women to render these standards irrelevant, and to focus on each other and their individual self-concept. Vanzant's piece goes on to emphasize self-care, and maintenance of physical and mental health.

One piece in *Naked: Black Women Bare All About Their Skin, Hair, Hips, Lips, and Other Parts* discusses hair—"The Curl" by April Yvonne Garret. The CEO of an image

consulting firm tells the story of her sporting a "jheri curl," a wet and wavy hairstyle popular among Black people in the 1980s. Ultimately, Garret gives up the curl, and becomes less emotionally invested in her hair all together. She interrogates the tendency to politicize Black women's hair choices, and critiques the tendency to make character judgments of Black women based on their hair. "Why does anyone care what a woman is doing with her hair as long as she feels comfortable with it?" Garrett asks us all.

Scott, Vanzant, and Garret all offer varying responses to hegemonic beauty culture's marginalization of Black women's embodiment. Though these beauty standards are systematic, oppressive, and deeply rooted, each woman offers individualized, agentic counter-narratives to the larger discourse. Each of these three women in varying ways acknowledges the larger, socio-historical implications of colorism, the media, and the politicizing of Black hair, respectively; however, they move to theorize and write down their own *self-definitions*, a la Patricia Hill Collins.

In Collins's chapter on self-definition, she distinguishes the "self" from perhaps more liberal, individualistic notions of the self. She states, "Given the physical limitations on Black women's mobility, the conceptualization of self that is part of Black women's self definitions is distinctive. Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found within the context of family and community" (Collins 105). The natural hair movement, may be one such "community" where this "self-definition" work occurs, as it is made up of Black women communicating amongst each other to negotiate what this new wave of "going natural" might mean.

After mapping the development of the natural hair movement, detailing the significance of beauty standards, and understanding that Black women respond to beauty culture in varying

ways, we can now begin to look at specific intersections of these ideas within the words and images of the current natural hair movement. To what extent does the "natural hair movement" participate in/ endorse Eurocentric standards of beauty? How are Black women utilizing the natural hair movement to (re)define, (re)shape, and (de/re)construct meanings of beauty and Black womanhood?

Chapter Three

For this study, I completed a discourse analysis of four internet-based natural hair care spaces:

1) The official website of Carol's Daughter brand natural hair care products

2) CurlyNikki.com, the world's most popular natural hair blog (Walton)

3) Popular video blogger Naptural85's YouTube channel and

4) A Twitter and Tumblr page within the 4C hair type sub-grouping

I considered both the images and language used within these four spaces, in order to discuss common patterns regarding the natural hair movement at large. I chose to consider the narratives of both Carol's Daughter as a company, as well as the blogs and social media, because these two spaces can represent both corporate and more "grassroots" narratives concerning Black female natural hair.

Considering the narratives of both a major natural hair company *and* women within the natural hair blogosphere will help to understand intersections between what is marketable and what is happening "on the ground." I felt that it was important to see what idea(l)s sell to women with natural hair; however, considering only top down narratives produced by a corporate giant such as Carol's Daughter felt like it would not do justice to the autonomy, individuality, or agency of the Black female movers and shakers involved in the movement. It is worth noting; however, that corporate interests and the blogosphere are not necessarily discrete categories, as companies often "sponsor" video bloggers by way of free products in exchange for product reviews. Accordingly, the blogosphere and corporate interests are constantly overlapping, reaffirming, and shaping one another.

Setting: Why Internet Representations?

For several decades, many Black women have regularly met one another in physical spaces, such as hair salons, in order to both 1) get their hair "done" or "fixed," meaning to have it chemically relaxed, and/ or straightened via a heated tool, such as a flat iron or a "hot comb" and 2) converse with one another about potential hairstyles or hair care recommendations (Byrd and Tharps, Jacobs-Huey). Chapter 2 of Lanita Jacobs-Huey's *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care* details the ways that Black women use both language and non-verbal cues within physical spaces ("from the kitchen to the [hair] parlor") to exchange recommendations regarding hair styling and care. Jacobs-Huey situates this exchange within a longstanding historical legacy of Black women connecting with each other and shaping their identities around hair.

However, as Chapter 5 of Jacobs-Huey's text, "BTW: How Do You Wear Your Hair?': Gender and Race in Computer-mediated Hair Debates," notes, the rise of the Internet has changed the way that exchanges regarding hair now occur. Jacobs-Huey looks at discursive and linguistic patterns around hair debates surrounding Black women that occur on the Internet to suggest that the Internet allows room for new and distinctive ways to debate ideology around Black hair. Indeed, populations marginalized by social identities such as race, sexual orientation, and class have consistently used the Internet to connect and further their own specific needs and agendas (Mehra, Merkel and Bishop). In this way, Mehra, Merkel, and Bishop suggest that the Internet can provide a tool for subversion and empowerment, specifically for Black women.

Ultimately, it is important to consider natural hair blogs, because the current natural hair movement began and flourished largely via the Internet (Byrd and Tharps, Muhammed, Yawson). Prior to both the Internet and the natural hair movement, Black women often met up physically in hair salons, friends' homes, and their own kitchens to both get their hair "fixed"

(straightened and/ or relaxed) and dialogue about hair care. However, after "going natural," many women no longer regularly frequent hair salons. This is because there is no longer a need or expectation for them to regularly have their hair straightened. Thus, Black women created new spaces to exchange ideas about their hair—spaces the Internet has allowed endless room for. There are now a massive number of Twitter pages, Instagram pages, Facebook pages, websites, blogs, and YouTube channels dedicated to styles, maintenance, and lifestyle choices regarding natural hair.

Indeed, the recent natural hair movement is inextricably linked to Internet use by way of: the producing of video tutorials and product reviews on YouTube, bloggers posting written product reviews and tutorials, the sharing of links and photos on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram; see the aforementioned #teamnatural discussion in Chapter 2), and the utilizing of social media to connect with other women and to plan in-person natural hair meet ups (Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux, Muther, Yawson). In order to understand common images and discourses surrounding the natural hair movement, it is vital to consider the participants within the natural hair blogosphere.

As discussed in Chapter One, the natural hair movement is now a multi-million dollar industry, which is heavily influenced by advertisements and corporate interests (Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux, Muther, Saro-Wiwa). The sales of products to maintain natural hairstyles are on the rise, while sales of relaxers are consistently declining (Muther, Saro-Wiwa). Companies that have sold relaxers for several years now have lines for natural hair, and "mainstream" brands of hair products marketed for non-Black women are now producing more new product lines for "curly" hair (Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux). Because natural hair is now big business, it is relevant to consider the ways in which advertising and marketing influence dominant discourses about

natural hair. This consideration will allow me to think about the various influences that shape the way Black women think about their hair, their embodiment, and beauty. As the previous discussions of Black female celebrities Viola Davis and Solange Knowles suggest, Black female natural hair is a site of contestation involving identity construction.

Sample

As the previous section details, the natural hair movement's Internet presence is now enormous. Indeed, as of April 2015, a simple Google searched of "Black natural hair" returns about 150,000,000 results. Given the large amount of material existing regarding natural hair, I have chosen a sample of materials that consider natural hair from varying perspectives (consumer, blogger, corporation) and social media platforms (blog, YouTube, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter). The project shows a glimpse at many patterns existing within a sizeable amount of the natural hair movement. The project represents a microcosm of the many spaces Black women engage over the Internet to exchange information, dialogue, and learn about natural hair and natural hair products.

One space where discourse on natural hair is produced and disseminated is by natural hair companies and corporations. One incredibly popular natural hair brand is called Carol's Daughter. The website for Carol's Daughter is among the top visited natural hair care websites, as it is the top Google search result for "natural hair products" (as of April 2015). Carol's Daughter is currently valued at $27 million, and was bought out by corporate giant L'Oreal in Fall 2014 (Doggett).

Additionally, the standalone blog that I analyzed is called CurlyNikki.com. In her 2013 book *Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair,* author

Nikki Walton calls CurlyNikki.com the most visited natural hair website in the world. Indeed, *Ebony* magazine writer Jamilah Lemieux calls the website "wildly popular" (Lemieux). As the website's name indicates, it was created to "affirm those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair" by way of "hair therapy," which "serves as an educational tool, but also as a platform for each of you to share your experiences, frustrations, and triumphs of being Naturally Glamorous" (CurlyNikki). Interestingly, the website's "About" page explicitly depoliticizes hair, noting, "My approach to natural hair is a little different. It is neither a political statement, nor a 'back to nature' movement. It's simply one part of a fabulous, healthier lifestyle...an extension of our beauty. Making natural hair chic, versatile and accessible is the name of the game!" (CurlyNikki).

Though the blog is named after its creator Nikki Walton, the website is a space for contributed written pieces, comments, and forums for and by women across the world. This point is critical because it highlights the interactive and communal nature of the space. Many of the followers and bloggers are "loyal" to the website, and consistently post, comment, and interact on the forums. Also, it is important not to read the analysis of CurlyNikki.com as a function of Nikki Walton herself, an individual woman making individual decisions. Rather, this project is interested in larger patterns of discourse, representation, and ideology within the natural hair community and among many Black women.

Relatedly, I will also consider the entire videography from video blogger Naptural85, as she is one of the most watched natural hair video bloggers on YouTube. Naptural85, or Whitney, currently holds 70,609 subscribers and 45,329,343 views after joining YouTube on August 8, 2009. Like CurlyNikki.com, Naptural85's channel has been chosen due to its popularity. Her extreme presence of the natural hair scene suggests that thousands and thousands of women

identity with her message and platform. She has posted over one hundred YouTube videos providing product reviews, styling tutorials, and recommendations for maintenance. Because I have explored all of Naptural85's video content, and she joined YouTube in 2009, the content I discuss spans from 2009 to early 2015.

Finally, I also wanted to think through the emergence of natural hair spaces that specifically cater to "4C" audiences. Again, 4C hair is known as the "most" kinky and tightly coiled hair texture. The 4C hair texture is most often directly linked to Blackness and Black identity, and it has socio-historically been denigrated with phrases such as "bad," hair, "coarse" hair, and "nappy" hair. As the previous chapter outlined, many women within the natural hair community argue that the 4C hair texture has been marginalized and depreciated within the movement. Thus, I felt it might be useful to investigate spaces created specifically *for* 4C further.

After a Google search for "4C hair," the most popular website created specifically for 4C natural hair to appear was 4CHairChick.com. Accordingly, the website describes itself as "The #1 Online Community for Type 4 Naturals." The standalone website also disseminates content via Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and Pintrest. I decided to consider the web content on 4CHairChick.com's *Tumblr*, *Instagram,* and *Twitter* pages. I chose these three platforms because they are three spaces that have been critical to the proliferation of the natural hair movement (Byrd and Tharps), but that have been not been otherwise discussed within the confines of this project. I examined content from 2015 of the 4C sub-genre.

Indeed, the natural hair movement also exists on Google+, Facebook, and Pintrest; however, there is only so much room in this paper to discuss social media platforms. Within this entire project, I have attempted to choose the social media platforms that are the most popular

and relevant in shaping the discourse within the natural hair community: YouTube, the standalone blog, Tumblr, Twitter, and Instagram.

Methodology

This project constitutes a *discourse analysis* of the web content found on the aforementioned four Internet-based natural hair spaces. According to McDougal's *Research Methods in Africana Studies,* a discourse analysis is "a research technique that allows [researchers] to systematically analyze the hidden and visible content in communication messages" (McDougal 265). McDougal notes, "Virtual documents such as websites and Internet postings can also be a subjects of research, as they reveal data about their creators or authors. Documents have to be interpreted and analyzed within the context that they were produced" (McDougal 266). Following McDougal, this project assumes that there is value is studying discourses taking place on the Internet, as they help researchers and scholars understand the audience, creators, and context of the texts.

This project also assumes that there is extreme value in privileging the voices of the Black women in this space, as they make up most of what we know as the natural hair movement. Despite the fact that the researcher within academia has traditionally been positioned as the "expert," and consider that the consumer-driven media has often been discussed as the most powerful force in spaces like this, this project assumes that the Black female participants' narratives and voices must be prioritized. These assumptions fall in line with Black feminist ways of thinking about knowledge production (Collins).

Indeed, Patricia Hill Collins's seminal text *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* speaks of the "Eurocentric Masculinist Knowledge Validation Process." Here, Collins argues that the "institutions, paradigms, and other

elements of the knowledge validation procedure controlled by elite white men constitute the Eurocentric masculinst knowledge validation process" (Collins 203). For Collins, Black women have been marginalized within this space throughout history, and have often been forced to theorize in spaces other than academia. She notes:

> Because Black women have had to struggle against white male interpretations of the world in order to express a self-defined standpoint, Black feminist thought can best be viewed as subjugated knowledge. The suppression of Black women's efforts for self-definition in traditional sites of knowledge production has led African-American women to use alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important locations for articulating the core themes of Black feminist consciousness." (Collins 202)

Had Collins written this piece about fifteen years later, she may have added "the Internet" to this list of "alternative sites" of "knowledge production."

Procedure

Within this project, I considered both languages and images within these varying platforms. As far as images, I asked questions such as: Who are the models and women featured? Who is chosen as the ideal? Which textures and lengths are prevalent, and which are less common? What styles recur most often? What patterns emerge? In regards to language: What are the goals/ ideals? What do the followers/ consumers want to achieve? How is natural hair discussed? What is described as beautiful? How often are hair length mentioned, and in what ways?

I took extensive notes, and I looked for common themes found within YouTube, advertisements, and the blogosphere. I looked for words and phrases that frequently reoccurred

within each space, and images that seemed to be common across varying platforms. I then categorized and these words and images according to common themes and proceeded to analyze them in according to the aforementioned theories and research questions.

Chapter Four

Is Some Natural Hair "Too Natural"? The Language of Styling Natural Hair

One pattern that emerged constantly throughout the study was the language of natural hair needing to be made "manageable" by way of "definition" via styling products. Natural hair needs to be "done" via these hair products and styling methods, otherwise it is not necessarily socially accepted. Natural hair is most ideal when it is styled, defined, and polished. Hair in its natural state is something to be altered, stretched, and shaped. To quote one narrative from a Carol's Daughter product, it must be "tamed." Ultimately, much of the discourse suggests that there is indeed such thing as natural hair that is "too natural."

One way that this idea plays out is the constant use of the term "curl definition" as a goal for natural hair. The language of "definition" suggests that the product or method in question will take away the ambiguity of hair caused by frizzy-ness or unruliness of hair in its natural state, and replace it with a more polished look. For example, the narrative of Carol's Daughter's "Marla Curl Collection" states,

> We love our curls to be bouncy, shiny and flow freely, but they get a bad reputation when they start misbehaving, naturally becoming dry, hard and unmanageable. Take control and train them to spiral into perfection, staying soft, manageable and easy to define. (Carol's Daughter)

In this passage, hair in its natural state is described as "misbehaving" something that should be "controlled" and "trained." The product's narrative caters to and reinforces the notion that natural hair is best when it is soft, manageable, and of course "defined." The idealizing of "bouncy" and "shiny" hair was also common throughout the natural hair community. The passage's use of the phrase "spiral into perfection" also suggests that another goal of hair-defining products is to bring out a more precise spiraled curl pattern. As the aforementioned

chapters note, curly hair with a distinct spiral curl pattern (the "3" hair type) is the most often coveted hair texture for Black women.

The narrative for Carol's Daughter's Hair Milk Alcohol-Free Styling Gel uses much of the aforementioned rhetoric regarding the ideal natural hair look. The product page reads:

> Your perfect style should simply, stay put! Take control of every curl, coil, kink and wave with this high-hold gel that keeps styles touchably soft and instantly locked in place. This gel is alcohol-free and super-hydrating, so no matter your hair texture, it stays defined and full of shine without any dusty, flaky residue.

Again, we see that natural hair is something the product user must "take control," of, in order for the "perfect style" to "stay put." The goal of hair definition is again present, as well as the pursuit of shine. In total, Carol Daughter markets four products that claim to do the similar work of "defining" natural hair: Hair Milk Alcohol-Free Styling Gel, Marula Curl Therapy Diffusing and Styling Lotion, Marula Curl Therapy Softening Serum, Hair Milk Nourishing & Conditioning Styling Pudding.

Many product descriptions use verbs such as "control," "manage," "tame," and "perfect" alongside adjectives to describe un-styled natural hair such as, "unruly" "stiff," "uncooperative," and "frazzled." For example, the Cupuacu Smoothing Blow Dry Cream, product states: "Frizz-stopping Cupuaçu, pronounced koo-poo-ah-soo, is a rare butter—harvested only once a year in the Amazon Rain Forest—that silkens and perfects dry, unruly, frizz-prone hair." Below is another example from the description of Black Vanilla Edge Control styling product:

> Forget sticky pomades, crunchy gels and heavy waxes to control edges and flyaways! This clear edge smoother applies dry, not wet, so hair stays sleek when styling face-framing frizzies to be flat, smoothed-out and under complete control. Made with Aloe to

keep hair moisturized, soft and manageable, plus Honey Extract to help seal split ends and hold hair in place so your polished pompadours, tapered cuts and slick ponytails never look out of place.

Again, the passage suggests that hair in its natural state is something that must be kept "under complete control." Ideally it is "polished," "soft," "moisturized," "manageable," "sleek," never "out of place," "flat," and "smoothed out." Like many products marketed within the larger sphere of beauty culture, these products put forth that they are transformative, changing "unruly" hair to that which is more "flat," "smoothed out," defined, and ultimately socially acceptable. Indeed, the Carol's Daughter website sorts its products by "Hair Concern" and the option "Frizzy and Unmanageable" sits beside the likes of "Damage and Breakage" and "Dry and Dull." Ultimately, natural hair that is idealized and beautiful, is not that which is frizzy, un-styled, and in many ways the most "natural."

Relatedly, the blog and YouTube channel under study both show many tutorials for kinds of styles that simultaneously stretch natural hair, and mold in into styles that mimic curly or wavy hair textures. Some examples of these kinds of styles found on Naptural85's YouTube channel are "twists outs," "curling wands," "flexi rods," "steam rollers," "perms rods," "roller sets," "braid outs," and "curl formers." All of these styling methods, which often involve styling products similar to those products discussed above, are methods to change the look of natural hair in ways that mimic more loose curl patterns. Her channel currently features twenty-eight different video tutorials for these kinds of styles.

For example, in a video called "How To Cheat a Flexi Rod Set | Easy Technique Heatless Curls," the replication of larger curls is the goal. Several of these videos use similar language as the Carol's Daughters products regarding the goal of "defined" hairstyles. For example, the

Naptural85 channel now has posted: "My MOST DEFINED Wash and Go | Easy Technique - Naptural85," "Ultra Defined Twist Out Tutorial No Heat Curls" and "My Softest + Most Defined Twist Out Technique 2014." These kinds of styles are discussed as especially attractive, such as in the video, "Wild and Sexy Stretched Curls | No Heat Natural Hair."

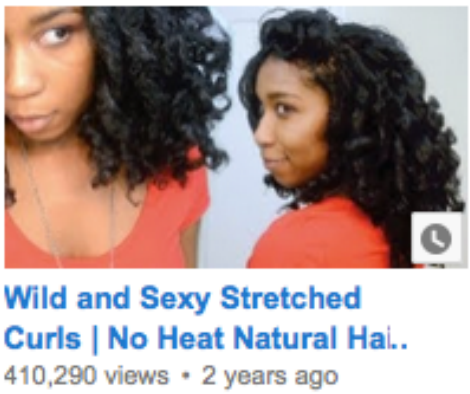

Figure 6 A YouTube tutorial by Naptural85

Like the narratives of the Carol's Daughter's products, Whit's YouTube channel suggests that an integral part of the natural hair discourse surrounds accomplishing styles that will "define" women's hair in ways that mimic or project looser hair textures.

Also noteworthy in the title of this video, "Wild and Sexy Stretched Curls | No Heat Natural Hair," is the use of the term "stretched." "Stretched," or "stretching," of the hair is a common buzzword in the natural hair community, and it suggests that the given style or product will reduced "shrinkage" and show more of the hair's "true" length. "Shrinkage" is the word for natural hair that is shrunken up, in its most kinky and curly state. On a piece for CurlyNikki, blogger AshleyGlenn describes shrinkage this way:

> It happens often, you spend time styling your wet hair for it to eventually shrink up to a shorter length. You may feel frustrated because you want to show off the length that you worked hard for. Shrinkage is normal for curlies, especially those with Type 3 and 4 curls.

"Stretching," the hair reduces shrinkage by elongating the shaft of the hair to varying degrees. For example, below are two illustrated images found on Tumblr that compare a women's hair in its most "shrunken" state, versus a more stretched state.

Figure 7 An Illustration of "Shrinkage"

Maximum shrinkage is generally something avoided and chagrined within the natural hair community, because it is when hair looks the most short and least defined. Thus, styles that "stretch" the hair (such as the previous ones depicted by Naptural85) are often the most popular. CurlyNikki's blog has published the following articles: "5 Ways to Decrease Shrinkage" by AshleyGlenn, "5 Easy, Practical Ways to Combat Natural Hair Shrinkage" by Jessica of heygorgjess.com, "A Wash and Go Routine—Tricks to Avoid Shrinkage" by Bianca Alex, and "Twist Maintenance to Reduce Shrinkage" by Misst1806. All of the articles are made up of suggestions for how to prevent shrinkage, with many using strong language like "avoid" or "combat" in the title.

Many of the aforementioned pieces that detail how to avoid shrinkage suggest that shrinkage is demonized most because it is when hair looks the most short. For example, Jessica's piece on CurlyNikki's blog states:

> If you've been natural long enough—you know that shrinkage can be cray [crazy]! It can rob of you hard earned inches! Personally, my hair shrinks up at least six inches

(probably more… I don't have a tape measurer otherwise I probably would check). Some people hate shrinkage, while others don't mind it at all. When I first went natural I hated it... a lot. Especially because I wanted my hair to look longgg–not be like an afro! Not that anything is wrong with afros at all—just wasn't my personal preference.

This passage articulates much of the discourse surrounding shrinkage in the natural hair community, and why it is something to "combat." The author laments that when her hair is most shrunken in its natural state, she loses "at least six inches" of "hard earned length." She also notes that she wants her hair to be "longgg" and "not […] like an afro!" adding also, "not that anything is wrong with afros at all" but that they are simply not her "personal preference." However, as the previous discussion on the discourse surrounding the styling of natural hair suggests, her lack of interest in wearing her hair as a short afro is difficult to think of as "personal preference," within a larger biases towards styled, "defined," non-kinky hairstyles.

However, one article on CurlyNikki provided an alternative perspective called, "Embrace the Shrinkage, It's Good For You!" by Toia B. In this piece, Toia B. acknowledges that shrinkage is generally seen as unfavorable within the natural hair community, and urges her readers to instead embrace shrinkage as a "beautiful, unique trait of natural hair." Toia writes: "Shrinkage' has become a four-letter word within the natural hair community […] Phrases like 'shrinkage is the devil' or 'I hate shrinkage' show up in photo captions on social media daily, usually in hashtag form." She goes on to state that that shrinkage is probably most disliked because women want to show off their "real length, or at least something close to it."

Later in her piece, Toia notes that the natural hair community's distaste for shrinkage may be linked to larger, socio-historically engrained Eurocentric standards of beauty. She points out that women with naturally straight hair probably do not experience the same anxieties about

their hair looking "too straight" in its natural state to be socially acceptable. She says, "Here's what I don't get: we complain about shrinkage which is essentially our hair in its completely natural state. Do people with straight hair complain about their hair being so… straight? I dunno. Maybe some do. But could there be something a little deeper here?"

Toia goes on to unpack this "something deeper" by more explicitly linking the dislike of shrinkage to a longer historical legacy of idealizing long hair, and this legacy's link to larger questions regarding standards of beauty. Ultimately, Toia is interested in interrogating why the desire to minimize shrinkage, in order to maximize length, seems to be such a huge part of the discussion around styling natural hair:

> For decades, women of color have been told that straighter and longer is better. We've conquered the mountain of returning to our natural textures- great! But it seems many of us are still stuck on this length thing. Setting goals are fine and all but are we setting the right goals for our hair? I can't stress enough that focusing on hair health is far more important than being so length-conscious. Maybe that's where all this shrinkage 'hate' stems from, this need for length… at least on some level. I'm not even sure where this word came from. Lemme ask my mother if they were complaining about shrinkage in the 70s.

Interestingly, Toia directly compares the current natural hair movement to the much more politized, "Black is beautiful" emergence of the "afro" from the 1970s. She wonders if within this time and space, Black women were equally as concerned about their hair "shrinking" into its shorter, fro'ed form. While Black women may or may not have been concerned about shrinkage in the 70s, Toia seems to be suggesting that the loathing of shrinkage in some ways seems antithetical to what a natural hair movement should be about. She also forces an examination of

the goals and ideals of the natural hair movement. Is about having and appreciating one's own healthy hair? Or is it simply about growing long hair, and reifying long hair's historical link to beauty, femininity, and ultimately "good hair?"

The previous discussion regarding shrunken versus stretched hair shows intersections between the idealizing of *defined* hair and *long* hair within the natural hair community. Stretched styles are ideal because they mimic looser curls patterns and define the hair, but also because they show off more of the length of the woman's hair than a shrunken afro. As Jessica states, she hated shrinkage because she "wanted [her] hair to look longgg—not be like an afro!" To what extent is longer hair lauded in the natural hair community at large, and why?

"Hairspiration!" Natural Hair & Discourse Around Hair Length

Length is constantly desired within the natural hair community, and growing ones' hair longer is often the ultimate goal. This laudation of longer natural hair is evident in both the narratives surrounding the products, as well as the images and bloggers that gain notoriety within the natural hair community.

Consider the "Monoi- Hair Repair" product line marketed by Carol's Daughter. Six of the narratives for the products in this line have language regarding the anticipation or desire to achieve longer hair length. For example, Monoi Oil Sacred Serum reads, "…Take your hair to its maximum strength and length," while Monoi Reparing Conditioner states, "The stronger your hair is, the longer it grows." Monoi Repairing Mask reads more directly, "Strengthening your hair is the only way to lengthen it, so you can do whatever you want with it." This statement may be a nod to the ways in which many Black women begin their natural hair journey with very short hair.

When Black women go natural, they often choose to "transition" from relaxed to natural, or they choose to complete a "big chop." The big chop requires that the woman cuts off all or most of her hair, and begins to grow it out in a state that is now not chemically altered. After "chopping" off ones hair and starting anew, the woman is usually left with a "T.W.A." (or "twa")—a "teeny, weeny afro." The big chop, and the resulting T.W.A., are often associated with a sense of excitement and empowerment. After all, it is a big step to cut off one's chemically relaxed hair and start over with natural tresses. However, the big chop and the resulting T.W.A also leave many Black women feeling vulnerable and insecure. To go from longer relaxed straight hair to almost no hair at all is also a big change, a change that may leave women feeling as though their hair lacks options or versatility. This stage of ambivalence is highlighted in SPStyles's written piece "How Long Will You Be in the TWA Stage?" featured on CurlyNikki.com on October 1, 2012.

The aforementioned Carol's Daughter passage may be nodding to this particular vulnerability that comes with this short hair with its statement, "Strengthening your hair is the only way to lengthen it, so you can do whatever you want with it." The text assumes that consumer aspires to grow out their hair; they perceive a lack of viable styling options, and that they are dissatisfied with their short hair. Length is the end goal, and selling aspirations of longer hair seems to be big business.

Another space that idealizes length is the Naptural85 channel. On March 14, 2012 Whit posted, "My TOP 10 Tips on Growing Long Healthy Natural Hair." The video has since garnered a whopping 1, 283, 398 views and 17,186 "likes." She also posted "Create Illusion of a Longer Voluminous Ponytail" on March 3, 2012. This video was a tutorial designed to style

one's hair so that their ponytail, and their hair itself, appears longer and fuller to the outside viewer.

The channel also has five instances of "length checks," a common practice within the natural hair community. Length checks are videos in which the given blogger physically measures and reports how long her hair is, via a tape measure or measuring tape. Below you will find two images from the Naptural85's video "Length Check #5 Natural Hair Growth," which was posted on October 7, 2013.

Figure 8 A "Length Check" on YouTube

This particular length check received 234, 725 views, and 7, 411 "likes" of approval. Naptural85's viewers express their admiration for her hair length in the comments section, as many inquire in disbelief how Whit has grown her hair so long. "How did she do this in just four years???" one user asks, as seven others "like" her comment in agreement. "You are definitely my hairspiration! <3" another commenter states, with 38 other users co-signing her comment by "liking" it. "Hairspiration," here of course suggests that the user is "inspired" by Whit's hair length, and would like her own to eventually grow as long. Like "length check," "hairspiration" and/ or "hair inspiration" is a common phrase used in the natural hair community. Predictably, the hair that is most often described as "hair inspiration" is the longest hair with more loose curls

pattern. This trend will be explored further by way of the blog CurlyNikki.com's "Hair Idols" series.

Whit has posted five videos of "length checks" between August 10, 2010 and today, with each one showing increased hair growth. She states on her YouTube "About" page that she big chopped in January 2009. Whit's five length checks across time show the ways in growing long hair is situated as part of "*the* natural hair journey." "Progress" by way of how well one takes care of her hair is made tangible by how long her hair has grown since she "went natural" and/ or completed her "big chop." Hair expert and doctor Phoenix Austin's self-published 2012 book *If You Love It, It Will Grow: A Guide to Healthy, Beautiful Natural Hair* again reinforces a link between love of hair, hair health, and hair growth. Again, long hair is the assumed goal, and many women who have gone natural equate long hair with some form of success or achievement.

Terms such as "hairspiration," "hair inspiration," "hair porn," "hair goals," and most pertinently "hair idols," are all examples of language within the natural hair community that lauds long hair. These terms are all used to describe images or videos of Black women with hair that is widely admired and envied within the natural hair community. This hair is most often the longest hair, with the most loose and/ or defined curl pattern. One example of this trend is the "Hair Idols" section of the popular CurlyNikki.com blog.

As the name suggests, the pages feature women with hair that the site has determined to be worthy of idolization. Each of the women is accordingly interviewed about her personal life, natural hair journey, hair care routine, and favorite products. The purpose of asking about their hair routine and favorite products is likely so that other hopeful naturalistas will read the interview and attempt to incorporate these steps and products into their own hair care routine. In fact, sometimes the interviewer asks directly, "How do you maintain healthy length?" as they did

with Hair Icon Constance on March 19, 2015—again reinforcing a link between hair health and length.

Products claiming to help hair grow, "length checks," a proliferation of stretching styles, and "hair inspiration" are all trends that suggest that long hair is the ideal in the world of natural hair. Previously mentioned video blogger Jouelzy has even addressed what she calls the "Hair Vitamin Swindle," or the recent trendiness of supplements (often containing Biotin) that claim to help hair grow longer, faster, and/ or thicker. Whether it is its association with hair health or aesthetic beauty, many naturalistas yearn for their hair to grow past "bra strap length," another phrase commonly used within the natural hair community. To quote a phrase now a staple in hip-hop culture and the Black community at large, the notion of "long hair, don't care," seems to help define and shape idealized female physicality.

"What's Your Type?" Hair Texture and the Natural Hair Community

Hair textures and/ or hair typing have proved to be both a salient part of one's identity within natural hair-based Internet spaces, as well a site of contestation and tension. Many bloggers openly and repeatedly identify their hair textures to their audience, and many of the viewers write comments relating/ not relating the video bloggers hair texture to their own. However, in general, hair typing/ textures are at times a contentious topic throughout the natural hair community. These tensions are often implicitly or explicitly linked to perceived hierarchies and/ or marginalization in regards to hair textures.

Meanwhile, none of the Carol's Daughter products I looked at explicitly target or mention specific hair textures by name or number. Meaning, none of the products say anything such as, "This styling product would work best for 3C hair." This lack of specificity is probably

an effort to make their products as marketable for as wide a consumer base as possible. Accordingly, the images used by the brand's promotional material revealed that the brand seems to be targeting a wide variety of textures, from the "curly" 3s to the "kinky" 4s. Below you will find an example of this variety, by way of the tutorial videos linked on the company's website:

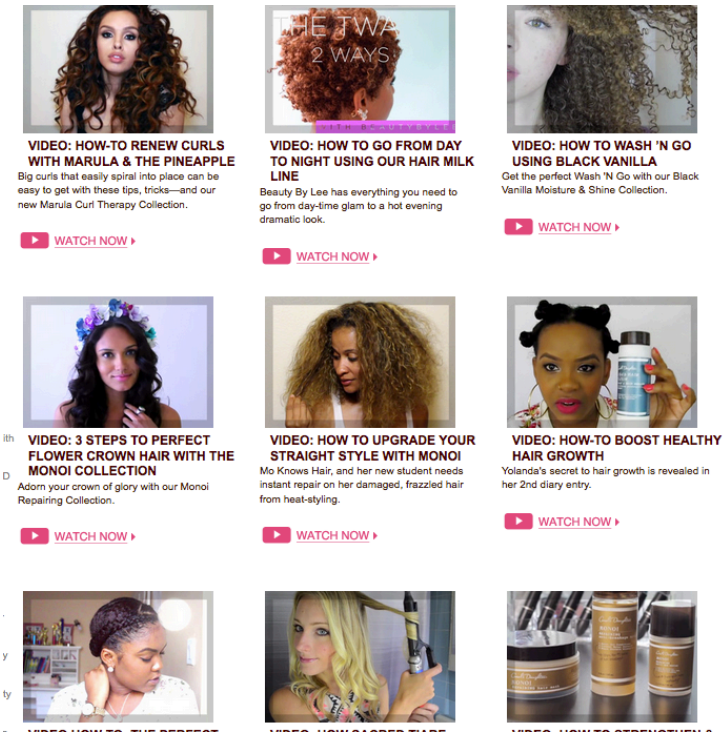

Figure 9 Video tutorials from the brand Carol's Daughter

On YouTube, many bloggers identify their hair type clearly as a part of their marketing profile. Hair type can influence the products, styling techniques, hair care regimen, and overall look of any and all participants in the natural hair community. Accordingly, identifying one's own hair type can be an important aspect of a natural hair blogger's identity. For example, the "About" page on YouTube for Naptural85's channel states, "HAIR TYPE: 4a, 4b in Crown."

Self-proclaimed 4C video blogger Jouelzy began a dialogue that resonated throughout the natural hair community with her video "So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination," posted April 27, 2014. In the video, Jouelzy details what she perceives as

discrimination and marginalization based on hair texture within the natural hair community. She maintains that despite her loyal fan base, consistent quality content, and accurate information, the natural hair community has not provided her her deserved lucrative success. Jouelzy argues that this lack of success is because her hair "doesn't look pretty from start to end." Jouelzy defines "pretty," as loose curl pattern, sheen, definition, and slicked down "baby hairs" (edges/ hairline).

Jouelzy also wrote an accompanying article for Ebony.com called, "We Aren't All Curly Girl: Politely Addressing Texture Discrimination." Like the video, the article details Jouelzy's journey through Internet-based natural hair community, and her experiences on the margins as a woman with short, kinky, "nappy" hair. In the piece, she notes:

> This current advent of Black women embracing their natural hair----and companies quick to pounce on the marketing value of this trend----has been accompanied by messaging that suggests that healthy natural hair equates to thick, shiny curls. Many women are empowered to go natural seeing the myriad of products that promise the perfectly defined twist out; the leave-in that gives your hair so much shine it has it's own aura; and that through the powers of olive, coconut and grapeseed oil, their curls will be whipping in the wind with the perfect bounce. It's a false reality that leads many into quick frustrations wondering why their hair won't curl like all those girls on Instagram.

Jouelzy's video and accompanying article caused widespread reactions throughout the natural hair community. The video garnered 133, 043 views; 11, 215 likes; 2, 304 comments, and several video responses. Many agreed with Jouelzy's arguments, while many others felt the articulations were divisive and short sighted. One example of the latter opinion is a video by popular natural hair video blogger Taren Guy.

Taren Guy joined YouTube as a natural hair video blogger in January 2009. She has since garnered 247, 649 subscribers and 23, 073, 150 views. According to an August 2009 video, Taren has racially identifies as bi-racial, "Swedish and Jamaican," and discusses her own hair texture as 3B/ 3C.

On June 5, 2014, she posted a video called "RV#18: Natural Hair Separation Equals Bullshit," which addresses tensions across the natural hair community surrounding texture discrimination. Though this video does not directly reference the accusations Jouelzy makes in her "Texture Discrimination" video, she addresses many of the issues Jouelzy's video raises. While Taren Guy acknowledges and problematizes advertisements' and the media's biases towards certain women "who look like her," she argues that harping on this inequality is divisive and counterproductive. "Let's not point fingers at the light skinned curly girl that you feel is privileged, and say that her message doesn't necessarily matter," Taren Guy says, "I have a right to make a video about self-acceptance."

Guy suggests that the conversation around texture discrimination conversation is further separating an already marginalized community.

> …What kills me is this continued separation within this community on whose struggle is worse, [and] who has it the best, based on what they look like and what kind of hair they have. You are responsible for how you feel about yourself, and you are responsible to help represent what you feel like you want to see.

However, in spite of viewpoints such as Taren Guy's that attempt to unite the natural hair community, tensions persist between textures. YouTube user artisticchiQ posted a top comment on the aforementioned Taren Guy video, a comment that garnered nine "likes of approval." The user writes:

> …But you don't have the SAME struggle and its time you mix[ed] girls be decent human being[s] and not force yourself into the African textured hair movement. Girls in the REAL kinky hair category are vulnerable and susceptible to being used by others for those others to get what they want. Please respect our spaces. You most certainly do have a natural struggle just not one compared to us…

This comment by user artisticchiQ's on bi-racial 3B/C haired YouTube user Taren Guy's video reveals not only a tension between hair textures, but a tension between bi-racial women and women with "African texture hair" in the "REAL kinky hair category." It appears that despite Guy's attempt to unite the natural hair community and neutralized the differences between hair textures, women with kinkier 4C hair feel that their "space" is being threated. So where is a woman with 4C kinky hair to go? A woman who feels marginalized and erased within her own movement? This remainder of this project's results will consider a pair of these safe spaces.

*"The Girl Who Has Nappy A** Hair": 4C Chicks Creating Their Own Space*

Within the aforementioned tensions surroundings texture discrimination and marginalization, women with 4C hair textures began creating their own Internet-based spaces to represent, advise, and affirm each other. With leadership like aforementioned blogger Jouelzy and pop singer Solange, women with kinky, curly, "nappy," 4C hair connect with each other by way of Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook. A consideration of the Instagram page @4CHairChicks and the Tumblr page ILoveMy4C-Hair.Tumblr.com reveals this pattern.

As has been discussed, Jouelzy helped push along the conversation in regards to texture discrimination and the marginalization of kinky hair textures within the movement. "I'm just gonna champion for the girl who has nappy ass hair!" she states in her "Texture Discrimination"

video, “And show them that their hair is healthy.” Jouelzy does not blog about her own hair anymore, due in large part to her grievances presented throughout her “Texture Discrimination” video. However, other blogs and spaces have been carved out for women with 4C hair to appreciate their own textures. Two such spaces are @4CHairChicks and the Tumblr page ILoveMy4C-Hair.Tumblr.com.

As the name suggests, ILoveMy4C-Hair is a space where 4C hair is exclusively represented and esteemed. The homepage states, “This blog is dedicated to the thickest hair texture, 4C! Big and beautiful,” as the subtitle reads, “I love this cotton hair!” The majority of the blog’s posts are images of women and men with 4C hair. The posts are tagged and sorted into categories of: “hair love,” “updos,” “color,” “protective styles,” “videos,” “art,” “tips/ products,” and “natural men.” The images are a randomized blend of personal self-taken photographs (often called “selfies”), artwork, celebrities/ popular media (though seeing celebrities with natural 4C hair is still quite rare), and artwork.

The blog also features several images of an often-politicized Black natural hairstyle called “dredlocs,” (also known as “locs”) which require the twisting of hair until it “locks” into twists of hair. In their Black Hair Glossary, Byrd and Tharps define dredlocs as:

> What happens when nappy hair is left to its own devices. Sometimes achieved by twisting the hair first, then leaving it alone until the individual strands of hari begin to loc around each other to form a ropelike appearance. Does not require wax or glue or other foreign objects. Does not require abstaining from regular hair hygiene, i.e., washing and conditioning. (Byrd and Tharps 133)

As the definition suggests, in some sense dredlocs are *the* most “natural” black “nappy” hair can get, as its forms into locs when “left to its own devices.” Locs are best known and

associated in mainstream culture with Bob Marley, reggae music, and Rastafarianism—and often carry this politicized weight.

Today, locs are constantly under attack for being deemed "unprofessional," and the hairstyle has been banned from the U.S. Army since 2006 (Henderson and Butler). Eighteen-year-old singer and actress Zendaya Coleman wore faux loc extensions on the Oscars red carpet, and an E! Fashion Police correspondent Guiliana Rancic later said Coleman "probably" smelled like "patchouli oil" and "weed," referencing the aforementioned stereotypes regarding locs (Steiner). Coleman went to Instagram in response, posting a paragraph of text in which she called Rancic's comments "ignorant" disrespectful. Rancic has since been asked to leave the show (Steiner).

Given this social context for wearing locs, it is noteworthy that the ILoveMy4C-Hair Tumblr page is the first and only space where I encountered images of locs throughout this study, simply by browinsing. Like 4C hair, locs have been marginalized, and at times completely erased, within the natural hair conversation. Perhaps this is due to the ways locs are politicized, stereotypes, and labeled as "unprofessional" and "unpolished." Below is an image of a woman with her 4C hair twisted into a time-honored African style called "bantu knots" (below right).

Figure 10 Bantu Knots

The Instagram page @4CHairChicks (also a Twitter page and a Website) has similar objectives. Self-described as "The #1 online community for women with type 4 hair," the Instagram page brings together women with 4C hair to share photos, product ideas, event information regarding natural hair meet ups, positive comments of affirming one another, and simply to chat. The page has about 57, 100 followers, and has posted 4,653 images.

The Twitter page for @4CHairChicks has 1,396 followers, and has published 7,883 tweets as of April 2015. The page introduction to the page says, "Join a community of women with hair like yours. We are the #1 online community for type 4 naturals." The phrase "join a community of women with hair likes yours" suggests that the followers with type 4 hair are not necessarily used to seeing hair "like" theirs in other spaces. The use of the term "community" suggests that the space will be safe and affirming. One of the posts on the Twitter page is a drawing of a woman with an afro by artist Carol Rosetti. The text written on the image reads:

> "Maira loves her afro! But rumor has it that her hair is ugly, wiry, kinky, nappy, bad. Maira, don't straighten it just because of that. Your hair is memory, ancestry, strength, beauty, identity, and tons of love! Your hair, besides being gorgeous, is yours. YOU are in CHARGE."

This short amount of text does work to empower the afro as a symbol of racial pride—linking it to "memory and ancestry." It also links the afro to other aspects of self—strength, beauty, and identity. Finally, the text does the Black feminist work by affirming "Maira's" agency to style her hair however she chooses to, in spite of beauty standards and social pressures. Rosetti notes that Maira's hair is hers alone, and that she is "in charge" of its appearance.

Also worth noting is that the 4ChairChicks Instagram page was the most politically conscious online space I experienced throughout the study. As I stated before, the blog CurlyNikki.com has purposely depoliticized itself. The blog's "About Me" section states: "My approach to natural hair is a little different. It is neither a political statement, nor a 'back to nature' movement." Meanwhile, 4CHairChicks politicizes itself by engaging social justice related issues alongside representations of hair culture. The page sometimes engages issues of power and racial topics that are being discussed in the news. In particular, the page advocates against the state-sanctioned violent killings of unarmed Black people at the hands of law enforcement.

When a young Black male named Anthony Hill was killed by police near Atlanta, Georgia, 4CHairChicks posted a photo morning the loss. The words "We demand justice!" ran in bold across Mr. Hill's picture. The caption reads, "Unfortunately this #anthonyhill case hits very close to home for us. This is the loved one of one of our team members. Please send up your prayers and lend your voice to the fight for justice for #anthonyhill. Military vet, loving boyfriend and beautiful person #weloveyouB #justiceforanthony #4chairchick #rip."

Similarly, the page posted a series of photos depicting Black men and women who had been extra-judicially killed by law enforcement. The caption for each of the photos detailed the name, time of death, and circumstances behind the murders of each of the young Black victims.

Some of these images are found below.

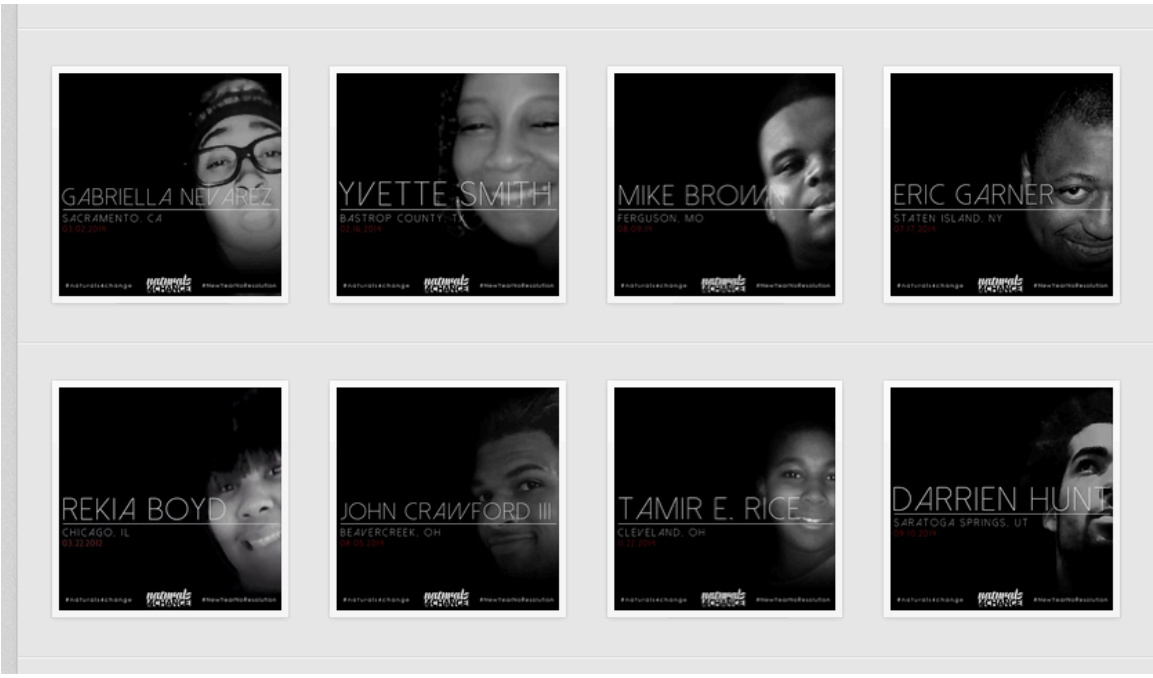

Figure 11 Young Black victims of state-sanctioned violence featured on @4CHairChicks

The culminating image in the series reads "Naturals4Change," and references another Instagram called @Naturals4Change. The image states that by subscribing to the Instagram and Facebook page for @Naturals4Change, the reader will be updated on ways to organized surroundings issues of police brutality. A passage from the caption of this culminating image reads:

> We've lost many lives to police shootings and its our responsibility to take a stand and demand justice. @Naturals4Change is a collective of women in the natural hair community dedicated to addressing social justice and human rights issues affecting people of color around the world. Make your voice heard! Join us in the fight for justice, get updates on future campaigns and find out how we ALL can make a difference together…

Like most spaces, natural hair communities online can most likely appeal to the widest scope of consumers and businesses by "playing it safe" and remaining neutral and depoliticized. If these spaces are just about the hair and not specifically about Black hair, and definitely not issues of anti-Blackness, they will appeal to the largest number of people. Thus, it is noteworthy that a space like 4CHairChicks has chosen not only to focus itself on the most marginalized group in the natural hair community, but has also chosen to advocate for Black people as a larger marginalize group.

Chapter Five

Natural Hair and Beauty

It appears the natural hair movement does indeed to some extent endorse Eurocentric beauty standards, which have socio-historically privileged long, "polished," "defined," and loose curly hair textures. However, the movement has simultaneously widened the scope of what it can mean to have "beautiful" Black natural hair, while allowing space for Black women to (re)theorize socially constructed notions of beauty. Indeed, it appears that the natural hair movement as a commodified entity is a space where certain kinds of hairstyles, lengths, and textures are being privileged—styles, lengths, and textures that are least often associated with embodied Blackness. However, in spite of and in response to this pattern, Black women are forging their own spaces of self-love, self-care, and safety. In this sense, the natural hair movement has seemed to come full circle.

The language around styling suggests that hair in its most natural state is still unacceptable, even within the natural hair movement. Hair is best when it is "defined" into a recognizable curl pattern, and/ or "stretched" to look as long and curly as possible. The obsessions with "stretching" and "defining" natural hair both sit in forced opposition to most Black hair in its natural state—kinky and tightly coiled. bell hooks talks about having her hair "fixed" on Saturday mornings—"fixed, that is straightened" (hooks). The term "fixed" here suggests that the hair is not quite acceptable or "ready" until "Mama fixed [her] hair with a hotcomb" (hooks). It appears that within the natural hair movement, defining and stretching otherwise un-styled hair has become a new version of "fixing."

These styles that aim to define and stretch the hair often form the hair into various manifestations of wavy, curly, big, "good" hair (Andrews, Byrd and Tharps) Byrd and Tharps document this pattern, noting "Not only were there products for curl elongating a natural hair

wearer's curls, there were also 'stretching' techniques intended to change the hair's texture. These included flat twists, braid outs, Nubian knots, and other textured 'sets'" (191). They quote scholar Yaba Blay, who calls these styles "manipulated natural" styles. "What kind of natural are we talking about?" Blay asks, "Is it what grows out of your head or a manipulated natural?" (Byrd and Tharps 191).

Of course, there is nothing inherently problematic about experimenting with different hairstyles, stretching one's hair, or altering one's hair to a texture other than their own. The pattern becomes noteworthy; however, when shrinkage is something to be "combated" and "avoided," a point when stretching and defining natural hair becomes a requirement for it to be suitable for public viewing. The consistent and constant need to wear stretched styles, and the countless products that cater to this demand, suggest that for many consumers, kinky Black hair in its most natural state is still unacceptable.

Similarly, there is also perhaps nothing inherently problematic about wanting one's hair to grow. Like other bodily functions, consistent hair growth can be a sign of a healthy, functioning human body. However, the natural hair community's idealizing of long hair, alongside the constant pursuit of knowledge on how to grow more length (and *fast*), suggests that the topic of hair length is another space where European beauty standards are reinforced. Ultimately, it makes sense that long hair would be lauded and fetishized in the natural hair community, because it is within society at large. Eurocentric beauty standards wed the wearing of long hair to ideals of beauty and femininity. On this point, Byrd and Tharps offer:

> America's, including Black America's, beauty ideal has not altered drastically since the late 1800s. Large breasts, small waists, and masses of flowing hair are still the look desired by men and sought after by many women. The adoption of certain Black looks

and trends by Whites does not indicate a more inclusive definition of beauty, but merely offers Whites a broader range of ways to look "exotic" or "different." (Byrd and Tharps)

While long hair is not antithetical to embodied Blackness, Black hair in its natural state usually "shrinks" to appear shorter than its "actual" fully stretched length. Meanwhile, Black women are constantly mocked for "not being able to grow long hair." As the previous discussion on shrinkage suggests, the difference may not always be the actual hair length at all, but the fact that looser curl patterns show more of the length, and kinkier textures tend to "shrink."

Accordingly, having long hair is often associated with bi-racial or non-Black women. Consider a YouTube video posted on May 26, 2014 by user "22nd Century Natural Woman" called "My Girls: Natural Hair Grew Butt Length (NOT MIXED)." The description for the video reads, "Yes, little girls do not have to be 'mixed' to grow long natural hair!..." The video has since garnered 44, 386 views. The title and description of this video suggest that author anticipates that the viewer will assume a correlation between long hair and bi-racial women, and that the viewer may assume her daughters were able to grow "butt length" natural hair because they are bi-racial. Thus, the description insists, "Yes, little girls do not have to be 'mixed' to grow long natural hair!" The video suggests and reinforces that bi-racial women's hair is to be idealized, for it is more likely to grow long, which is the ultimate aesthetic ideal for all women. Similarly, blogger Imani Dawson notes that "big, biracial hair" is often the "unspoken goal" of many who go natural (Byrd and Tharps 191).

In the natural hair community, we see an overall praising of longer hair, especially when it is on women with looser curl patterns. The factors together combine in ways that maintain Eurocentric hegemonic beauty standards that privilege non-Black women, while marginalizing women with 4C hair textures, who are most often Black. Long hair has socio-historically been

linked to “good hair,” and ultimate proximity to Eurocentric beauty ideals (Byrd and Tharps). “Racialized beauty standards combined with the color complex make hair texture and length an essential part of Black female identity,” scholar C.L. Robinson notes, adding “Hair texture and length variation among Black females provide fodder for discrimination within the Black population” (Robinson 360).

Indeed, having long hair is a way that Black women’s hair is often measured against beauty ideals, as Black women are often shamed for “not being able” to grow long hair. An insult commonly leveled intra-racially to Black woman is to call one “bald headed.” Hence the prevalence of the insult “bald headed scallywag,” a term that found its ways into popular rap artist Juicy J’s 2013 smash hit record “Bounce It.”

Popular lexical website UrbanDictionary.com’s most popularly affirmed definition for the colloquial term reads:

> 1.A derogatory term used to define a female who lacks hair in the back of her scalp. term may also apply to the whole head.
>
> 2. a female who's hair is short due to the lack of the [ability] to grow. (one who has short hair is not necessarily a balheaded scallywag)
>
> 3. someone who leaves a perm, and or relaxer in their hair for more than twenty minutes, and gets cabbage patch.
>
> 4. black ghetto female who cant achieve it, so they "weave" it, or can't grow it, so they sow it.

The term demeans women, Black women in particular, who “can’t” grow their hair long, because they “lack ability.” The term is also raced and classed, such as definition number four’s

calling out of "black ghetto female[s]" who supposedly wear weaves due to their own inability to grow their own hair.

The thrust of this insult mocks Black women's perceived inability to meet social standards of hair length set forth by idealized Eurocentric beauty and femininity. It is within this context that the idealizing of long hair exists within the natural hair movement. It is within the context the anxiety of "big-chopping" ones hair and subsequently wearing out their "teeny weeny afro" (T.W.A.) exists. Black women's very embodiment leaves them more vulnerable to scrutiny under narrow and Eurocentric beauty ideals.

Meanwhile, the looser hair textures with defined spiral curls have in many ways become the idealized face of the natural hair movement. This pattern is probably due to a dialectal relationship between 1) Maintenance of Eurocentric beauty standards, through which proximity to whiteness is always privileged and 2) A desire to cross-market, and appeal to the widest "curly haired" consumer base.

As our previous exploration of "good hair" and "bad hair" suggests, hair texture (in addition to length) is another space where Eurocentric beauty norms are mapped onto Black female physicality. The good hair/ bad hair dichotomy still seems to exist within the natural hair community, as there are tensions between the "3s" and "4s." The 3s are defined by their "loose curls," which arguably saturate mainstreams representations of natural hair. This curl pattern is often associated with multi-racial ancestry and/ or racial ambiguity (Byrd and Tharps, Lemieux). Meanwhile, the 4s, particularly 4c are defined by kinky, coil-y hair textures, which appear to be marginalized within representations of natural hair (Byrd and Tharps, Yawson, Lemieux)

The practice of hair typing itself (3a-c, 4a-c) seems to inadvertently provide new language to discussing hierarchies of hair texture. Some even call this hierarchy "curlism"

(Andrews), or "curl hegemony" (Yawson), while others call it "texture discrimination" (Jouelzy). The use of "hegemony," "discrimination," and the "-ism" suffix all suggest that the hierarchies of hair texture are systematic and pervasive, with some groups being privileged and other groups marginalized.

Indeed, for writer Ama Yawson, it is "curl hegemony." "The curl hegemony has black women being oppressed by the natural hair movement that was aimed to liberate them," says Yawson. "This erasure seems almost inevitable in an era in which 'one drop' is made synonymous with blackness, curly is conflated with kinky, substitution is masked as support, and colonization parades as cooperation" (Yawson). Here Yawson relates the curl hegemony to larger questions of erasure, marginalization, racism, and colonization. The discrimination of certain textures of hair is both indicative and representative of the positioning of Blackness with larger society.

Yawson's use of the term "one drop" again hits at a space of contention regarding a visual prevalence of bi-racial women in favor of Black women with kinkier hair texture. Writer Jamilah Lemieux also details this pattern in a piece for Ebony.com:

> However, I think we all need to consider the need for us to have places that we go to that are exclusive, be they physical, via technology or otherwise. We often confuse integration with equality and acceptance, when we are so often the ones who find ourselves left out in the cold. I assure you that a White woman with silky, curly hair will be just fine if we'd rather keep our hair chatter to ourselves.
>
> (Lemieux)

While catering to Eurocentric beauty standards, it also perhaps makes good business sense to de-center Blackness within the natural hair movement. The natural hair movement has

now become a billion dollar industry, and many of the brands and Internet spaces I looked at did indeed market themselves as targeting women with "curly natural hair," rather than Black women in particular. Thus, women who identify as any race may potentially read CurlyNikki.com or purchase Carol's Daughter products. Jamilah Lemieux also addresses this point in her article for Ebony.com called, "White Women on #TeamNatural? No Thanks." She writes:

> This is the era of 'total market' America and when culture starts making dollars, it starts losing sense. So it should not come as a surprise that curly hair can be positioned as a rallying point that unifies women of different races underneath the banner of giving hair care companies our money…(Lemieux)

Women of all races and hair textures were present within the representations I looked at for this project. However, these diverse representations are contentious, as Lemieux notes

> We often confuse integration with equality and acceptance, when we are so often the ones who find ourselves left out in the cold. I assure you that a White woman with silky, curly hair will be just fine if we'd rather keep our hair chatter to ourselves. (Lemieux)

It appears that the emergence of spaces for women with 4C hair documented within this study are a way some Black women have indeed managed to, in the words of Jamilah Lemieux, keep their "hair chatter" to themselves. In the ways Lemieux suggests, autonomous spaces like ILoveMy4C-Hair and 4CHairChicks forgo "integration" for exclusivity. The carving out of these spaces makes sense as a result of all of the aforementioned contentions within the natural hair movement—general detestation of the most often kinky and coily phenomenon known as "shrinkage," an apparent privileging of looser 3-type hair textures, and proliferation of racially ambiguous women becoming the face of a now comodified movement.

From this perspective, it makes sense that women who feel underrepresented in the movement, women with "nappy" 4C hair, would want to create their own Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook pages that center themselves. It is also noteworthy that the 4C spaces I looked at were significantly more politicized than more mainstream blogs such as CurlyNikki, and of course more politicized than the product pages for brands like Carol's Daughter. The 4C pages came equipped with messages of self-love and self-acceptance. They also featured posts addressing the social justice issue of state-sanctioned police violence.

Similarly, the 4C spaces were the only times that I viewed that featured dredlocs at the forefront, a hairstyle that is constantly politicized, stereotyped, and viewed as improper. Perhaps being positioned on the margins of an already marginalized group allows room for more politicized thought. Or perhaps a lack of concern about mass marketing or cross-racial appeal undergirds more "controversial" posts. Regardless, the spaces seem to be a direct response to elements not seen within mainstream natural hair movement, and the spaces themselves are in some ways subversive of the Eurocentric status quo.

Limitations and Recommendations

A limitation of this study might be a lack of a systematic, rigorous process for choosing the study's subjects. As Chapter Three details, I tried to pick Internet spaces that were incredibility popular, and thus spoke to the ideologies many women involved in the movement hold. Also, some might view the use of only representations found on the Internet as a limitation. This study also focused exclusively on African American women in the United States, rather than thinking diasporically or cross-racially.

Because the natural hair movement is still so recent, I feel that there is still much work to be done across disciplines and methods regarding these matters. Though I have focused on

representations of natural hair on Internet spaces, for reasons detailed in Chapter Three, it could be useful to try different qualitative methods to tackle beauty and natural hair. Focus groups, individual interviews, and surveys might be some ways to get participants' opinions on these issues firsthand. A participatory action research study with people who hand make natural hair products, or organizations that talk about natural hair, might be a way to understand the physical spaces and interpersonal relationships that have also allowed the natural hair movement to evolve and thrive (as opposed to Internet spaces).

It also might be useful to study more about the precursors and impetuses for the natural hair movement. This will help us better understand why the trend began, and what factors might help it have a more long-lasting impact. Where were the first natural hair shows? Who was producing and selling some of the first handmade and organic natural hair products? Which sub-groups and sub-cultures of Black people were wearing natural hair first, and did their influence cause the trend to spread? I had difficulty finding any sources at all, let alone peer-reviewed texts, that were able to unpack these sorts of questions. Oral histories might be one way to uncover and record this recent past, from the movers and shakers who witnessed it unfold.

Final Thoughts

Ultimately, the natural hair movement has seeming contradictions, vibrancy, and multiplicity, because women of color have seeming contradictions, vibrancy, and multiplicity. The movement comes complete with its own set of tensions, questions, redefinitions, and negotiations of identity. As Patricia Hill Collins's states, "Black women's lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as American-American women with our objectification as the Other" (Collins 94).

She notes that this positioning "creates a peculiar tension to extract the definition of one's true self from the treatment afforded the denigrated categories in which all Black women are placed" (Collins 94).

Though I would suggest that this tension does not define the totality of Black female subjectivity, this tension does manifest itself in a variety of spaces. The natural hair movement may be one such space where such negotiations of identity are occurring. Black women have created their own space to (re)theorize and (re)create meanings of beauty, adornment, and "acceptable" hairstyles. At the same time, the natural hair movement is also a space where deeply embedded Eurocentric standards of beauty may sometimes influence the hairstyles, textures, and lengths that are most idealized and marketable within this space.

In many ways, a critical mass of Black women chopping off much of their hair, "going natural," and re-learning how to take care of their natural hair is a subversive and monumental moment. It seems to make sense that these same Black women are now negotiating and reinventing what it means to be beautiful. It is also seems to make sense that these same women might sometimes fall back into a meanings of hegemonic beauty that have been familiar for decades—long, flowing hair that is *anything* but "nappy." Finally, it seems to make sense that corporations and advertisements might attempt to profit from this ambivalent space, by marketing the appeal of beauty as many of us have been taught to know it—"defined," "polished," and "stretched" *curls*. Encouraging media literacy and support of inclusive/ wide-ranging representations of natural hair may be two concrete ways to mitigate and mediate these dynamics.

The aforementioned anecdote involving the then forty-seven year old actress Viola Davis's natural hair red carpet debut embodies many of these tensions. Davis publicly navigated

the tensions Patricia Hills Collins and countless other Black women have articulated before. The wide variety of reactions to Viola Davis's natural hair reflect the ambivalence many Black women face after "going natural." The ambivalence also reflects the sorted and complex ways beauty standards and social norms are mapped onto Black female bodies, by way of hair politics. Some hated the look. But countless Black women, including Davis herself, appreciated the newness and subversiveness of natural Blackness. They appreciated the ability for a Black woman to publicly and unexpectedly ornament her body however the heck wanted. Perhaps this is why Davis called going natural a way to "Step into who you are." (MadameNoire)

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