“IT’S THE FEELINGS I WEAR”: BLACK WOMEN, NATURAL HAIR, AND NEW MEDIA (RE)NEGOTIATIONS OF BEAUTY

By

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ABSTRACT

"IT'S THE FEELINGS I WEAR": BLACK WOMEN, NATURAL HAIR, AND NEW MEDIA (RE)NEGOTIATIONS OF BEAUTY

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At the intersection of social media, a trend in organic products, and an interest in do-it-yourself culture, the late 2000s opened a space for many Black American women to stop chemically straightening their hair via "relaxers" and begin to wear their hair natural—resulting in an Internet-based cultural phenomenon known as the "natural hair movement." Within this context, conversations around beauty standards, hair politics, and Black women's embodiment have flourished within the public sphere, largely through YouTube, social media, and websites. My project maps these conversations, by exploring contemporary expressions of Black women's natural hair within cultural production. Using textual and content analysis, I investigate various sites of inquiry: natural hair product advertisements and internet representations, as well as the ways hair texture is evoked in recent song lyrics, filmic scenes, and non-fiction prose by Black women. Each of these "hair moments" offers a complex articulation of the ways Black women experience, share, and negotiate the socio-historically fraught terrain that is racialized body politics and "beauty" as a construct. My project is guided by the following research question: How are Black women utilizing the context of the natural hair movement to (re)define, (re)shape, and (de/re)construct meanings of beauty and Black womanhood? Using an embodied Black feminist framework, I argue that at the intersection of both (re)presentations of natural hair and uses of social/ new media, we find new possibilities, intimacies, (re)negotiations, and (re)articulations of both Black women's embodiment and the potentiality of "beauty" as a construct. Ultimately, the project uses hair as a way to underscore the agency within Black women's uses and understandings of their bodies, in a cultural landscape that constantly tries to tell them who and what they are.

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the Black women, girls, and femmes in my family, in my communities, and in the world who have inspired me to do this work.

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"Historically, black women in America have had a complicated relationship to beauty standards; not surprisingly, their participation in the beauty culture industry was laden with paradoxes."
-Tiffany Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (2010)

"Don't touch my hair/When it's the feelings I wear."
- Solange Knowles, "Don't Touch My Hair," 2016

"Don't Touch My Hair"

The phrase "don't touch my hair," has become ubiquitous within larger discourse around Black hair and Black hair politics. The phrase speaks to the everyday occurrence of White people seeming to feel entitled enough to reach out and tacitly engage Black women's hair, presumably from a place of curiosity and fascination. Signs of this kind of non-consensual hair touching as an action, and Black women's resistance to this action, can be found within meditations on race within the cultural landscape. For example, in 2017, Black woman creator Momo Pixel designed a video game called "Hair, Nah" which involves an animated avatar of a Black woman protagonist swatting and dodging countless White hands that unexpectedly pop out in various directions attempting to touch her hair.[1] Later, a children's book called *Don't Touch My Hair* was released in Fall 2018. The description of the story on Amazon reads: "It seems that wherever Aria goes, someone wants to touch her hair. In the street, strangers reach for her fluffy curls; and even under the sea, in the jungle, and in space, she's chased by a mermaid, monkeys, and poked by aliens...until, finally, Aria has had enough!" The protagonist Aria's narrative voice in the story states: "It's great that people love my hair, but some love it so much they want to touch it! […] I don't like this. They are so curious about my hair that they try to touch it without even asking for permission!"

In music, the opening lines of Solange Knowles's hit 2016 single "Don't Touch My Hair" emphatically state: "Don't touch my hair/When it's the feelings I wear." She later calls her

hair her "pride," her "soul," and her "crown," each time asserting "don't touch" to outsiders and interlocutors. Later, she continues to assert ownership over her locks, singing: "This here is my shit/Rolled the rod, I gave it time/But this here is mine." Elsewhere in the music world in 2016, rapper Princess Nokia released a song called "Mine" on her album *1992.* "Mine" serves as an ode to the uniqueness of women of color's hair practices. In the beginning of the song, a voice asks "*Um...is that a wig?/I'm confused, is that a weave?/Is that your real hair?*" The voice is a sort of valley girl, vocal-fried tone that is meant to be representative of a clueless white woman. Princess Nokia's voice interjects by answering in frustrated tone, "No, you can't touch my fuckin hair! You ain't got no manners!" The beat builds then drops, with the refrain that buzzes. Princess Nokia states repeatedly, "It's mine, I bought it, it's mine, I bought it" as an answer to people like the white woman from the beginning of the song, people who ask invasive questions and lack knowledge about women of color's hair practices.

Meanwhile, the introduction to comedian Phoebe Robinson's 2016 *New York Times* best-selling book *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* reads:

> Nope. You can't touch my hair. [...] Honestly, there is nothing I hate more than people groping and marveling in *National Geographic*-esque hushed tones about how my hair feels different than expected. It's frustrating how something as simple as a quick trip to the supermarket can turn into an impromptu seminar about the history of black hair, during which I'm supposed to clarify where I stand in the #TeamNatural versus #TeamRelaxer debate, discuss how I think black/white relations are going in America, and admit that if I was less defensive about my hair being touched, racism might be solved in an hour.[2]

Of course, as a comedian, Robinson is employing hyperbole and a tongue-in-cheek tone throughout this passage. But, as its subtitle suggests, Robinson's book is in part a project towards "explaining" her embodied experiences as a Black woman—as well as her perspective on race, gender, and popular culture—to an unfamiliar audience. Robinson elsewhere states that her book is not one that will make the reader "feel bad about being white," however, it will "touch on

some heavy and complicated race issues."[3] Her words beg the question, *who* is Robinson telling not to touch her hair? Who both needs and feels entitled to "a history lesson" around the history of Black hair politics, as well as a take on contemporary Black hair debates today? The answer, it seems, is white people.

Meanwhile, not all Black women have been prohibiting others from touching their hair. In June 2013, an exhibition called "You Can Touch My Hair" occurred in New York City's Union Square. Here, three Black women of varying textured hair *did* allow people to touch their hair, as they held sheets of paper that read: "YOU CAN TOUCH MY HAIR."[4] Antonia Opiah, the creator of the exhibition set out to explore the "tactile fascination" with Black hair. During the two-hour experiment one Thursday afternoon, about 75 to 100 individuals stopped by to touch, watch, or engage conversation. Each of the three Black women participants had their own reasons for participating in the experiment, including to engage dialogues and teaching moments, to heal their own "trauma" around unwarranted hair touching, and to have their hair properly represented.

In *Don't Touch My Hair* Phoebe Robinson notes what scholars have also argued for some time—Black hair, along with dark skin, is a salient marker of "otherness." Robinson writes: "Outside of skin color, nappy hair is probably the biggest in-your-face reminder of Blackness, of otherness. And in case you haven't noticed, people have historically not handled 'Otherness' well."[5] Indeed, while at face value these kinds of interpersonal tactile engagements have to do with hair, the "don't touch my hair" conversation is also about what bell hooks calls "eating the other"—a desire to consume and physically engage that which feels "different" or "exotic" from a white gaze.[6] This consumption has less to do with whether or not it is White people actually *doing* the "looking" (according to Huff Post, the majority of people who did touch the women's

hair in the exhibition were non-White). Instead, it is more about *Whiteness* as an idea—the Eurocentrism in how bodies (and hair) are read and understood as they move in the world. bell hooks reminds us that "Within contemporary debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoy of racial difference."[7] She writes, "Exploring how desire for the Other is expressed, manipulated, and transformed by encounters with difference and the different is critical terrain that can indicate whether these potentially revolutionary longings are ever fulfilled."[8] In a landscape where Black hair is a tangible, tactile marker of difference, White people might feel a desire to "consume" or engage hair that is markedly different—in terms of its styling, history, texture, malleability, and maintenance.

To be sure, Black women's stories around their negative experiences with having their hair touched without their consent are relevant and important. However, I do find it significant that all of this discourse around "don't touch my hair" often centers White and non-Black people at the expense of women's own independent embodied experiences with their hair. The conversation becomes about White people's audacity and entitlement, about what they should or should not do behaviorally while engaging women of color. It also provides liberal White people a sort of "out" in terms of grappling with the idea of Whiteness, as well as their own complicity in racism, fetishizing, and narrow standards of beauty. One can read a work like Robinson's *You Can't Touch My Hair* that details the perils of non-consensual hair touching and say to oneself, "I would never do something like that." And then, their introspection may end there. Furthermore, I wonder to what extent this problem of White people touching Black women's hair is a uniquely classed problem? Who *is* and who is *not* grappling with this problem of White people touching their hair without consent? It appears that this problem requires a certain

proximity to Whiteness, and White people quite literally, in order to become a persistent pattern. In other words, do Black people who live and work in Black communities, attend Black colleges and universities, and hold mostly Black interpersonal relationships and friendships ever have to tell anyone "Don't touch my hair?"

In some ways, this conversation around White people, Whiteness, and the touching of Black hair mirrors or mimics longstanding scholarly and public conversations around Black hair's relationship to beauty standards. Often, when we talk about Black hair and beauty practices, we are talking about them *in relationship to* Whiteness or White people. We are talking about the ways Black hair has been historically compared to White hair, and how it has been rendered inferior. We are talking about practices like hair straightening, extensions, and wigs as a mimicking or assimilating to White hair. We are pathologizing the amount of money, time, thought, and effort Black women spend on their hair as something uniquely outrageous in comparison to the hair practices of White women. And we are working within debates that have often historically situated Black women within a simplistic and dichotomous "assimilation/self-hate" versus "subversion/self-acceptance" way of understanding their choices of adornment.

Negotiating Beauty

Indeed, for decades, both scholarly and popular discourse have encouraged us to view Black women's hair practices in direct relationship to what we now know as "Eurocentric" standards of beauty. Through this lens, much of how we understand Black hair politics is reactionary, located within a dichotomous framework that holds afros, African printed scarves, and cornrows as "subversive" and "liberatory," meanwhile hair weaves, "relaxers" (chemical straighteners), and straightened hair are indicative of assimilation (at best) and self-hatred (at worst). Following this logic, each day Black women make choices to adorn their bodies that

either reify or disrupt a larger system of oppression. Within this binary, Black women's agency, narratives, and experiences are obscured. The complex constellation of interlocking factors that inform how Black women experience and conceptualize beauty at any given moment—including nationality, gender identity, sexuality, region, class, size, and ability—are made invisible.

Many have pointed out that since modernity, as a result of colonialism and slavery, Eurocentricism and anti-Black racism interact in order to denigrate phenotypically "Black" features. In terms of concepts of beauty, this interaction results in a privileging of features associated with whiteness—pale skin, long and straight hair, thin angular noses, etc. Meanwhile, dark skin, kinky hair, and large round noses are denigrated.[9] Within this context, the idea that straight hair is indicative of low self-esteem, lack of political consciousness, or assimilationist tendencies, while natural hair is indicative of an imagined polar opposite, has existed across time and space. The notion can be traced to global Black liberation movements going back to the early 1900s, including: Garveyism (US/Jamaica), Rastafarianism (Jamaica), Black Power (US, UK, Anglophone Caribbean), Afro-Black aesthetics (Brazil), Black Consciousness (South Africa), and *Negrissmo* (Dominican Republic).[10] This history is hugely important to how we understand body politics, aesthetics, racialization, and beauty today. But in the twenty-first century, what are the limits of still understanding these choices as a zero-sum game? How can we complicate our understandings of aesthetic choices, and Black women's relationship to beauty standards? How can we center their voices, narratives, and experiences within this space? How can we break down longstanding assumptions in beauty studies that often work within binaries of pain versus pleasure (because I am also critical of individualistic, neoliberal, 'beauty can be fun!' arguments, as well), subversion versus assimilation, and the individual versus the structural?

Today, recent scholarship in beauty studies, including myself in others, aims to forward this work. Kobena Mercer's seminal piece "Black Hair/Style Politics" provides (at least) four contributions relevant to these questions: 1) urging us to reconsider hair choices through the lens of style, aesthetics, and agency; 2) destabilizing the notion of what is "natural," by pointing to the ways that even "natural" hair is constructed, manicured, and styled in specific ways; 3) troubling static, essentialist dualism between what is natural/African and what is straight/European and 4) calling for us to "*depsychologize"* the practice of hair straightening—interrogating the assumption that straight hair "imitates" or "mimics" whiteness.[11] Mercer ushers in a post-modern understanding of Black hair politics, by allowing space for hybridization, creolization, and improvisation.

Shirley Anne Tate in part builds on Mercer's work in ways that center Black women and Black feminism.[12] Tate's text uses ethnography and interviews with British and Caribbean Black women to investigate their hair practices and thoughts on beauty. Tate's work ultimately argues that beauty is something that is "done"—through mimicry, hybridity, and performativity. Meanwhile, Maxine Leeds Craig argues that it is most helpful to understand Black women's experiences through multiple standards of beauty that are contextual, moveable, and varied.[13] Because beauty is contested, in any particular context there will be multiple standards of beauty in circulation. Craig considers various historical contexts, arguing in each time Black women "negotiate" a complex set of expectations involving region, race, gender, class, political orientation, color, and more. Craig interrogates the assumption of a singular, Eurocentric standard of beauty that Black women are always measured up against.

Scholars such as Rebecca Coleman and Moreno Figueroa ask use to take seriously the role of affect in our understandings of beauty.[14] In considering affect, we become less hyper

focused on beauty practices themselves (i.e. make up, hair styling dieting, plastic surgery), and we are able to think about the *processes* of beauty, as well. In using Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism," Coleman and Figueroa help us understand beauty as an aspiration to normalcy that is simultaneously "optimistic and cruel," "specific and imaginary." Coleman and Figueroa help us think through the temporalities of beauty, as an embodied phenomenon that is also social, cultural, and economic.

Finally, Simidele Dosekun's helps us rethink the ways that weaves, or sew-in hair extensions, are understood in relationship to Black femininity.[15] She addresses the assumed link between the wearing of weaves and self-hatred, while situating it specifically in the context of upper middle class, Nigerian, millennial women. Dosekun's work then addresses binaries of "Western" versus "African" forms of expression via hair, as well. The use of the weave may be built on an "unhappy" (via postcolonial scholar Sarah Ahmed) histories of Black hair, but it is indeed a crucial part of Black femininity, rather than a simple mimicking of European Whiteness.

To be sure, the decades of work that scholars, thinkers, and activists have done to reveal the ways that hegemonic standards of beauty are racist, and indebted to global White supremacy, is critical to our understanding of body politics today. Others and I could likely not do the work that we do today if not for this body of work. We do have to talk about Whiteness, and we have to talk about Black hair and beauty within the context of colonialism and anti-Black racism. However, the goal of my dissertation is to reveal and underscore the complex ways that Black women navigate, critique, reify, and negotiate these standards of beauty independently and in communities—on their own terms.

Natural Hair and New Media (Re)Negotiations of Beauty

In this dissertation, I turn my attention inward, by focusing on the intra-racial, intramural[16] aspects of Black women's natural hair culture, particularly in regard to storytelling and "going natural." Through an embodied Black feminist framework and analysis of various forms of pop cultural production, I aim to uncover the narratives, experiences, and points of negotiation that Black women articulate through their work. Thus, rather than understanding and discussing Black women's hair and beauty practices in relationship to whiteness—whether that be White people's behaviors (i.e. "don't touch my hair") or "Whiteness" as a social construct (i.e. "Eurocentric" standards of beauty)—I uncover and highlight Black women's stories and experiences with hair, beauty, and their bodies on their own terms. My project does this work by focusing on contemporary constructions of natural hair, within the context of the present-day natural hair movement.

The term *natural* was first used within Black beauty culture in the 50s and 60s, to describe a short afro style.[17] Today, to be "natural" or identify as part of the "natural hair movement" is uniquely situated in a new media, twenty-first century context. Beginning in the late 2000s, a critical mass of Black women in the United States created their own Internet-based "natural hair movement." These women made the conscious decision to stop chemically straightening their hair via "relaxers," and "transition" into wearing their hair "natural," without chemical processing or straightening. According to Black beauty culture historian Tiffany Gill, hair "relaxers" [chemical hair straighteners] accounted for only 21 percent of Black haircare sales in 2013, a 26 percent decrease since 2011.[18] From 2008 to 2013, chemical hair relaxer sales decreased from $206 million to $152 million, and from 2008 to 2013, there was a steady growth in all Black hair care products except chemical relaxers.[19] As Byrd and Tharps 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."[20]

For *New York Times* writer Zina Saro-Wiwa, "this movement is characterized by self-discovery and health."[21] For some Black women, the journey from chemically relaxed hair to natural styles can be incredibly powerful and emotional. 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.[22] It also provides a space for embodied, creative forms of self-expression.[23] Black hair is also inherently politicized within a larger patriarchal and white supremacist cultural landscape.[24] Within this space, Black hair is hyper-scrutinized, and held to longstanding and narrow Eurocentric standards of beauty.[25] In the context of the natural hair movement, new conversations around standards of beauty, hair politics, and Black women's embodiment have flourished within the public sphere—largely aided by social media/"new media." My project maps these conversations, by exploring contemporary expressions of Black women's natural hair within cultural production.

My research uncovers the embodied ways that Black women experience Eurocentric standards of beauty and the politics of their bodies as Black women. When I describe something as "embodied" or use the term "embodiment," I am mobilizing the term in the way of Paul C. Taylor's uses embodiment[26]—indebted to the tradition of Richard Shusterman's work on bodies and aesthetics.[27] For Shusterman and Taylor, embodiment is interested in "the way the body is experienced, as it were, from the inside."[28] Many scholars before me have (rightfully) documented the ways beauty standards and systems of oppression negatively affect Black women's bodies, and how Black women resist this oppression to varying degrees and in varying ways. But how do Black women "experience […] from the inside" these systems? How are they

giving voice to these experiences through negotiations of natural hair? Answering these questions informs the core of this project.

I investigate various sites of inquiry: natural hair product advertisements and internet representations, as well as the ways Black women's hair texture is evoked in recent song lyrics, television scenes, and non-fiction prose by Black women. Each of these sites of inquiry—"hair moments"—offers a complex articulation of the ways Back women experience, share, and negotiate the socio-historically fraught terrain that is Eurocentric standards of beauty and racialized body politics. Each of the sites of inquiries somehow involves the mobilizing of social media and/or new media—tools which, since their emergence, Black people have utilized in unique and culturally specific ways.[29]

Black Feminist Embodied Beauty

Theoretically, this study is shaped by a Black feminist framework, and throughout the dissertation I offer the concept of "Black feminist embodied beauty" as a way of using this Black feminist framework to understand Black women's experiences in relationship to beauty. Through the research, I frequently turn to the likes of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Hortense Spillers, and Kimberlè Crenshaw. Black feminist theory shapes the project in at least four core ways: 1) An interest in "Black female interiority" and the "inner lives" of Black women 2) "Intersectionality" as a way of understanding how systems of oppression interlock and impact Black women's relationships to power, beauty, and body politics 3) "Interstices" as a way of understanding Black women's subjectivities and relationships to categories of "woman" and 4) "Black feminist epistemology" as a way of centering of Black women's voices, experiences, and epistemologies in matters about themselves—particularly their bodies—as well as positioning Black women as knowledge makers and holders.

First, Black feminist criticism has offered us notions of interiority and an interest in the inner lives of Black women and people. This concept has perhaps reemerged in recent years with a new thrust and angle, in part due to the recent wave of scholarly interest in Black women's sexual pleasure.[30] This understanding of Black women's interiority is informed through their practice of protecting their "inner lives" through "dissemblance," as coined by historian Darlene Clarke Hine.[31] Black feminist scholar Joan Morgan much more recently offers the notion of "Black female interiority."[32] Like the language of "embodiment" "interiority" provides a language and a framework for charting the agency, intimacy, and affective nuances of how Black women experience beauty and hair/body politics. While Hine and Morgan are both largely referencing Black women's relationship to their sexuality when they speak of "inner lives" and "the interior," I wonder if beauty and sexuality are linked because they are both "embodied"[33] and "felt" affectively[34] in certain kinds of ways. I am wondering if hair is a space primed to do this work, to speak to specific embodied intimacies of Black womanhood. It is so clearly embodied—it grows on the body, from the body, and is inscribed with socio-historical meaning distinct to Black women's bodies alone. I view the natural hair movement as a space and a context for Black women of varying standpoints to think through all of these questions, both individually and amongst each other.

Second, the Black feminist canon is also responsible for the growth of the concept of "intersectionality," which is useful way of understanding how systems of oppression interlock and impact Black women's relationships to power, beauty, and body politics. While "intersectionality" is often attributed to Kimberlè Crenshaw, the concept has been integral to Black feminism for decades. France Beale's 1970 piece told of the capitalistic oppression in the form of the "Double Jeopardy" of being Black and female,[35] reminding us "The new world that

we are attempting to create must destroy oppression of any type."[36] The 1977 Combahee River Collective's Black Feminist Statement argues, "the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives."[37] Accordingly, in the CRC commits itself to "struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression."[38] Angela Davis wrote in 1983 about gender, race, and class as categories of oppression that we cannot think about as separate,[39] while Audre Lorde encouraged us in 1984 to recognize and grapple with the significance of "age, race, class, and sex" as integral for understanding differences among women.[40] Later, in 1991, Crenshaw notes "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race and gender dimensions of those experiences separately."[41]

In each of these instances, Black women have articulated an understanding of power that is shaped by overlapping, interlocking systems of oppression: racism, sexism, classism, heteronormativity, ageism, and more. In understanding beauty and body politics, these same systems inform notions of who is afforded space, safety, and visibility in the arenas of beauty, desirability, and "professionalism." These systems of oppression also greatly inform the moments when Black women and girls' hair is criminalized and policed in schools, airport security, and workplaces.

Third, Black feminism, specifically Hortense Spillers, has also offered us the notion of "interstices," a way of understanding the illegibility of Black women's bodies and subjectivities. In her essay, "Interstices: A Small Drama of Words," Spillers focuses on how there is a lack of articulation of Black women's sexuality and sexual experiences.[42] She notes, "While there are many number references to the black woman in the universe of signs, many of them perverted, the prerogatives of sexuality are refused to her because the concept of sexuality originates in,

stays with, the dominative mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression."[43] For Spillers this refusal, these "lexical gaps" or "absence[s]" are the "interstices"—the spaces in between. Spillers's work is useful for understanding and critiquing how categories of women and gender are constructed in opposition to Black womanhood, which Spillers's work constantly underscores. In this project, Spillers contributions to Black feminist understandings of body politics are useful for thinking about concepts of womanhood, femininity, and beauty are known and felt, as well as how Black women's discursive practices intervene in the absences, gaps, and erasure of themselves within these categories.[44]

Finally, Black feminism has also offered the concept of "Black feminist epistemology" as a way of centering of Black women's voices and ways of knowing, re-framing them as creators of knowledge and authorities regarding their lived experiences. By way of Black feminist epistemology, this project also assumes that there is immense value in privileging the knowledges, voices, and experiences of Black women in these spaces as authorities and authors of their own hair and bodies. Black women's knowledges make up the majority of what we know as the natural hair movement—their organizing of physical and online spaces, researching product ingredients and hair health, their experimentation with styles and length, ec cetera. Meanwhile, the researcher within the academy has been traditionally positioned as the "expert," and many accounts of beauty standards are often "top down"—focusing on ideals being sold through major locations of power such as images in popular magazine ads, national beauty pageants, or the appearance of top runway models. However, this project prioritizes the narratives of Black women participants, and I am interested in the ways they resist, critique, negotiate, and respond to "beauty" disseminated from these locations of power. This prioritizing aligns with Black feminist ways of thinking about knowledge production. As Patricia Hill

Collins notes in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990):

> 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, 1990, 202)

For me, these "alternative sites of knowledge production" that Collins references also include the site of analysis that I engage in my project—Internet-based social media communities, blogs, podcasts, non-fiction prose, songs/music videos, films, television shows, and more created by Black women that each offer particular narratives and ways of knowing around hair and beauty politics.

Accordingly, this project investigates visual and discursive representations within the actual natural hair movement, as well as cultural representations that exist within the socio-historical context of the natural hair movement. I define the "*natural hair movement*" as an internet-based cultural moment (from about 2008 to the present) in which a critical mass of Black women actively has made the decision to stop chemically straightening their hair via "relaxers," in favor of a variety of hair styles (extensions or not) that mimic or display a more kinky, curly, or "natural" hair texture. I consider all of the corresponding blogs/bloggers, web tutorials, products and online product reviews, advice books, physical spaces (i.e. natural hair "meet-ups," mixers, salons), Twitter accounts, Tumblr accounts, Facebook profiles, artwork, and spaces for "selfies" (self-portraits) to fall under the umbrella of this "natural hair movement." I define "*natural hair*" as a woman of color's hair that un-straightened through either heat or chemical processing. When I discuss one's "*natural hair texture*," I am referring to kinky, coily,

or curly un-straightened hair, most often growing straight from a woman of color's head. I offer these definitions now for the sake of clarity, while recognizing that all of the aforementioned terms are unstable, contested, and subjective—within both the internet sphere and communities more broadly.

In addition to considering articulations around hair within this slightly more contained natural hair movement, I am also interested in Black women's constructions of hair within the social context (2008 to the present) of the flourishing natural hair movement—a time I am calling the *"natural hair movement era*." Within this space, how do Black women use film, biography, and music to discuss their natural hair and its relationship to standards of beauty, systems of oppression, and larger questions of the Black female body within the American cultural imaginary? To do this work, I investigate: television scenes that engage natural hair texture, such as the now infamous wig removal of protagonist Annaliese Keating on the popular nighttime drama *How to Get Away with Murder*; the evoking of hair in the lyrics of recording artists Solange Knowles and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter; and the function of hair in texts such as *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* by Phoebe Robinson, and the novel (recently turned Netflix film) *Nappily Ever After* by Trisha R. Thomas. Each of these hair moments speaks to the multiple ways Black women experience, critique, and negotiate Eurocentric standards of beauty and racialized body politics. While these representations may not directly link to the "natural hair movement" as I have previously defined it, I would argue that it is difficult to consider the topics that these pieces have taken up divorced from the natural hair movement's flourishing.

While much has been written on the politics of Black hair, there is still a dearth of critical scholarship regarding the still developing contemporary "natural hair movement." Because the

natural hair movement only began in the late 2000s, there is very little scholarship on the topic so far. Even fewer scholars have analyzed the natural hair movement as an internet-based space alongside other forms of more "traditional" modes of cultural production (films, books, songs, television, etc.) involving hair, beauty, or Black womanhood. Additionally, Black people's uses of social/new media more generally is a still relatively underdeveloped field of scholarship, as well. How does the natural hair movement compare to other communities and movements that Black people more generally, and Black women in particular, have created via social media—including #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #BlackTwitter as a rhetorical and discursive space more generally? How do Black women engage representations of hair on and through social media?

Additionally, I aim to contribute to Black feminist cultural criticism's recent push to think about representations of Black women outside of questions of stereotyping, exploitation, and the "negative"/"positive" image binary, but to instead center notions of multiplicity and contradiction[45] pleasure,[46] everyday practices/social life,[47] and ideas of "interiority."[48] Like these recent scholarly offerings, I attempt to ask perhaps less frequently asked questions about Black women's bodies on screen and in print. Jennifer Nash charts this trajectory in a review essay, noting a "growing body of scholarship produced across the disciplines that puts an end to the long-standing debate over 'good' and 'bad' representations of the black female body."[49] Nash argues that recent texts allow us to study, "…How images are used, mobilized, and deployed by subjects - ironically, humorously, pleasurably, strategically, and even normatively" so that we may "examine how the production of more, and more varied, images enables the flourishing of all kinds of […] revolutionaries."[50] What might be "revolutionary" in understanding what forms of pleasure, self-identification, shame, vulnerability, and connectivity Black women engage in

when they see these "hair moments" within the culture? How might these experiences be unique to Black women? How can social media be a discursive space to track some of these responses?

This project brings together larger conversations around Black feminism(s) and body politics, Black women's relationships to standards of beauty, pop cultural criticism, and social media/new media. My dissertation is driven by a central research question: How are Black women utilizing the context of the natural hair movement to (re)define, (re)shape, and (de/re)construct meanings of beauty and Black womanhood? This dissertation is constituted of five main chapters that each explore a different aspect of this question.

Chapter 1 takes on three key objectives. First, I review significant literature within beauty studies, in order to situate Black women's negotiating of beauty within larger conversations around body politics, beauty standards, feminism, and colorism. Next, I provide a historicizing of Black women's hair practices and politics, as well as their relationship beauty. I sort this historicizing into two main time frames: 1) "The Long Black Hair Movement" - Pre-1990s and 2) "Building a New Natural" - 1900s - Early 2000s. Finally, I chart the expansion of the natural hair movement. The chapter's goals are to theoretically and historically situate hair, beauty politics, and the natural hair movement, in order to allow room for the in-depth analysis of specific cultural production and narratives within the natural hair movement/era found in the subsequent chapters.

In Chapter 2, I analyze internet-based spaces within the natural hair movement, where "beauty" is negotiated, contested, and reified. These spaces for analysis include: 1) the product descriptions on the websites of two natural haircare company giants, Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture 2) natural hair blog CurlyNikki.com and 3) the work of YouTube video blogger Whitney White (also known as "Naptural 85"). These sites of analysis serve as case studies to

explore negotiations within contemporary natural hair movement. I unpack two central spaces of negotiation and points of contention: *styling* and *texture.* For both of these themes, the larger ideology of the natural hair movement—and its Black women participants themselves—often reifies what we conceive of as Eurocentric standards of beauty. However, as their narratives demonstrate, these participants often also actively critique, reveal, interrogate, re-shape, and de/reconstruct these beauty standards, as well. The goal of the chapter is to provide an in-depth analysis of the ways Black women's narratives and discourses within the internet-based natural hair movement show embodied negotiations of ideas of beauty. These Black women write and re-write understandings of the potentiality of "beauty" as a construct for Black women through their online musings. Within the Black feminist embodied beauty framework, this chapter relies heavily on the work of the likes of Patricia Hill Collins, who affirm Black women as producers of knowledge.

Chapter 3 explores climactic, contemporary on-screen representations of Black women removing wigs or hair extensions as spaces that reveal intimate moments of Black women's "inner lives." I turn to Black feminist embodied beauty notions of "inner lives" and interiority" to unpack the pivotal on-screen wig removal moment in Season 1 Episode 4: "Let's Get to Scooping" of ABC's nighttime drama *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*), as well as viewers' response to this scene on social media, in news articles, and in comedian Phoebe Robinson's non-fiction book *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* (2016). Additionally, I consider two other filmic scenes featuring Black women protagonists that depict a comparable stripping of extensions and wigs in front of a mirror to reveal un-styled hair—namely scenes from *Beyond the Lights* and *Being Mary Jane* (Season 2, Episode 7). In these filmic spaces, the protagonist removes the hair extensions that she

consistently adorns herself with daily and reveals un-styled, sometimes matted or tangled hair underneath. However, this uncovering brings about a specific kind of vulnerability, an undoing of a "dissemblance"[51] that eventually leads the character to a different place mentally and emotionally. By depicting these moments of "undoing" cinematically, Black women directors, producers, actresses, and viewers converge to depict moments of intimacy and vulnerability, which Black women viewers seem to relate to in particular ways. I argue that these moments quietly unpack Black women's relationship to their own hair, and beauty politics more broadly.

In Chapter 4, I consider contemporary understandings of the concept of "good hair," arguing that the phrase is a site of negotiation where work to reveal and subvert beauty standards is done. I offer a critique of Chris Rock's 2009 comedic documentary *Good Hair*, which I argue de-centers Black women's experiences, and ultimately offers an incomplete and pathologizing account of Black women's hair practices. Then, I unpack the lyrics "you better call Becky with the good hair" in Beyoncé's Knowles-Carter's 2016 single "Sorry" as a space where the idea of good hair is subverted and played with. Ultimately, I argue that within the context of the contemporary natural hair movement, tracking Black women's narratives and experiences around "good hair" reveals more about how concepts of beauty and body politics are consistently (re)negotiated. In terms of the Black feminist embodied beauty framework, the work of Hortense Spillers and Shirley Anne Tate help me think about how categories of "woman" and "beauty" are created and understood, often in opposition to Black women's bodies and subjectivities. "Becky" is womanly and the default in terms of beauty, so where do Black women find themselves?

In Chapter 5, I focus on the intra-racial, intramural[52] aspects of Black women's natural hair culture, particularly in regard to storytelling and going natural. I examine social media discourse, the 2018 Netflix film *Nappily Ever After*, and the 2018 short film called "The Big

Chop" as spaces where a kind of Black feminist storytelling is occurring. These stories articulate diverse experiences around what it looks like to complete "the big chop," a phrase used to describe the event of cutting off all or most of one's hair in order to leave only the natural afro-textured hair in place. The big chop typically results in the wearing of a "teeny weeny Afro" or a "T.W.A."—a short (perhaps an inch or less) afro. These narratives allow us to de-center whiteness and prioritize Black women's feelings, embodied experiences, and knowledge production around the contemporary natural hair movement. Here, I rely on Black feminists thinkers such as Robin M. Boylorn, who provide a way of understanding Black feminist auto-ethnography and storytelling.

Finally, I conclude the dissertation by offering a few of my own experiences with body politics as a younger Black girl, working in the tradition of Black feminist scholars locating themselves within the work that they do. I then offer potential directions to take my project in the future, specifically the considering of Black girls' narratives around the negotiating of hair and beauty politics. Black girls are socialized into Black womanhood in part through the teaching of these politics. Black girls are policed at school through dress codes that tell them their hair is distracting and unkempt. In 2016 South Africa, Black girls at the Pretoria School for Girls stood up against these kinds of dress codes in protest. Meanwhile, in the United States, representations of Black girls such as Blue Ivy Carter in the media demonstrate the ways that they too are scrutinized under ideals of beauty. What does it look like to center Black girls' voices and experiences with hair and beauty politics? This work is important for constructing a more complete picture of a notion of Black feminist embodied beauty.

In 2016, Solange Knowles softly sang, "Don't touch my hair/When it's the feelings I wear." While much has been made of the first line, a disavowal of outsiders' hair touching, I aim

to turn to the second set of words— "When it's the feelings I wear." For many Black women, hair is an extension of their bodies tied to salient, affective understandings of their embodied experiences. It is tied to their feelings and their felt experiences. This project mobilizes Black feminist theory and cultural criticism in order to argue that at the intersection of both (re)presentations of natural hair and uses of new media, we find revealed new possibilities, intimacies, (re)negotiations, and (re)articulations of both Black women's embodiment and the potentiality of "beauty" as a construct. My project asks, where is the radical potential in understanding Black women's re-framing, re-negotiating, vulnerability within, and experiencing of Eurocentric standards of beauty—rather than rendering them objects, victims, symbols, or models within that space? My project is not simply about hair, and it is not interested in cataloging the artistry in hairstyles, hair's appearance, or the cultural capital of hair within Black communities. Others before me have done this important work. Ultimately, the project uses hair as a vehicle for recovering the agency and interiority within Black women's uses of their bodies, in a cultural landscape that constantly tries to tell them who and what they are.

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CHAPTER ONE - BEAUTY AND HISTORICIZING THE NATURAL HAIR MOVEMENT

Throughout the natural hair movement, conversations around beauty standards, hair politics, and Black women's embodiment have flourished within the popular discourse. In the interest of limiting and operationalizing the contemporary "natural hair movement," I have marked its beginning to the late 2000s—around 2008 or 2009; however, many precursors and factors shaped this particular moment. Additionally, Black hair practices, the politicizing of Black hair, and Black women's negotiating of beauty politics have a history that stretches decades before this time period, as well. I aim to establish the specificity of the contemporary natural hair movement, while also properly contextualizing and historicizing this moment.

This chapter has three key objectives, in this order: First, I review key relevant literature within beauty studies, in order to situate Black women's negotiating of beauty within a nuanced theoretical context. Secondly, I historicize Black women's hair practices and politics, as well as their relationship beauty. I sort this historicizing into two main timespans: "The Long Black Hair Movement" and "Building a New Natural." Thirdly, I chart the expansion of the natural hair movement. Ultimately, the goal of the chapter is to theoretically and historically situate hair, beauty politics, and the natural hair movement, in order to allow room for my analysis of specific cultural production and narratives within the natural hair movement/era found in the subsequent chapters.

Beauty Studies and the Politics of Beauty

Beauty and Feminist Foundations

In the context of feminism and women's body politics, "beauty" has been a site of critique, since at least the second-wave feminism of the 1960s. During this period, feminists' critiques often involved the idea that beauty ideals are harmful and oppressive, and they

disproportionally and negatively affect women. Women's bodies are hyper-scrutinized, and women as people are objectified. An event widely considered as an "origin story" for the second wave feminist women's liberation movement was their 1968 protesting of the Miss America beauty pageant.[1] Here, feminists protested what they viewed as the ranking of women based on their attractiveness. They felt the pageant "epitomized the objectification of women within a male dominated culture."[2]

Following the historical trajectory of these feminists' protesting at the pageant, many feminists in both popular and scholarly discourse have taken an anti-beauty stance. One strand of this anti-beauty way of thinking has argued that beauty standards are a disciplinary mechanism of patriarchal control of women's bodies. For example, Sandra Lee Bartky's work of the 1980s and 1990s consistently holds this kind of position, as she conceptualizes normative notions of womanhood as the "Femininity Project."[3] She argues that society expects women to be "docile bodies" who regulate themselves and their behavior according to a socially created and perpetuated idea of "femininity." Bartky relies on Foucault in conceptualizing the "Panoptical Male Connoisseur," speaking to how women self-regulate their bodies and appearance through the eyes of a male gaze.

Similarly, Susan Bordo unpacks the various discourses that inform how women's bodies are read, understood, surveilled, and controlled.[4] On beauty, she states:

> My focus is on the complexly and densely institutionalized system of values and practices within which girls and women […] come to believe that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless. In a cultural moment such as the present, within which a high level of physical attractiveness is continually presented as a prerequisite for romantic success and very often is demanded by employers as well, I believe that we desperately need the critical edge of systemic perspective.[5]

Bordo also takes an anti-beauty stance, highlighting the ways that women and girls internalize narrow standards of beauty that affect their own self-concept. Meanwhile, these narrow standards of beauty also work externally, as people read women and girls' bodies based on their conforming and fitting these standards. Non-conforming to the standards has negative consequences, from in the work place to our most intimate relationships. Ultimately, Bordo attends to these questions of embodiment by theorizing systems of control and domination rooted in sexism and misogyny. She also thinks about women's bodies' relationship to power through a Foucauldian lens. Later, Sheila Jeffreys builds on the work of Bordo and Bartky to argue against physically "harmful" beauty practices such as waxing, labiaplasty, high heels, cosmetic surgery, and shaving.

Other anti-beauty scholars have argued beauty standards are a backlash against gains of feminist pasts. Perhaps the most well-known iteration of this argument is Naomi Wolf's idea of the "beauty myth," which maintains that social gains for women resulting from feminist movements have engendered a backlash called the beauty myth.[6] This beauty myth requires the pursuit of a constructed notion of "physical perfection," which leads to self-loathing, self-consciousness, and unrealistically high aspirations for women. Wolf states:

> 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.[7]

For Wolf and others who subscribe to the "backlash against feminism" view, beauty is a tool of social control that sets women back and continues to chip away at the progress that women have made through feminist activism. Related to critiques of post-feminism, the "beauty

myth" concept is a way of saying that "beauty" is a construct is used to put women back in their place.

However, not all feminist thinking, either in popular or academic discourse, has been anti-beauty. In particular, third-wave feminism's turn towards embracing pleasure, playfulness, choice, femininity, and contradiction has allowed room for re-framings of beauty. Many third-wave scholars critique previous iterations or imaginings of feminism for the ways that they have been too stuffy, femme-phobic, or "judge-y" regarding ideas of beauty. Elias, Gill, and Scharff discuss what they call this "Affirmative Turn" in beauty studies, noting: "Much of popular third wave feminism also calls on feminism to engage with beauty and fashion in terms of playfulness and pleasure rather than coercion—directing its attacks less at a patriarchal beauty-industrial complex than against a particular construction of second wave feminism.[8]

Because third-wave feminism sees itself as allowing more room for pleasure, individual choice, complexity, and contradiction, this wave of feminism has been more overtly accepting of engagement with beauty vulture. For example, Linda Scott provides a historical reading of feminism and fashion, and through biographical accounts she claims that feminism has alienated most women by being anti-beauty and anti-fashion.[9]. Other affirmative or more positive takes on beauty include Claire Colebrook, who asks us to reject politics that are opposed to beauty.[10] She maintains, "Beauty is never purely ideological, and in all its deployments allows for some degree of enjoyment."[11] Relatedly, Rita Felski urges us to allow room for the "pleasures" of beauty in their own right, which are related to the "wonder" and "enchantment" we have towards and aesthetic beauty more broadly (i.e. in nature or in art).[12] Felski asks, "Is there a place in feminist thought for what we might call a positive aesthetic, an affirmation, however conditional, of the value of beauty and aesthetic pleasure?"[13] Colebrook and Felski ask to consider the possibilities

of beauty, outside of it being a simple tool of patriarchal oppression. What role(s) might pleasure, and mere appreciation of aesthetics, play in our beauty conversations?

While the anti-beauty literature of women's studies' past is critical to my own work, my work does not take on the same ardently anti-beauty stance. For me, this work does not always allow enough room for women's agency, multiplicity, and active negotiation of "beauty." Additionally, much of this work is written by white women, and I would argue it centers "sexism" through capitalism as *the* structure through which beauty operates and oppresses. Race, colorism, colonialism, and ethnicity are often marginal or absent.

However, I do find this foundational work incredibly useful for understanding beauty as a socially constructed idea that is often defined through, shaped by, and upholding of systems of power. I do also appreciate the scholarship within the "affirmative turn" towards beauty, because it allows room for multiplicity, agency, hope, and change. I think this turn revived the conversation and pushed it in new directions regarding the potentiality of beauty. I hope to bring this kind of energy to my own work. However, I am also critical of third wave feminism's individualism, as well as any views that are willing to embrace "beauty" and everything that comes with it, to the point of losing a critical standpoint.

Consider a recent controversy around popular Black British author, novelist, and essayist Zadie Smith's comments about beauty. In an August 2017 interview with *The Sunday Times*, Smith stated that she gets upset and annoyed that her seven-year-old daughter regularly spends so much time getting ready in the mornings and looking at her own reflection in the mirror.[14] Smith apparently told her daughter, "You are wasting time. Your brother is not going to waste any time doing this. Every day of his life he will put a shirt on, he's out the door and he doesn't give a shit if you waste an hour and a half doing your make-up."[15] Smith's comments in the

piece were critiqued, as many felt that Smith was trivializing women's sordid experiences with beauty standards and diminishing the importance of the skill and pleasure involved in women's daily beauty practices. Jezebel.com Writer Megan Reynolds suggested that a woman as conventionally beautiful as Smith comes to the conversation around make up with a particular set of privileges, stating: "It's also worth noting that Zadie Smith is conventionally attractive and has cheekbones sculpted by nature and not by expertly-applied cream contour and a light hand."[16] Meanwhile, Essence.com writer Siraad Dirshe critiqued Smith for "shaming" women's choices and diminishing the ways that beauty routines makes women feel good and serve as a form of self-care.[17] Tweets and social media conversations echoed these sentiments, including the idea that Smith, as a "naturally conventionally beautiful" light-skinned Black woman in particular, is not in a position to judge people for how much time they spend on make-up.

I think Smith has the right to raise her daughter to de/prioritize whatever she wants to as a mother. However, I also agree with broader critiques of viewpoints like Smith's, in that chastising individual women for how they choose to engage beauty culture (i.e. whether or not they wear make-up) is short-sighted, a bit pathologizing, a bit patronizing, and ultimately perhaps not the most helpful work to do. It also makes sense to me that these comments would feel tone deaf coming from a famous, wealthy, accomplished, conventionally beautiful women with access and light-skinned privilege.

However, I also think we must have some kind of critical eye towards where our ideas of beauty come from, who benefits from them, and why they hold so much weight for women, girls, and feminine presenting people in particular. In other words, what systems of power exist to support Zadie Smith's initial assertion in the interview that her son is less likely to be invested is his appearance than her daughter? As Feministing.com writer Meg Sri argues, the backlash

against Smith's comments on beauty may ultimately be a bit incomplete when it comes to these questions. Sri states:

> Underlying this outrage [around what Zadie Smith said] is a sense of personal injury that typically accompanies feminist critique of societally mandated practices for women (such as makeup, fitness or shaving legs). When someone criticizes the fact that women are expected, in all circumstances, to appear presentable and beautiful, their critique is taken as an attack on every individual who chooses to put on lipstick or remove their body hair. It is a classically individualistic, and arguably neoliberal, response to feminist critique: if we chose to do something for ourselves, then we can divorce that practice from the structural context in which it is encouraged and it emerges.[18]

Indeed, we must find ways to attend to this tension without shaming, patronizing, belittling, or erasing women's experiences. In my work, I think about beauty as an embodied site of "negotiation."[19] where all of these tensions between the structural and individual exist within Black women's everyday practices and experiences. My goal is to highlight the nuance of these narratives, experiences, and representations that come out of this space of negotiation.

Whether "pro-beauty" or "anti-beauty," much of the work I have detailed from within beauty studies' past has taken a position within this binary. Beauty is a harmful, oppression construct rooted in power which ultimately diminishes the quality of life for women, or beauty can be viewed as a space for pleasure, play, or self-expression that women can use to exercise agency over their bodies. However, in the past ten to twenty years, there has been an emergence of scholarship in feminism and women's studies regarding concepts of beauty. Indebted to this prior work, these contributions have built on this scholarship and complicated these longstanding feminist debates regarding beauty, by asking questions around surveillance,[20] affect,[21] globalization,[22] intersectionality,[23] nationality,[24] transnationality,[25] biopower,[26] neoliberalism,[27] and aesthetic labor.[28]

I align with this more recent group, particularly those who complicate and interrogate beauty by centering the experiences of women of color. Due to their historic exclusion from

ideals of femininity and beauty, many women of color historically have not felt they have the leverage to take a decidedly anti-beauty position. In other words, because Black women's bodies have not always been afforded space in the landscape of "beauty," their feminist politic could not involve a flat-out disavowal of it. Maxine Leeds Craig documents this tension noting that the women's liberation protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant was contentious for Black women, because Black people were protesting that same pageant for its lack of representation of Black women as beautiful.[29] The women's liberation movement was prompted in large part by the protesting of a beauty pageant that seemed to see (white) women as nothing but pretty faces and bodies, meanwhile Black people (women included) protested that same pageant for its refusal to recognize Blackness as beautiful.

Black Women and Beauty

Janell Hobson argues Black women have historically been erased or othered (i.e. hypersexualized, made "grotesque") within the landscape of beauty.[30] For Hobson, Black women have by necessity carved out spaces to reclaim and recover "beauty" for themselves, such as in the films of Black director Julie Dash—of *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) acclaim.[31] Black feminist scholars have consistently expanded and complicated ideas of beauty, by maintaining that women of color have a unique relationship to beauty, one that is shaped by more than blanket experiences of sexism and misogyny. This specificity is necessary, because notions of beauty are defined and shaped by interlocking systems of oppression.

Ideas of "Eurocentric" or "white supremacist" beauty standards have been theorized to understand the ways that mainstream beauty standards have socio-historically privileged corporeal features most closely linked to whiteness—light skin, straighter hair, thin noses and thin body frames.[32] Accordingly, features associated with Blackness have often denigrated

socially—darker skin, wider noses, larger lips, and kinky hair textures. An idealizing of these Eurocentric beauty ideals has been documented across populations of people of color, and across the African diaspora, throughout time and space.

Margaret Hunter argues beauty standards are another standard used to serve the interest of two privileged social groups: white people and men. They allow whiteness to continue to be privileged as most beautiful of all, while maintaining patriarchal society, as women divide and compete with themselves regarding who can be seen as beautiful.[33] Hunter 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."[34] In a world where qualities such as beauty, femininity, and delicacy are often socially rewarded in women, these socially constructed standards of beauty ideals have material stakes.

Social standards of beauty are also reflected in the ways that Black hair has been socio-historically bifurcated into binary poles of "good" and "bad" hair. This hierarchy is constructed through European-centered standards of beauty, as "good" hair is typically defined as hair with a wavier or loosely curled texture, while "bad" or "nappy" hair is kinkier and afro textured.[35] Kobena Mercer 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."[36]

Historically "tests" were done to determine if Black people's skin was light enough, or their hair was "good" enough to be accepted in certain social spaces. While evaluations like the "brown paper bag test" functioned to police skin tones, evaluations like the "comb test"

concurrently policed hair textures.[37] Obiagele Lake's work depicts advertisements for products as far back as the 1880s that promised to make "kinky hair grow long and wavy."[38] 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.[39] 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."[40] Patton says that this standard of beauty privileges "very light skin," "blue or green eyes," and "long, straight or wavy hair."[41] Relatedly, Robinson's makes key these links by connecting "good" and "bad" hair to the concept of colorism. Robinson defines colorism as "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."[42] Robinson and others like her argue colorism's link to western standards of beauty. Accordingly, Robinson links colorism and hair hierarchies.

Relatedly, good hair as previously defined by loosely curly or wavy hair texture is often attributed to bi-racial, or multi-racial ancestry.[43] While "good" hair is often conceptualized as a marker of bi-racial or multi-racial identity, nappy afro-textured hair is accordingly associated with people who are "fully" Black. Accordingly, Byrd and Tharps define the dichotomy by stating that during slavery, according to slave narratives, "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."[44]

The aforementioned scholarship regarding Eurocentric standards of beauty is critically important to understanding race, beauty, and power; however, some scholars have begun to complicate this picture even further. Tanisha Ford argues that across different spaces and times

in global Black history, Black women have used clothing, hairstyles, and accessories to construct counter-hegemonic, context specific forms of "soul style."[45] Meanwhile, the work of Maxine Leeds Craig argues that it is most helpful to understand Black women's experiences through multiple standard*s* of beauty, which are contextual, moveable, and varied. She states:

> I suggest that we look at beauty as a gendered, racialized, and contested symbolic resource. Since beauty is contested, at any given moment there will be multiple standards of beauty in circulation. By thinking about competing beauty standards and their uses by men and women in particular social locations, we can ask about the local power relations at work in discourses and practices of beauty and examine the penalties or pleasures they produce.[46]

Craig uses the term "negotiate" to demonstrate that at any given historical context, Black women navigate a complex set of expectations which may involve region, race, gender, class, political orientation, color, and more. For example, Craig's analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century African American beauty contests reveals a preference by Black people for beauties with both light and dark skin in close to equal numbers. Or, Craig's reading of the practices of middle-class Black women from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century reveals that Black women's adornment was likely to be shaped by their region, class, and the politics of respectability. In each of these cases, the context, and how Black women "negotiated" that context, is key. As Craig pushes back against the idea of a singular, Eurocentric standard of beauty that Black women are measured up against, she and other beauty scholars of color continue the work of interrogating entrenched assumptions that have existed within beauty literature.

Indeed, newer directions in beauty studies—such as this work by Maxine Leeds Craig—complicate the tendency of beauty studies to fall into binaries and dichotomies that mark the ways that beauty is "good" or "bad" for women. Black women in particular find themselves uniquely situated within this landscape, as they may be situated in binaries that are uniquely

raced, gendered, and classed. Black women navigate a complex landscape in terms of the ways their hair and beauty practices are politicized.

However, as discussed in the Introduction chapter, many in both popular and scholarly discourse have carried a dichotomous way of understanding their hair practices. Simidele Dosekun notes: "There is a tendency, scholarly and popular, in Africa and beyond, to see Black women's appearance with hair longer and less 'kinky' than 'nature' would have it as evidence of a relative racial 'self-hatred' and 'inferiority complex'; as a form of repudiating 'blackness' and a sign of desiring 'whiteness."[47] A few examples of this scholarship include Cheryl Thompson's arguging that Black women's hair straightening and wearing of sew-in hair extensions "stunts any potential to overcome the legacy of slavery and a multi-generational pathology of self-hatred."[48] Meanwhile, Michael Barnett argues that a key factor for Afro-Caribbean women straightening their hair is "an embedded sense of shame" and "internalized self-hate."[49] In addition to this scholarship, contemporary popular discourse often supports these claims. Consider the huge success of the 2010 film by Black male comedian Chris Rock *Good Hair*. The duration of the film is spent pathologizing Black women for the amount of time, money, and effort they spend on straightening, styling, and installing extensions to their hair.[50]

I align with scholars who theoretically disrupt this self-hate vs. self-love binary. Kobena Mercer's aforementioned work ushers in one of the first post-modern understanding of Black hair politics, by allowing space for hybridization, creolization, improvisation, and diversity. Mercer's work is crucial because it reframes Black people (and hair practices) in a way that underscores their agency, multiplicity, flexibility, and creativity. This reframing feels crucial to Black women in particularly, who are more likely to be objectified and judged more on their physicality. Indeed, Mercer notes towards the end of his piece that "the important question of

gendered differentiations (and similarities) in strategies of self-fashioning" still need further study.[51]

Accordingly, Shirley Anne Tate builds on Mercer's work in ways that center Black women and Black feminism. Tate states she is "dissatisfied with the treatment of black beauty in the academy."[52] She argues that beauty is something that is done—through mimicry, hybridity, and performativity. Thus, she "sees women as having agency in terms of beauty practices, getting pleasure from them and being empowered by stylizations."[53] For example, many people both in academic and popular discourse would argue that Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's and other Black women's wearing of long, thick, blonde weaves is actually a reflection of their self-hatred of their own shorter, kinky hair. However, Tate argues based on her interviews with Black women that they see styles like this one as playful, performative, and one of many options to choose from. For Tate, styles like these purposefully exaggerate the "artifice" or the artificial—playing with concepts of "natural" and serving as props for Black women to have fun and explore with. While Tate uses ethnography to chart the ideology beyond women's hair styles and practices themselves (how and why a woman might wear box braids, for example), I am interested in how Black women experience, negotiate, and rearticulate these questions of beauty though their cultural representations.

Amber Jamilla Musser does very different work to disrupt the self-love/self-hate binary.[54] She thinks about the texture of Black hair through the notion of "defensiveness," and argues conversations around it actually "work to produce an ideology of black female difference."[55] Musser states:

> The narratives I explore juxtapose assimilation and radicality, 'naturalness' and toxicity. Though these fantasies around hair and agency differ, they both produce the black female body as the primary source of agency and resistance. In these contexts hair makes a difference. It marks individuality, normativity, and desirability. However, this agency

> through hair is, I argue, illusory. Hair is situated as a defense against structures (neoliberalism, colonialism, modernity) that already compromise the possibility of agency in deep and complex ways. The schism between the vulnerability of the black female body and the desire to make hair signify resistance results in a defensive posture.[56]

Musser too is interested in dissolving and disrupting the binary. She cites the case of Angela Davis, noting "In Davis's distress that her legacy is reduced to fashion icon, we also read her irritation at the difficulty of sustaining a legacy of a black woman's political agency. By focusing on her hair, the actual political work that she has been engaged in recedes into the background. In this reduction of black women's agency to hairstyling options, the actual problem of agency has been obstructed."[57] Musser pushes back against these choices of hairstyling (and perhaps all similar embodied practices) as a space of agency for Black women, because they all are confined to certain scripts, informed by systems of "desire, capital, and power." She suggests that these very concepts around Black women's hair texture reinscribe difference and foreclose possibilities for agency—a point argued through her use of Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism."

Simidele Dosekun also to disrupt the binary, by rethinking the ways that weaves, or sew-in hair extensions, are understood in relationship to Black femininity.[58] She addresses the assumed link between the wearing of weaves and self-hatred, while situating it specifically in the context of her subjects as upper middle class, Nigerian, millennial women. In Dosekun's work, the binary I've been charting addresses not only racialized assumptions, but binaries of "Western" versus "African" forms of expression via hair, as well. Dosekun cites the work of Shirley Tate and Maxine Leeds Craig, and argues that the weave is an "unhappy" (from scholar Sara Ahmed) technology of Black femininity, a way or style of doing Black femininity.[59] The use of the weave may be built on "unhappy" histories of Black hair, but it is indeed *a part of*

Black femininity, rather than a simple mimicking of whiteness. For Dosekun, this perspective allows us to: "admit the weave into Black femininity," "depathologise" and "de-psychologise" the practice, and also decenter whiteness from our understandings of beauty. Dosekun states: "Understanding the weave as unhappy technology allows us to keep white supremacy firmly in view yet without reducing blackness and black subjectivity to it."[60]

Like these offerings from Mercer, Tate, Craig, Dosekun, and Musser, I aim to theoretically disrupt longstanding binary understandings of straight hair versus natural hair. I recognize that these choices exist within histories and social contexts of sexism, white supremacy, colorism, and colonialism. However, by understanding Black women's representations of natural hair as spaces where these contexts are negotiated, I underscore the nuanced and dynamic nature of Black women's agency within this landscape, while also de-centering whiteness and hair's relationship to it. Online, in writing, in film, and in music, Black women may simultaneously critique, negotiate, and reify these understandings of beauty.

The question of "beauty" has held a significant and divisive space within both feminist and anti-racist work for many years. Far from trivial, beauty is important because it encompasses so many tensions: the individual versus the structural, how bodies are read versus the gendered ways people self-present, specific sub-cultural understandings versus normative or "mainstream" understandings. Systems are mapped onto the body through our ideas of beauty, including nationalism, heteronormativity, cisnormativity, capitalism, racism, sexism, sizeism, ableism, and colorism. Beauty culture often reifies these systems, while also providing a space to critique, interrogate, and re-negotiate these systems. Beauty addresses these tensions and contradictions in ways that feel close to so many people, because they are so "embodied"[61]—people move around the world in their bodies all day, every day, for their entire lives. Black women, within their

bodies, find themselves at the intersection of these systems. Meanwhile, they have always used their bodies—and hair in particular—to self-express and to navigate these systems.

The Long Black Hair Movement (Pre-1990s)

For many decades, hair has been a site of creative expression, stylization, negotiation, identity formation, and kinship for Black women. There have been several texts written that offer detailed histories of Black women's relationship to their hair, tracing back to fifteenth century continental Africa.[62] Rather than provide a broad historicizing of this literature, I offer a history of Black women's relationship to their hair that centers their voices and experiences. I am most interested in the ways that Black women have experienced, negotiated, and "spoken back"[63] to the notion of their hair as politicized aesthetic space. Ultimately, I demonstrate that Black women have always enacted agency over their uses, experiencing, and stylizing of their bodies, and their hair practices have always been a way to do this work.

Mapping the Roots of Black Hair (Pre-Black Power Movement)

During reconstruction and into the early twentieth century, Black hair care entrepreneurship and beauty shops boomed, ushering in legendary women such as Annie Turnbo Malone and Madame C.J. Walker.[64] These women blazed new trails in Black hair care products and Black women's entrepreneurship. However, as is often the case with Black hair, this buying and selling of goods was inherently politicized. The discourse around the selling of these hair care products was linked to the "racial uplift" of the Black race, an ideology often rooted in middle class respectability politics. As Erin D. Chapman states, "The primary objective of the rhetoric and images Mme. Walker and ads for her products presented to the public was the establishment and maintenance of black respectability."[65] Byrd and Tharps relatedly maintain:

> …It is the story of two hair-care capitalists, Annie Turnbo Malone and Madam C.J. Walker, that best illustrates the way Black hair was used to make money while

> simultaneously helping to build up the race. The story of these two women also illuminates a theme that will be seen throughout the modern history of Black hair in America—the contradictions that seem to lie at the core of creating an industry that is pro-Black while pushing an agenda of altering or 'improving' on Black features by making them appear 'whiter.'[66]

As Tiffany M. Gill argues, Black beauty shops have been a site of activism since the early 1900s, and Black women beauticians have consistently been politically active for decades. From 1900 to 1930, "Black beauticians fostered the social, economic, and political networks that bridged the discourses of the black business community, the black women's club movement, as well as the New Woman and New Negro movements."[67] For Gill, Black women beauticians during this time and throughout history have been in a prime position to do this kind of political work: they have had physical space to gather and organize, they have remained economically autonomous within the Black community, and they have always have held spaces for Black social life specifically. As Lanita Jacobs-Huey's maintains, Black women have consistently used language as a "cultural resource' to negotiate hair's role in making or the 'becoming' within Black women's identities."[68] In examining Black women's "hair talk," Jacobs-Huey's work reveals the ways that "language mediates African American women's beauty work on themselves and others."[69]

Moreover, as Gill maintains, "Historically, black women in America have had a complicated relationship to beauty standards; not surprisingly, their participation in the beauty culture industry was laden with paradoxes."[70] Indeed, Black people's responses to beauty culture norms have always been varied and complex, as this boom in Black women's haircare entrepreneurship sometimes seemed to sit in ideological opposition with the politics of both racial uplift ideology and Black nationalism and Garveyism, despite that these constituents often worked together. For example, in 1920s, Pan-Africanists in urban spaces (followers of Garvey)

publicly denounced hair straightening, while praising kinky hair and other "African" physical features as a political rejection of white centered standards of beauty. However, even these moments were layered, as Byrd and Tharps note: "Marcus Garvey, who fiercely denounced straight hair, owned and operated a newspaper, *Negro World*, that devoted approximately two-thirds of its advertising to hair products, including straighteners. And Garvey's *Negro World* was not the only Black newspaper that filled its pages with text that condemned straightening yet carried advertising for straightening products."[71] Indeed, Black hair during the first half of the twentieth century offered layered questions at the intersection of political ideology, Black entrepreneurship, and standards of beauty that still inform the ways we think about hair today. Black women found themselves at the center of these debates, while continuing to innovate and create new ways to style, groom, and maintain their hair.

"Black is Beautiful" and Black Power

Prior to the 1960s, it was extremely unusual for a Black woman to be seen out in public without straightened hair or a wig, unless she aligned politically with the aforementioned Garveyite nationalist political strands, or perhaps she was a dancer.[72] Unstraightened hair was seen as "eccentricity at best" and "bad grooming at worst."[73] However, as Black politicization and activism spread over the years, more Black people began wearing their hair natural. Some of the first women to ever wear their hair natural in critical numbers were young women on historically Black college campuses, such as Howard University.[74] Women in SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) began wearing their hair natural, and soon they began to have a certain "look" that usually included natural hair.[75]

Stokely Carmichael's "Black is beautiful" speech took place in 1966, and by 1968 the phrase "Black is beautiful" was a popular slogan. This slogan was often accompanied by images

of the afro.[76] *Ebony* magazine debuted its first afro on the cover of its magazine in the year 1966, which was met with mixed reactions from its readership.[77] Still, during the late 60s, the Afro became one physical marker of a politically conscious, "Black and proud" person. Aesthetically, within these circles, a space was opened up where unstraightened hair could be seen as beautiful. Maxine Leeds Craig writes about the ways that the afro became a symbol of Black authenticity and political commitment during the movement. Here, the afro as an aesthetic choice helped unite people within the movement, standing in for or masking real ideological divides that existed. Craig notes: "Blackness and its beauty were represented by physical embodiment, augmented by adornments, with images that reinforced traditional gender hierarchies, placed in a context that suggested a political message."[78]

Afrocentric thinker and scholar Maulana Karenga endorsed the afro hairstyle at the time, as he suggested that love for and recognition of Black women's "natural" beauty could be a test of a man's "real" Black consciousness. Similarly, the Nation of Islam took up political stakes in natural hair, though often women in the Nation covered their hair. However, like previously in history with the Garveyites, the Nation of Islam's relationship to natural hair was rife with contradictions. The Nation denounced straightened hair, yet they featured it in its ads. They advocated Black owned businesses, but at the time they were ambivalent to the lucrative nature of Black owned salons.[79]

Indeed, while the 1960s are often romanticized as a time of widespread love of natural hair and Blackness, the time period was complex in terms of hair politics. Through the voices of Black women who were there at the time, Craig draws out some of the layered feelings Black women felt as they were wearing their Afros. Craig's text also reveals the varied reasons that women went natural in the first place during the time. Some women went natural because of

their newfound political consciousness, but others did it for other reasons: all of their friends were doing it, they thought "conscious" men would find them more physically attractive, or they just wanted to pick a fight with their mothers. My purpose here is not to undermine the radical political shifts that were happening at the time, or to downplay the prevalence and impact of afros and the "Black is beautiful" movement. My aim is to humanize and complicate how Black women actually experienced this time period, giving reverence to the complex and contradictory nature of Black women's embodied experiences. For me, one way to do this work is to continue to complicate the idea that there was something inherently liberatory about "going natural."

Black feminist foremother Michele Wallace spells out some of these tensions she felt during the period in her brilliant essay "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood."[80] In part, the essay discusses how women were objectified and minimized within many organizational spaces during the Black power movement, and how these experiences helped lead her to Black feminism. Wallace went natural within the context of the movement, but felt objectified, policed, and aesthetically inadequate, even among the "conscious" crowd. She notes: "So I was again obsessed with my appearance, worried about the rain again—the black woman's nightmare—for fear that my huge, full afro would shrivel up to my head. (Despite blackness, black men still didn't like short hair.) […] The message of the black movement was that I was being watched, on probation as a black woman."[81]

Her words underscore a number of important points regarding this time period and natural hair. One, the decision to go natural was a loaded one, and it was expected of most "conscious" "proud Black women." Also, the passage reveals the ways these decisions were uniquely gendered, wrapped up in ideals of femininity and beauty—and long hair as an indicator of both. Finally, the passage speaks to the ways that some Black women felt they were policed,

"watched," and "on probation" in terms of their bodies. Finally, the passage speaks to the ways that Wallace—and perhaps other women like her—found herself grappling with standards of beauty even in the context of a larger, ostensibly "pro-Black beauty" natural hair movement.

As Maxine Leeds Craig points out, the decision of how a Black woman chose to wear her hair was (and remains) a "public" matter. Even a woman who many consider Queen of the Afro—the legendary writer, scholar, and activist Angela Davis—has written about the ambivalence she eventually held towards having and being associated with a large Afro. She recalls being referred to as "the Afro," and states, "It is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a generation following the events which constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as hairdo."[82] She calls it ironic that she is remembered as "the Afro," when she was simply copying "the Afro" from other women at the time.

Kobena Mercer interrogates the assumptions that "the Afro as subversive" concept rests on, noting, "It should be clear that what we [are/were] dealing with are New World creations of black people's culture" and that there has been "no preexisting referent" for the Afro hairstyle in any "actually existing' African cultures."[83] 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?"[84] Mercer responds to his own question by discussing how each of these styles "became rapidly depoliticized and, with varying degrees of resistance, both were incorporated into mainstream fashion within the dominant culture."[85]

1970s and Beyond

Indeed, by the mid-1970s, the Afro was much more associated with trendiness, disco, and being "hip" than radical politics. Afro wigs became popular nationwide across races, and sex symbols of the mid-70s such as Blaxploitation film star Pam Grier and the character Thelma from the sitcom *Good Times* allowed the Afro to be viewed as sexy and alluring.[86] Eventually, the afro was subsumed by the mainstream, and decimated by the growing conservativeness of the 1980s. Byrd and Tharps note: "For some Blacks the reason for getting rid of the Afro was less dramatic and more pragmatic. Many brothers and sisters of the revolution had to get a job. With drastic cutbacks in state and federal aid to cities and social programs, many jobs available to people who had stayed on the fringe of the mainstream were now shutting down."[87] Instead, during the 1980s, the jheri curl became popular, and many women wanted "big" hairstyles, a la then popular talk show host Oprah Winfrey's hair.[88]

Indeed, the 1980s brought about a crackdown on natural hair, as several court cases involving discrimination and hair took place. For example, the 1981 case of *Rogers vs. American Airlines* involved the rights of employees to wear braids in the workplace.[89] In this case, and many like it, Black women are told to unbraid their hair, disguise their braids by wearing a bun, or cover them with a wig. Of cases like these, Paulette M. Caldwell says, "The forcible covering up of a black woman's hair—connotes a demeaning servitude that persists even in the face of changes…"[90] The policing of Black women's hairstyles in accordance with standards of beauty and notions of "professionalism" and "polish" has been consistent throughout history. At times, this policing has been legislated, as braids and other natural hairstyles have been regulated within many offices, businesses, and work spaces.

Building a New Natural (1990s – Early 2000s)

In previous iterations of this project, I struggled to figure out what constellation of factors made it so that so many Black women were willing to go against conventional beauty standards, decades of habit, and their own forms of self-presentation in order to begin to wear their hair natural during the early 2000s. However, Black women have *always* been negotiating this landscape. They have never been a monolithic group of passive consumers who conform to a singular, overpowering, Eurocentric standard of beauty. Therefore, many Black women had been wearing their hair natural before the late 2000s, which I mark as the approximate start of the contemporary natural hair movement. I am also certain many other Black women wanted to, or at least would have been comfortable with, wearing their hair natural pre-late 2000s, but simply did not have the tools, available hair products, or knowledge base to do so. In filling this gap in knowledge, products, and tools, the contemporary natural hair movement entered and flourished. I believe several factors converged to open a space to make possible the expansion of a culture of natural hair. I explore some of these factors below, beginning in the 1990s. These factors include: economic shifts, "going green" and organic products, media images of natural hair, and usage of the Internet.

During the 1990s, there were many options available for Black hairstyles. Indeed, Black people were choosing from a number of hairstyles, and hoping their employers did not complain. Weaves, perms, wigs, locs, flat ironed hair were all possibilities to choose from. Braided extensions also found popularity, as recording artist Brandy and superstar Janet Jackson (in the hit 1993 film *Poetic Justice*) both wore long box braids. Meanwhile, as technology improved, weaves and hair extensions became less expensive and more easily available. So, the weave market exploded into the early 2000s, as well. During this time period, Black hair also became a

topic of both academic study and art, meanwhile there was also continued chastisement of Black hair by teachers and employers across the country."[91]

Natural Hair in Media and Cultural Representations: 1990s – Early 2000s

The late 1990s into the early 2000s brought about a trend in rhythm and blues music often called "neo soul." The sub-genre found its roots in soul music, while also incorporating jazz, funk, hip-hop, pop, fusion, and African music. Music critics have noted its traditional R&B influences, conscious-driven lyrics, and the strong presence of women as defining characteristics. Most pertinently, artists of the neo-soul genre were often associated with a more "natural" or "Afrocentric" look, which of course included their hairstyles. Grammy-award winning artist Lauryn Hill was known for her long, thick dreadlocs, while the legendary Erykah Badu wrapped her hair in colorful, tall scarves. India.Arie, whose debut album *Acoustic Soul* was released in 2001, was also associated with these kinds of hair scarves and a "natural" aesthetic. Other debut albums from this moment by natural haired women included: Alicia Keys with her cornrows debuting *Song in A Minor* in 2001, Jill Scott and her afro debuting *Who is Jill Scott?: Words and Sounds Vol. 1* in 2000, and Angie Stone and her afro on the cover of her solo debut album *Black Diamond* in 1999. Before this particular moment, many of the major Black women musical superstars of the 1990s had straight hair: Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson (with the exception of the *Poetic Justice* moment), TLC, Lil' Kim, Queen Latifah, Whitney Houston, Foxy Brown, Mary J. Blige, En Vogue, and so forth. The vast majority of the famous actresses of the decade also wore straight hair, such as: Nia Long, Angela Basset, Halle Berry, Jada Pinkett Smith, Lynn Whitfield, Vivica A. Fox, Vanessa Williams, Sanaa Lathan, Tisha Campbell-Martin, Stacy Dash, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Oprah Winfrey. The neo-soul era expanded the number of representations of

natural hair found within Black music and culture, and it allowed room for the idea that natural hair could be beautiful and sexy, as well.

Comedian, actress, and *New York Times* best-selling Phoebe Robinson recalls this moment, stating:

> As soon as Badu rocked her sky-high and colorful head wraps in the music video for her single 'On & On,' it seemed every woman of color tried to copy this signature look. The style was radical because it marked a turn away from the bone-straight hairstyles that dominated black hair culture at that time. Badu, along with other neo-soul musicians of that era including Maxwell, D'Angelo, and Jill Scott, made waves because they naturally embraced their natural hair stories. Essentially, these folks helped usher in the next great wave for the natural hair industry, and Badu was at the forefront.[92]

The neo-soul era opened up space for Black women to publicly wear a variety of natural hair styles, while also being viewed as talented, beautiful, sensual, and complex. As per Robinson's recollection, these styles became trendy among Black women. However, I have been unable to find evidence to suggest that during this moment Black women went natural in anywhere near the same numbers as they did via the current natural hair movement. Because there is so little historicizing of the natural hair movement and its precursors, my guesses for why this was the case are twofold: 1) Even if Black women liked the way that afros and natural hair looked on these neo-soul artists, they still did not necessarily know *how* to style or care for natural hair on their own heads, particularly after many years of relaxing and straightening their hair. Thus, the tutorials, product reviews, and other internet-based tools that later came about may have allowed them to transition into the new look more easily and confidently. 2) Even if people liked the look of neo-soul artists, I still feel like they may have been pigeonholed a bit as "Afrocentric," "conscious," or "hippy"—because these kinds of ideas were attached to their larger images as artists. In other words, someone may have liked how Jill Scott's afro looked, while simultaneously feeling that Scott could "pull it off" better because it matches her "free-

spirit artist" image. Meanwhile, the current natural hair movement does not necessarily carry the same ideological attachments, thus perhaps it feels a bit more attainable and accessible for a larger number of women. Nevertheless, the neo-soul moment was an important pre-cursor for what we now know as the natural movement, as many women during this time did go natural, or at least had more space for imagining they could. The moment expanded the representations of successful Black women artists and their conceptualizing of beauty and self-presentation.

As the neo-soul trend phased out and the 2000s were in full swing, the business of weave extensions continued to boom, supported by weave-loving superstars like Beyoncé Knowles.[93] However, little moments of representation continued to shake things up regarding Black women and hair. For example, the protagonist of the hit UPN sitcom *Girlfriends*, attorney Joan Clayton, wore her natural hair throughout the series. Clayton was played by Black biracial actress Tracee Ellis Ross, today an icon and "hair inspiration" in many natural hair internet-based circles.[94] Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair* also shook up the conversations around hair politics.

Economic Shifts in the 2000s

In addition to various sites of cultural production within the media, The Great Recession—a general global economic decline—was happening in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) concluded that it was the worst recession since the 1930s, with widespread negative effects in terms of industrial production, trade, capital flows, oil consumption, and unemployment.[95] The United States experienced a specific recession, which is generally said to have begun in December 2007. Though the recession was said to have ended officially in June 2009, the effects of this economic crisis were widespread, particularly for Black communities.[96] As the economic recession negatively impacted communities across socioeconomic class, it stands to reason that people might face new

challenges in terms of budgeting their finances. Assuming a woman visits the salon to get her hair relaxed, she must periodically revisit the salon to "touch up" her "new growth" (the kinky, unrelaxed hair that has grown in since her last relaxer) at least every two to three months; many women go as often as every six to eight weeks.[97] A hair stylist will easily charge at least $80 for the applying of the relaxer alone. Additionally, a woman who wears her hair straight (whether it is chemically relaxed or not) may visit the salon as often as once a week to have her hair straightened with a hot comb or flat iron—a service that could easily cost $40. In short, it makes sense that in a particularly difficult economic time, many women would be more willing to entertain alternatives to wearing their hair straight—a style that can prove costly when worn regularly.

A "do-it-yourself" hairstyle like a short kinky afro might make more sense in this context, particularly as "do-it-yourself" culture also flourished within this time period throughout the US in general. The DIY network launched in 1999, and it went on to produce shows that focus on do-it-yourself projects such as plumbing, woodworking, and scrapbooking. In addition to DIY on cable television, the video sharing platform YouTube launched in 2005. YouTube is perhaps the most "DIY" friendly of all social networking websites. Since its inception, tutorials, instruction videos, and "how-to" clips have been posted on a wide variety of subjects, such as cooking/baking, home repairs, crafting, and so forth. Today, my typing "do it yourself" into the YouTube search bar finds a whopping 41,800,000 search results.

It follows that "do-it-yourself" tutorials would carry to the worlds of beauty, as well. Women are more likely to use social media, and they have also carved out feminized spaces such as fashion blogs and make up tutorials.[98] Beauty "vloggers," or "video bloggers" often upload tutorials that demonstrate how to re-create make up looks, product reviews that demonstrate

how to use various products, or general tips and tricks about the application of cosmetics. According to Sarah Banet-Weiser: "YouTube make up tutorials can be seen as the quintessential neoliberal industry in that the focus in on the individual entrepreneur who mobilises her own creativity and gumption into a lucrative career."[99] Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharff have offered a way of understanding this kind of "aesthetic labor" that occurs uniquely in the current context of neoliberalism, post-feminism, globalization, and the Internet. For Elias, Gill, and Scharff, the neoliberal era positions women as "aesthetic entrepreneurs," who view themselves as active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing, self-transforming subjects.[100] Young women see themselves as in charge of controlling and monitoring their own bodies and are invested in becoming "the best versions" of themselves. Elias, Gill, and Scharff state: "Like the neoliberal subject more broadly, the aesthetic subject more broadly, the aesthetic entrepreneur is autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices. Preoccupations with appearance, beauty, and the body are turned into yet another project to be planned, managed, and regulated in a way that is calculative and seemingly self-directive."[101]

In this context, we see various forms of "aesthetic labor*"* such as online make up gurus and tutorials,[102] "fitspo" or fitness and healthy eating related aspirational content, everyday make up routines,[103] and other forms of labor related to the aesthetic sphere. Women's participation in this labor can reap varying kinds and amounts of material rewards, whether we're talking about a woman working in corporate office following the aesthetic codes of "professionalism" at her office,[104] or a YouTube make-up artist online capitalizing on her beauty and perceived authenticity and relatability through advertising sponsorships.[105] While this theorizing on the natural hair movement and "aesthetic entrepreneurship" are both new, they are useful in considering how the internet based natural hair movement has developed and flourished, as well

as how Black women bloggers, YouTube vloggers, and entrepreneurs have carved out new industries, garnered sponsorships, and built followings on their platforms.

"Going Green," and Organic Products

Along with media moments and economic shifts, the 2000s also brought about another potentially important factor to the natural hair movement—a broader interest in organic products and an interest in environmentalism and "going green." As Byrd and Tharps point to, the 2000s brought required recycling to neighborhoods, Al Gore's global warming documentary *An Inconvenient Truth,* more environmentally friendly ("green") versions of familiar household products, and practices such as re-useable bags at the grocery store. Byrd and Tharps capture this moment, stating:

> Soon enough everybody was doing it [going green]. And haircare was right in the mix. For many black women, going green initially meant buying shampoos and conditioners that didn't contain harmful ingredients like sodium lauryl sulfate and parabens. […] So, of course it came to pass that these same women began to question their hair-care practices, particularly those who straightened their hair with chemical relaxers.[106]

The first natural hair and beauty expo, called the "Annual World Natural Hair & Healthy Lifestyle Event" took place in Atlanta, Georgia in 2006. Hosted by Black natural hair product brand Taliah Waajid, the annual expo features tutorials, product sales, demonstrations, and social events. According to its event website, the mission of the event is to: "…Bring together the best in the industry of natural hair and skin care, to provide education and training for cosmetologist and barbers as well as free informational workshops for consumers. The show focuses on providing information and education on healthy living, natural hair and beauty, with hundreds of exhibitors that offer health, beauty, nutrition, wellness products and services…"

This World Natural Hair Health and Beauty Show, which occurs every year in Atlanta, went from drawing about 8,000 visitors in 2006 in its first year to about 50,000 in 2011—nearly

five times the number of visitors.[107] Because Atlanta is known for its large and diverse Black population, it was likely among the first and most thriving natural hair scenes in the nation. It is also important to note that 8,000 visitors came to the event in 2006, again speaking to the rising interest in natural, organic, chemical free products and processes that was flourishing at that time. In 2013 first *book Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair* popular natural hair blogger, psychotherapist, and influencer Nikki Walton recalls "going natural" in 2006, with the help of one of the first natural hair websites as we understand them today: NaturallyCurly.com. In 2008, she began her own website CurlyNikki.com. Today, Walton has published two books, appeared on the television show *Dr. Oz*, and still manages CurliNikki.com.

Black People, the Internet, and Social Media

In the early 2000s, about 81% of Americans were on the Internet regularly, and 23.9 million were Black Americans. About 70% of Black women were online.[108] An emerging field of study includes the investigation of the unique and varied ways that Black people, and Black women in particular, engage the Internet and social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. As Noble and Tynes argue, we must understand the internet—from representation to infrastructure—in an intersectional way that considers systems of power. This understanding is particularly necessary because internet studies has previously seen themselves as "colorblind," while constructing the "default" internet user as both white and male.[109]

However, scholarship across disciplines focusing on people of color has intervened in these constructions. Anna Everett charts a Black diasporic consciousness through the very beginnings of cyberspace.[110] Meanwhile Adam Banks details Black rhetorical and discursive practices, while centering the DJ as the ultimate "griot" or storyteller. For Banks, all kinds of

storytelling happen online, which reveal African American rhetorical practices.[111] Sarah Florini argues that the Black rhetorical oral tradition and practice of "signifying" happens frequently on Twitter, as a way for Black people to affirm their racial identities in a seemingly disembodied space, the Internet.[112]

Indeed, as Florini's article notes, Twitter—"a microblogging site that allows users to send messages of 140 characters or less ('tweets') to the people that follow them"—is home to the discursive space known as #BlackTwitter.[113] Florini defines Black Twitter as "the substantial Black presence on Twitter" and "millions of Black users on Twitter networking, connecting, and engaging with others who have similar concerns, experiences, tastes, and cultural practices."[114] Florini notes that Black people disproportionally use Twitter, and maintains that #BlackTwitter is not monolithic, just as the Black community is not. Meanwhile, Graham and Smith argue that #BlackTwitter holds many characteristics of what German philosopher and sociologist Habermas would call a "counterpublic" or a "parallel discursive arena" where subordinated groups "formulate oppositional interpretations."[115]

Additionally, Twitter, and social media more generally, has been a home for Black activism around police brutality, such as use of the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #HandsUpDontShoot. #BlackLivesMatter the organization was founded by three Black queer women. Black women in particular have used Twitter, and social media more broadly, to theorize and share Black feminist and womanist standpoints, critique, and community.[116] My own interest in Black uses of social media comes from two places: my thinking about the natural hair movement as an Internet-based phenomenon, as well as my interest in how Black women use social media to engage in critique, community, and commentary regarding various television and film representations. The latter has been discussed in a few ways before.

For example, Anna Everett's details the "collective intelligence" of fans of Shonda Rhimes's popular drama *Scandal*, who "obsessively" tweet while viewing. She argues "such participatory and interactive show experiences and engagements, arguably, have become an unparalled game changer in the transformed firmament of network TV production and consumption."[117] My own work features Black women's engagement with another popular Shonda Rhimes drama called *How to Get Away with Murder*. I am interested not in the global impact of this kind of interactive engagement, but what it looks like and reveal for Black women. Everett's work gives a sense of the contours of this engagement, as well as how impactful it may actually be.

Additionally, Catherine Knight Steele provides an analysis of the Black women's discourse on two popular Black celebrity gossip blogs. Steele uses Black feminist epistemology and Patricia Hill Collins's "matrix of domination" to argue that on the celebrity gossip blogs, Black women talk back to the systems and structures through which they are exploited.[118] For Steele, Black women's conservations around romantic relationships, "sister" friendships, beauty, mothering, and Black male heroes amount to forms of resistance. Steele's work points to the "possibilities and potential" of Black women coming together across regions and class to gossip, "signify," play the dozens, and "talk back" to systems.

The work of these scholars provides a scholarly context for understanding the natural hair movement's flourishing online. Like "Black Twitter," for example, the natural hair movement has developed as a discursive[119] space that Black people share ideas, images, language, and critique. Black women have been discussing their hair, beauty, and body politics among each other long before the Internet—just like Black people have been "signifying" and participating in rhetorical practices of African American Language long before Black Twitter and gossip blogs.

However, the proliferation of the Internet has offered opportunities for discursive spaces for Black people across physical space, differences in population, and demographics. The Internet has also provided opportunities for scholars to amplify these voices and give credence to their complexity, diversity, and multiplicity. Ultimately, when we consider economic shifts, trends in "going green" and organic products, pop cultural representations, and internet use, we can begin to understand the context in which the natural hair movement was able to begin and flourish.

Expanding the Natural Hair Movement (Early 2000s – Present)

#TeamNatural: The Natural Hair Movement

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, before the proliferation and flourishing of social media, message boards were a major way that like-minded people communicated about topics online. According to Patrice Yursick, creator of the natural hair website Afrobella, the first natural hair message board was launched in 2002.[120] It was called Nappturality, and it was the natural hair internet hub at the time. Yursick recalls, "We shared a lot of information there. It was the first time that people were able to share their voice and to share what was working for them and get that, 'Yes, girl!' validation that you weren't able to get in your day to day life."[121] Yursick recalls that at this time period, wearing natural hair was much less popular and accepted, so the message boards also provided a space for natural haired women to vent about experiences such as family and bosses who were unaccepting of their hair. Still, Yursick wanted a natural hair space that was more like a magazine—covering Black culture and lifestyle along with hair talk. So, she launched Afrobella in 2006.[122] Yursick recalls the true take off of the natural hair movement as the year 2010. Indeed, many dates and statistics previously discussed chart the origins of the contemporary natural hair movement somewhere between 2007 and 2010. Around this time, a critical mass of Black women stopped chemically relaxing their hair ("relaxing" meaning

chemically straightening) and began wearing natural hairstyles.[123] From 2008 to 2013, chemical hair relaxer sales decreased from $206 million to $152 million, and from 2008 to 2013, there was a steady growth in all Black hair care products except chemical relaxers.[124]

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. 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.[125]

Saro-Wiwa's use of "transition movement" and "transitioners" to describe the natural hair movement speaks to intentionality. Many Black women had been wearing their hair without chemical straightening, in "natural" hairstyles, well before what we know as the current natural hair movement. However, the natural hair movement speaks to the large number of Black women who have intentionally chose 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, then forty-seven-year-old actress Viola Davis caused a buzz online when she wore her own natural, very short, and golden-brown afro on the red carpet of the Essence Black Women in Hollywood celebratory Oscars luncheon. Also, in 2012, hugely successful talk show host, producer, and owner of the television network *OWN,* Oprah Winfrey, wore 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. Observers took notice, as Huffington Post writer Julee Wilson said: "Looks like Oprah is the newest passenger on the natural hair bandwagon! The Queen of All Media decided to grace the September 2012 cover of *O* magazine in all her au naturale glory."[126]

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 a visual and recording artist, and the sister of pop superstar Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. In 2009, Solange told Oprah Winfrey in an interview that she would no longer spending as much money and time manipulating her natural hair. She said after cutting her hair off and going natural she felt "free."[127] By 2012, she was wearing her natural afro and serving as the spokesperson for Carol's Daughter natural haircare line—a position from which she eventually stepped down.

In May 2012, Solange did an interview with popular Black woman's magazine *Essenc*e 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."[128] 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."[129] Regarding the decision to go natural, the singer said, "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."[130]

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.[131] Similar to actress Viola Davis's 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, and public embodiment.

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."[132]

Like Solange, some Black women do not want their decision to discontinue using a relaxer and going natural to be politicized. They do not wish for their choice to stop relaxing their hair to position them within a larger concept called the natural hair movement. Accordingly, Solange tweeted in June 2012: "I have never painted myself as the Team Natural Vice President," adding, "I don't know the lingo."[133] Huffington Post writer Contessa Gayles takes a

similar position, noting 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."[134] While it appears Gayles is affirmative about her own autonomous decision to go natural, she is also reluctant to identify with the natural hair movement label. She maintains 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. Ultimately, Gayles argues, "For many natural women today, self-confidence trumps racial pride and self-discovery takes priority over sisterhood."[135] Positions like Contessa Gayles's complicate the contours, definitions, and boundaries of who to include in the natural hair movement.

Whether or not natural hair movement has indeed established itself as a "movement" is also debatable. Writer Kaye Flewellen takes up this issue, arguing that the natural hair movement is indeed a movement, due to its scope and links to social change. She notes, "The forerunners of the natural hair movement took on the issues of self-love and inner beauty, which ultimately lead to outward expressions."[136] 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. She adds, "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."[137] Like Flewellen, I maintain that the natural hair movement is indeed a "movement," due to its scale, prevalence, and ability to shift cultural nows such as which Black products are bought, sold, and used.

This movement has largely spread via the Internet. 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. Byrd and Tharps's describe this movement by its hashtag #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."[138] They also describe the movement stating, "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."[139] The culture gave way to natural hair meet ups, Happy to Be Nappy parties, and even hair cruises.

Predictably, since its inception, the natural hair movement has since been commodified and commercialized. The overall sale of organic hair and body products has been predicted to surpass $13 billion. In 2007, the brand Jane Carter Solutions alone made $1.7 million.[140] The natural and 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 women 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."[141] 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 (several that have sold chemical relaxers for decades) now

market “natural hair” product lines. It has perhaps never made better business sense to “go natural.”

The natural hair movement has now changed the landscape of how Black women’s hair is being discussed, cared for, and marketed to. *Essence* now has a reoccurring “natural” hair column, which features products, personal narratives, and lifestyle advice. Superstar Black actresses such as Tamara Mowry and Sanaa Lathan have also used social media as a platform to share their own natural hair journey with their thousands of followers. Nikki Walton’s book *Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair* has sold thousands of copies, and was nominated in June 2014 for the 45th NAACP Image Awards 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.

Commodification, Hair Hierarchies, and the Rise of the “Curls”

Having considered both the politics of beauty and the natural hair movement in its commodified form, and we can now begin to understand potential relationships between the two. The spreading and commodification of the natural hair movement has allowed it to expand to include many non-Black women who have curly hair. Many blog names and product names now function under the unifying, trans-racial banner of “curly” hair.[142] 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 they 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.[143] 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."[144] 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."

Product brands like Curls and Curls Unleashed market to all women with curly hair. Brands such as Mixed Chicks and Miss Jessie's were some of the first natural hair products on mainstream shelves and were also designed by and for bi-racial women.[145] The expanding of the natural hair movement to non-Black women allows more room for the domination of curly textures. 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."[146] Let us again revisit the notion of a hierarchal relationship between "good" and "bad" hair, now mapped onto the natural hair movement.

As Byrd and Tharps note, hierarchies of "good" and "bad" hair still exist within the natural hair movement space. Hair hierarchies within the natural hair movement may feel a bit unexpected and ironic to some, given the association of "the natural" with Black pride and self-love. Byrd and Tharps cite vlogger 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."[147]

Popular YouTube vlogger Jouelzy posted a video in April 2014 called "So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination." This video gained 126, 382 views, and garnered several video responses that engage Jouelzy's assertions. The video, which has since been removed from YouTube by Jouelzy herself, discussed the ways in which she felt she had been overlooked and marginalized by advertisers, sponsors, and some viewers because she has self-described "nappy" hair. As her video stated, 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, Black history, and politics, rather than natural hair.

Consider the proliferation of "hair typing" within the natural hair movement. The natural hair typing system was first printed in a 1998 book called *Andre Talks Hair* by Oprah Winfrey'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."[148]

Curlier textures are "3s"; more kinky textures are "4s." The "kinkiest hair" is often classified as "4C." These designations can have pragmatic use, as they can help members of the natural hair community find others with similar hair textures. However, Yaba Blay argues, "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."[149] It is also important to note that Walker's initial hair typing system did not

include the kinkiest hair textures, that is the "4C." It is assumed that at some point within the discourse of the natural hair community, 4C was created and added to chart illustrations.[150] Walker himself has made controversial statements about kinky hair in the past, including his stating: "I always recommend embracing your natural texture. Kinky hair can have limited styling options; that's the only hair type that I suggest altering with professional relaxing."[151]

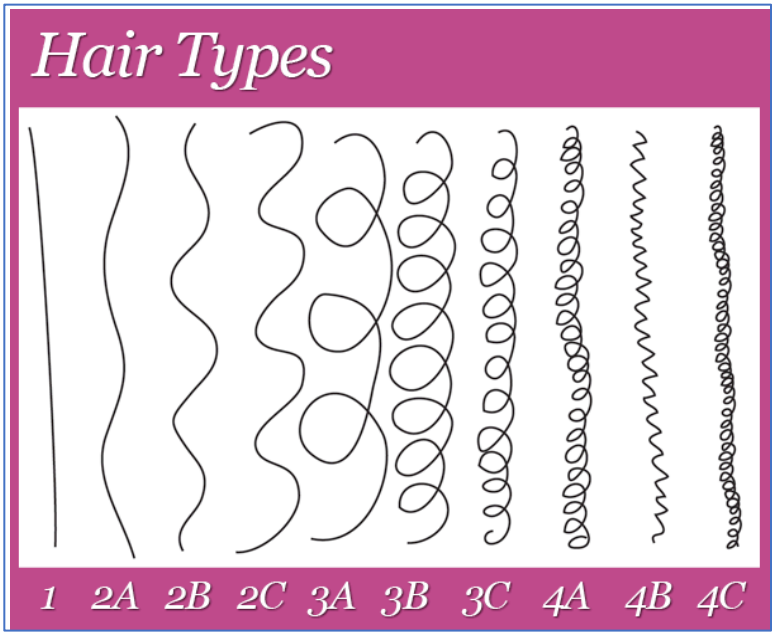

Figure 1 - An illustrated example of a hair typing chart

As hair texture socio-historically named as "good," the coveted "3" hair types are often associated with bi-racial or multi-racial people."[152] Lemieux maintains, "there has been too much representation of sisters who have what has been described as 'multicultural hair'," and she adds 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."[153] Byrd and Tharps mention 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. They 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."[154] Imani Dawson, creator of a natural hair Web site called A Tribe Called Curl, also stated; "big, biracial hair" is often the "unspoken goal" of many members of the natural hair community.[155]

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's loose curl pattern. Ross responded to the meme on her Instagram page, stating that Black women should appreciate their own natural hair, no matter its texture. Ross began a YouTube campaign called "#HairLove," in which she asked Black women to describe what they loved most about their hair.

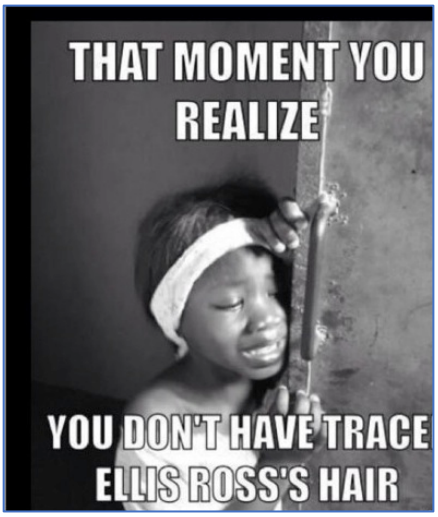

Figure 2 - An Internet meme poking fun at hair texture envy

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

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. Because the natural hair movement just began around 2008-2009, there is still relatively little scholarly literature on the topic so far.

The Natural Hair Movement as an Emerging Discourse

Currently, no full-length scholarly book manuscript on the natural hair movement exists. Much of what has been published on the topic includes master's theses and dissertations. Some of the published work is largely only descriptive of the movement, rather than theoretical—it attempts to capture the characteristics, contours, and extent of the movement. While this work is important to laying the groundwork of our understanding of the movement, my own work is interested in theorizing the movement, and the cultural moment it has engendered, through questions around cultural criticism, interiority, Black feminism, and embodiment.

Much of the work that has been completed on the natural hair movement is most interested in the movement as an Internet-based movement—the mechanisms of social networking, the digital sphere, and the role of media in constructing Black identities. For example, Tamika N. Ellington conducted focus groups with Black women to think about Social Networking Sites (SNS) as a communicative space Black women use to transmit information on caring for their natural hair.[156] Relatedly, Robin J. Phelps-Ward and Crystal T. Laura focus on the video sharing platform as "an investigation of self-talk in 56 internet video logs constructed

by Black adolescent girls with natural hair, describing the messages of self-love, hair care, and counter narratives…"[157] While I am in part interested in the natural hair movement as an Internet-based phenomenon, as well as the Internet as a space to chart others' responses by Black women to their representations, the Internet and social media do not make up the focus of my project.

Tiffany Gill outlines the contours and characteristics of the natural hair movement, and she maintains that the space is useful and subversive in its allowing room for self-representation and self-affirmation for women with natural hair.[158] However, Gill also points out limits of the movement in what she argues is a certain policing that happens regarding who or what is actually "natural." While Gill and I align in these important ways, we are still ultimately interested in different questions. Additionally, Gill is less interested in pop cultural representations within the context of the natural hair movement.

I aim to think about the movement as a space Black women have autonomously created, which has opened up a safe(r) space for them to critique, (re)present, articulate, and negotiate these standards of beauty as Black women. Additionally, I am putting the natural hair movement as an Internet-based space in conversation with other art and pop cultural representations of Black women. Whether online via social and new media, or within more longstanding art and media spaces, Black women are crafting new narratives that reflect the multiplicity of the ways they experience, negotiate, and critique normative understandings of beauty and bodies.

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CHAPTER TWO - "TRANSFORM YOUR HAIR!": MAPPING "BEAUTY" WITHIN THE INTERNET-BASED NATURAL HAIR MOVEMENT

When a young Black woman decides to go natural—or well before making this decision—she may likely begin to comb the web for information. Online, product descriptions promise her everything from "double the [curl] definition" through gels and creams, to next-level moisturizing through treatment masks, to the deepest cleansing through shampoos and rinses. YouTube video tutorials teach her, via step-by-step instructions, how to use some of these products through various processes of washing, conditioning, styling, clipping, and maintaining her newfound coils and curls. Natural hair blogs will provide her a space to view written essays, tutorials, product reviews, interviews, photos, and artwork. In sum, the internet will likely prove vital for her transition from relaxed straightened hair to wearing natural hair styles.

In this chapter, I analyze some of these internet-based hair spaces, where "beauty" is constantly being re-written, negotiated, contested, and re-inscribed. First, I explain why I have chosen the sites of analysis within the natural hair movement that I have chosen. Then, I analyze the work of two natural hair companies (Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture), a natural hair blog (CurlyNikki.com), and a YouTube video blogger (Whitney White, also known as "Naptural85"). These works serve as case studies to explore negotiations of beauty within the contemporary natural hair movement. In my analysis, I unpack two central spaces of negotiation and points of contention within all of the internet spaces: *styling* and *hair texture.* In regards to these two themes, larger narratives of the natural hair movement—and its Black woman participants themselves—may sometimes reify normative beauty standards. However, as their narratives demonstrate, these participants often also critique, reveal, interrogate, re-shape, and de/reconstruct these beauty standards, as well. Ultimately, the goal of the chapter is to provide

in-depth analysis of the ways Black women's narratives and discourses within the internet-based natural hair movement show active, embodied negotiations of ideas of beauty. Through their online musings, these women write and re-write understandings of the potentiality of "beauty" as a construct for Black women.

On Sample, Setting, and Methods

My analysis examines the content of the following internet-based sources: 1) The product descriptions from the official websites of two key natural hair brands—a) Shea Moisture and b) Carol's Daughter 2) Articles and written narratives from CurlyNikki.com, the world's most popular natural hair blog and 3) videos from the popular video blogger Whitney White (known online as "Naptural 85"). I chose to study the product descriptions for Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture, as well as blogs as social media, because these spaces represent the natural hair movement in two distinct but overlapping forms: its commercialized product sales, as well as its interpersonal social media exchanges. While I separate these spheres for now for the sake of clarity, they are not mutually exclusive. For example, one or more companies may "sponsor" a video blog or an Instagram post, paying money in exchange for being mentioned by an influencer.

These kinds of exchanges are more common, and potentially more lucrative, the more followers a social media influencer has—it is all about the amount of exposure they can potentially offer a company. This sort of product placement is one example of the ways that the blogosphere and the commodified natural hair movement are constantly overlapping and shaping one another. This kind of push/pull is important. Considering the narratives of both the major natural hair companies and women within the natural hair world will help to understand tensions between what is potentially marketable and conversations happening amongst Black women

themselves. The product descriptions provide a space to see what ideals are sold to Black women, while the blogs, videos, and social media represent narratives by participants within the movement.

Setting: On Internet Representations

For several decades, many Black women have regularly met one another in the hair salon, a physical space for them to get their hair "done." To get one's hair done often meant to have it styled in some way, often straightened via a heated tool, such as a flat iron or a "hot comb." Or, one might visit the salon to receive a conditioning treatment, to get one's hair trimmed, or to receive recommendations about haircare. While at the hair salon, women might converse with one another about potential hairstyles or hair care recommendations.[1] However, in the internet based, do-it-yourself inspired era of the natural hair movement, many women may visit the physical salon less frequently. Tutorials, information, and conversation on how to style, trim, maintain, and troubleshoot one's hair are all readily available on YouTube and blogs. Lanita Jacobs-Huey details the ways that Black women use both linguistic and non-verbal cues within physical spaces to exchange information regarding hair styling and care, also noting how the internet has changed the ways these exchanges now occur.[2]

It is important to consider natural hair blogs, YouTube channels, and product descriptions, because the current natural hair movement began and flourished largely via the Internet and social media. The movement itself is inextricably linked to Internet use by way of the production of video tutorials and product reviews on YouTube, bloggers posting written product reviews and tutorials, the sharing of links and photos on social media, and the utilizing of social media to connect with other women and to plan in-person natural hair meet ups. After

"going natural," many women no longer frequent hair salons as often as they once did, because there is no longer as much of a need to get one's hair done regularly.

The natural hair movement is now a multi-million-dollar industry that is heavily mediated by advertisements and corporate interests. The sales of products to maintain natural hairstyles are on the rise, while sales of relaxers are consistently declining.[3] Companies that have sold relaxers for several years now have product lines for natural hair, and "mainstream" brands of hair products marketed for non-Black women are now producing newer product lines for "curly" hair. It is critical to examine how advertising and marketing influence dominant discourses about natural hair.

Sample

The presence of the natural hair movement on the Internet is now huge. As of March 2019, a Google search of "natural hair" returns 2,630,000,000 results. "Black natural hair" returns about 1,730,000,000 results. Given the large amount of material existing regarding natural hair, this chapter shows a glimpse at patterns existing within a sizeable amount of the natural hair movement. The chapter represents a microcosm of the many spaces Black women engage over the internet to exchange information, dialogue, and learn about natural hair.

One major space where discourse on natural hair is produced and disseminated is natural hair corporations, and one of the most popular natural hair care companies is called Carol's Daughter. The website for Carol's Daughter is among the top visited natural hair care websites, and the brand is often credited as helping to build and grow the natural hair movement.[4] CEO Lisa Price founded the brand in 1993. She began mixing products for her family and friends in her kitchen, and she then began selling the products at local flea markets. The first Carol's Daughter store later opened in Fort Greene, Brooklyn in 1999. After appearing on Oprah's

Favorite Things special in 2002, the popularity of the brand surged even more. In 2011, the brand launched its now most popular line—its "Monoi Oil" line.[5]

Carol's Daughter has since become a force to be reckoned with, valued at $27 million. The brand was bought out by corporate giant L'Oréal in Fall 2014, a decision which proved controversial among its consumer base.[6] Some of Carol's Daughter supporters were disappointed that a previously Black owned hair care line was being sold to a corporate giant such as L'Oréal, especially in the context of the decades old history of Black hair products being distributed by White-owned companies in the US. Other popular natural hair product lines such as Shea Moisture and Oyin Handmade have remained Black owned in spite of this history. However, according to a 2017 article on Essence.com, Lisa Price viewed the decision to sell as "smart."[7] Price maintained that selling the line to a larger company was always her ultimate goal, in order to maximize its reach and accessibility.[8] Carol's Daughter products were placed in Target in the years 2014 and 2015, and by 2016 Carol's Daughter was available in 30,000 retailers across the nation.[9] Today, the products are available at retail giants such as Target, Wal-Mart, Walgreens, Sally's Beauty, and Ulta. Past spokespersons for the company include R&B legend Mary J. Blige, prolific actress Jada Pinkett-Smith, and recording artist/songwriter Solange Knowles. For the purposes of this study, I considered product descriptions for the 18 styling products featured on the Carol's Daughter website.

The other natural hair care brand under study is Shea Moisture. Shea Moisture was founded in Harlem in 1991 by Nyema Tubman and Richelieu Dennis (and his mother Mary Dennis). The company was inspired by Dennis's Sierra Leonean grandmother, Sofi Tucker, who sold shea nuts, shea butter, and African black soap at a rural market in Bonthe, Sierra Leone in 1912.[10] In an interview Richelieu Dennis (current CEO of the company) stated that when he was

young, he helped his grandmother sell products during summers—teaching him the necessary recipes and skills. When a civil war occurred in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Dennis, his mother, and his sister came to the United States.[11] Today, Shea Moisture sells natural hair products, lotions, and soaps in nationwide franchises such as Target, CVS, Walgreens, and Wal-Mart. In both 2015 and 2016, Shea Moisture was voted "Overall Favorite Brand" in popular blog Naturally Curly's annual "Best of the Best" survey. For the purposes of this project, I considered the 39 styling products featured on their website.

The blog that I analyzed is called CurlyNikki.com. According to its "About" page, the website was created to "affirm those struggling to embrace their naturally curly hair" by way of "hair therapy," which "serves as an educational tool" as well as a platform for readers to share "experiences, frustrations, and triumphs of being Naturally Glamorous."[12] In addition to including pieces about celebrities and lifestyle, most of the website's content is about the styling, maintenance, transitioning, and understanding of natural hair. Though the website CurlyNikki is named after Nikki Walton, the website is a space with contributed written pieces, comments, and forums by and for women across the globe. The website is communal and interactive, as conversations take place within the comments section of many posts. Many of the followers and bloggers are "loyal" to the website, and they consistently post, comment, and interact on the forums. Therefore, the content of CurlyNikki.com represents a piece of a larger discursive arena, ideology, and set of representations within the natural hair community and among Black women. CurlyNikki.com was chosen due in large part to its popularity, breadth of content, and relevance within the natural hair community. In her 2013 book, Walton calls her website CurlyNikki.com the most visited natural hair website in the world, while writer and cultural critic Jamilah

Lemieux also called the website "wildly popular."[13] According to Imdb.com, CurlyNikki "has become the largest and most popular blog of its kind."[14]

Nikki Walton is a licensed psychotherapist, television personality, and lifestyle and beauty blogger.[15] She writes on CurlyNikki.com's "About" page, "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!"[16] The website explicitly de-politicizes Black hair, framing it as part of a larger "healthier" and "fabulous" lifestyle. Walton has gained quite a bit of visibility as a result of her work, as she has been featured in outlets such as: *USA Today*, MSNBC, *The Huffington Post*, CNN, *New York Times,* The Grio, The Root, *InStyle*, *Parents*, *Seventeen*, *The Guardian*, *The Today Show*, *The Katie Couric Show*, and *The Dr. Oz Show*. In addition to being founder and Head of Content for CurlyNikki.com, Walton is co-founder of another natural hair website called NaturallyCurly.com.

Due the size of her audience, breadth of her content, and impact on the community, I consider the entire videography from video blogger Naptural85, or Whitney White. White describes herself as "a Graphic Designer, Vlogger, Blogger, and Natural Hair Enthusiast!"[17] She went natural in 2008, and she began her YouTube channel on August 8, 2009. Initially, White planned to simply upload one video about her "natural hair journey," in which she announced her progress since going natural and thanked others in the community for inspiring her to do so. This initial video resonated with others and inspired White to continue producing and publishing content on YouTube. Of these humble beginnings, White states: "Around that time on Youtube, there weren't many 4a, curly-haired women sharing their stories of what worked for their hair and what didn't, so I wanted to make sure I shared as much as possible in hopes of being able to

help someone else with my type of hair. I found myself in the bathroom thinking, *'Hey, this could help someone!'* and quickly grabbing the camera to record."[18]

White is one of the most watched natural hair bloggers on YouTube. As of March 2019, White has posted 338 videos, which have garnered a total of 103,857,251 views. White has over 1,060,566 subscribers on YouTube. On Instagram, a popular photoblogging application, she has over 678,000 followers. White makes more money on YouTube than she once did as a graphic designer.[19] In October 2018, White announced the launch of her own hair care line called Melanin Haircare, mass produced based on her own DIY recipes. The products were released and distributed in early 2019. White's extreme popularity suggests that over a million people identify with White and view her as a reliable source of information. Most of White's videos include natural hair product reviews, styling tutorials, and recommendations for hair health and maintenance. While I explored all of White's content from 2009 to present, the examples I cite here are concentrated from 2013 to the present. The natural hair movement also exists on Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, Pintrest, and more; however, there is only so much room in this chapter to discuss varied 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 and blogs.

Methodology

This chapter constitutes a discourse analysis of the web content found on the aforementioned internet based natural hair spaces. A discourse analysis allows researchers to systematically analyze what is both hidden and visible within communication, texts or language.[20] Discourse analysis involves a reading of texts that takes into account social context and the functionality of the given text. I perform discourse analysis on what is stated during

YouTube videos, what is written in blog essays, and what is detailed in product descriptions—all internet spaces. According to Serie McDougal, "virtual documents such as websites and Internet postings can also be subjects of research, as they reveal data about their creators or authors. Documents have to be interpreted and analyzed within the context they were produced."[21] Discourse analysis involves a reading of texts that takes into account power dynamics, social context, and the functionality of the given text.

David Kirkland's notion of "ethnography of discourse" is also useful because it combines the methods of critical ethnography and discourse analysis in order to take seriously the cultural context within which the discourse exists.[22] Through ethnography of discourse, I understand that I am not simply analyzing the discourse itself, but the function and significance of the words within a larger, culturally specific context. This paper assumes discourses occur in a particular cultural context, which is critical in interpreting the meaning(s) of the texts. My analysis 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.

The Language of Styling Natural Hair

Styling and Product Descriptions

I read the product descriptions for the "Styling" sector of products for both the Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture brands of natural hair products, and I noted which ideals regarding hair styling were most often evoked within the discourse of the product descriptions. One pattern that emerged constantly throughout the study was the language of natural hair that needs to be styled, manipulated, flattened, and smoothed in order to be considered "done." By way of styling products and styling itself, natural hair can be made "done" or "fixed." Hair is most ideal when it is styled, defined, and polished. The products consistently marketed certain ideals, demonstrated

by ideas and words that kept coming up repeatedly across the varied products: manageability, sleekness/de-frizzing/smoothness, definition, control, and the "behavior" of the hair.

The repetition of the ideals suggests that the natural hair products ultimately market a sort of managing, containing, and polishing of the hair texture in its natural state. One common way that these ideals play out is the constant use of the term "curl definition" and/or "defined curls" as ideal for natural hair. The language of "definition" suggests that the product or styling 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 smoothed and polished look. Products marketing themselves as "anti" frizz was another common idea, appearing in a third of the Carol's Daughter descriptions and almost half of the Shea Moisture descriptions. For example, the product description for Carol's Daughter's Marula Curl Therapy Diffusing & Styling Lotion reads:

> 6X MORE MANAGEABLE. 2X DEFINITION.
> TRAIN YOUR CURLS TO SPIRAL INTO PLACE, EFFORTLESSLY!
> We love our curls to be bouncy, shiny and free, but they get a bad reputation when they start misbehaving, naturally becoming dry, brittle and unmanageable. Take control and train them to spiral into your perfect style, while staying soft, manageable and easy to define, with this creamy lotion that never leaves curls stiff and dry. It's packed with Marula—a rich oil harvested for 12,000 years in Madagascar that instantly restores and softens your curls. Finally, you can truly let go and let curls flow.

In this description, hair in its natural state is described as "misbehaving" something that should be "controlled" and "trained." The use of "misbehaving" suggests hair that is wild, unruly, and needs to be contained, speaking to a sort of racially coded understanding of hair that is kinky, coil-y, or nappy. Shea Moisture's Mongongo & Hemp Seed Oils High Porosity Moisture-Seal Styling Gel uses similar language, stating, "Trying to force coarse curls into submission makes them look even more frazzled and damaged." In both cases, the natural hair is inherently out of control, so it must be "trained" into a more acceptable formation. The products' narratives cater to and reinforce the notion that natural hair is best when it is soft, manageable,

and of course "defined," harkening back again to defined curl patterns being an ideal. The idealizing of "bouncy" curls and "shiny" hair was also common throughout the product descriptions for both brands. The passage's use of the phrase "spiral into perfection" also suggests that another goal of hair-defining products is to reveal a more precise spiraled curl pattern. Curly hair with a distinct spiral curl pattern (the "3" hair type) is often the most often coveted hair texture for Black women.

Shea Moisture's product description for Mongongo & Hemp Seed Oils High Porosity Moisture-Seal Styling Gel also vividly calls up many of the same ideals, reading:

> Rough, tangled and damaged curly hair is never pretty. Shea Moisture's High Porosity Moisture-Seal Styling Gel is specially formulated with Mongongo and Hemp Seed Oils to tame wild, frizzy curls to give you a silky-smooth style you can rock with […]. Trying to force coarse curls into submission makes them look even more frazzled and damaged. Shea Moisture's High Porosity Moisture-Seal Styling Gel is enriched with ultra-hydrating Mongongo and Hempseed oils which seal hair cuticles to block humidity and frizz to give you shiny, smooth, perfect curls. […] Certified organic Shea Butter present in this gentle styling gel, nourishes your curls without weighing them down, leaving you with frazzle free, dazzling curls and coils all day long. Know your porosity, transform your hair! Shea Moisture's High Porosity Moisture-Seal Styling Gel equalizes hair porosity and seals in moisture to give you perfectly styled, shiny and bouncy curls."

The description immediately designates certain hair as removed from notions of what is "pretty." Again, un-styled and "frizzy" hair is associated with that which is "wild" and also "frazzled," while smoothness and defined style is idealized. "Perfect curls" are once again coveted, as is "perfectly styled, shiny, and bouncy curls." Like with the Carol's Daughter description, defined, styled, curls are put forth as the ideal state of natural hair.

Several product descriptions for both brands use verbs such as "control," "manage," "tame," and "perfect" alongside adjectives to describe un-styled natural hair such as, "unruly" "stiff," "uncooperative," and "frazzled." Ideally, hair is "polished," "soft," "moisturized," "manageable," "sleek," never "out of place," "flat," and "smoothed out." The contrasting of

these two sets of ideals suggests the products offer themselves as transformative, with several of the products literally using the language of "transform." For example, a Carol's Daughter description for Sacha Inchi Oil Omega-3-6-9 Rescue + Repair Curl Defining Smoothie reads "Transform frazzled, distressed hair into smooth, well-defined curls," while the aforementioned Shea Moisture description states, "Know your porosity, transform your hair!" This kind of pitching beauty products that are "transformative" to ones' appearance is a common feature of products sold within the larger landscape of beauty culture.

Like many beauty products, these products promise that they are "transformative." The discourse in these natural hair product descriptions often plays a delicate dance between encouraging its consumers to love their "natural curls," while also making clear that their curls are their best state when styled, polished, and contained by way of their products. They arguably do some work that subverts hegemonic beauty ideals, by encouraging women to accept their hair textures that have been marginalized and erased for so long. Meanwhile, they often ultimately uphold ideals of styling and texture.

This tension between "self-love" discourse and the simultaneous marketing of beauty ideals to individual consumers is discussed by Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias, who chart the contradictions and tensions within the rise of campaigns urging consumers to "Love your body!" by powerhouse brands such as Dove, Special K, and Weight Watchers.[23] Gill and Elias situate such campaigns in the context of neoliberal governmentality, emotional capitalism, the growth of social media, and commodity feminism. Ultimately, for Gill and Elias, the "Love Your Body" market campaigns "do not represent a straightforward liberation from tyrannical beauty standards, and may in fact instantiate new, more pernicious forms of power that engender a shift from bodily to psychic regulation."[24] Instead of subverting societal standards regarding body

shape and size, these campaigns cause women to regulate not just their bodies, but their sense of self, as well—a sort of "physic regulation." Not only must women's bodies be regulated, but they are simultaneously being asked to squelch and control their negative thoughts in favor of "loving" their body—though almost everything about the culture is telling them to hate their bodies.

Gill and Elias's work lays bare tensions between radical body positivity movements which call for an end to body discrimination of all kinds, versus a sort of consumer-driven call for one to "love" their individual, seemingly autonomous body. Many natural hair product descriptions and advertisements walk a comparable line in affirming the beauty of Black natural hair, while profiting from and re-inscribing the need to monitor, contain, and polish one's Black natural hair. Consumers should "love their curls!" and "love their hair!," while still recognizing the need to purchase a host of products to define, shape, stretch, maintain, and contain it.

Negotiating Styling Ideals Online

Like these product descriptions, the blog and YouTube channel under study also often encourage stretched, styled, defined, natural hairstyles. These spaces each promote the kinds of styles that simultaneously stretch natural hair and mold it into styles that mimic curly or wavy hair textures. Some examples of these kinds of styles found on Whitney White's) (also known as @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 the use of styling products similar to those product descriptions quoted above, are methods to manipulate the look of natural hair in ways that stretch the hair and mimic loose curls.

For example, a video called "My MOST DEFINED Wash and Go | Easy Technique - Naptural85," published August 3, 2014, has since garnered over a million views. The language of "defined" is used in the title, which mirrors the goal marketed in several of the Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture advertisements. White has also published videos that include: "Ultra Defined Twist Out Tutorial No Heat Curls" and "My Softest + Most Defined Twist Out Technique 2014." At times, the content of White's page reinforces the notion that accomplishing styles that "define" women's natural hair in ways that mimic or project looser hair textures is an ideal.

However, other videos that White has posted include her negotiating and critiquing these unwritten expectations for acceptable natural hair texture within the natural hair industry and community. She acknowledges this fraught terrain, and advocates that her viewers make the hair choices that make them the most "comfortable" and happy." In her video "My Natural Hair Hopes: Diversity in 2016 | Naptural85", which was published in January 2016 and has since garnered over 111,758 views, Whitney states:

> At the end, what's most important is that you are happy and healthy, and that you are helping the next person to love *themselves*—which *includes* their hair—in the manner of which they're comfortable in… Cuz people can only be happy when they're comfortable with themselves, they can only grow when they're comfortable with themselves, and when they feel like they're being represented correctly, and when they're happy.

Here, White suggests that the natural hair community should reorient itself away from policing individual women's hair practices and instead encourage acceptance—with oneself and with others. Though White's content may sometimes reinforce standards of beauty, her content also depicts a questioning and negotiating of these standards. Having become a very successful vlogger within the natural hair community by the year 2016, she is able to speak from a particular vantage point about divisions and tensions within the space. She arrives in a place of

reflection, where she emphasizes that women being "represented correctly," "comfortable," and "happy" should be the ultimate goal.

However, another common word used within White's content—as well as the product descriptions—is the idea of "stretched" hair in contrast to "shrinkage." "Stretched," or "stretching," of the hair is a common term in the natural hair community. The term connotes that a given style or product will reduce "shrinkage," "stretching" the shaft of the hair in a way that shows more of the strands' "true" (completely straightened) length. "Shrinkage" is the word within natural hair community for hair that is coiled, shrunken, and at its most kinky and curly state. "Shrinkage" is the opposite of hair that is "stretched," and hair that is straightened with heat (i.e. flat ironed) is the most "stretched hair." In one piece for CurlyNikki.com, writer 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."[25] Recall that Type 3 and Type 4 are the curliest textures, with 4s being the most kinky/coil-y.

"Stretching" the hair is to reduce shrinkage by elongating the shaft of the hair to varying degrees. An illustrated image found on Tumblr (Figure 3) demonstrates the concept of "shrinkage," by comparing a women's hair in its most "shrunken" state, versus a more "stretched" state. The illustration depicts a woman physically stretching her hair with her thumb and index finger.

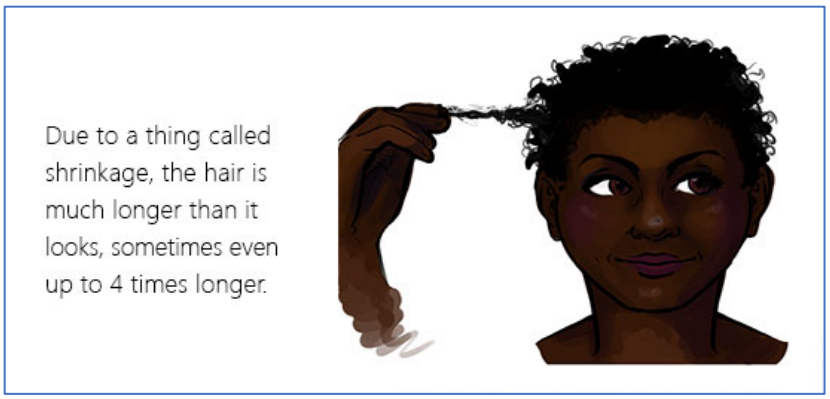

Figure 3 – An illustration of the concept of "Shrinkage"

"Maximum shrinkage" is often avoided and denounced within the natural hair community, because it is when hair looks its most short and least defined. Thus, styles such as the previous ones mentioned by Naptural85 and products that claim to "stretch" the hair are popular. The website under study, CurlyNikki.com, 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, "Twist Maintenance to Reduce Shrinkage" by Misst1806, and both "How to Prevent Shrinkage in Natural Hair" and "Here's How to Stop Hair Shrinkage" by Mary Wolff. Many of the articles have suggestions for how to prevent shrinkage, with many using antagonistic language like "avoid," "combat," or "prevent" 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 shortest. For example, Jessica's piece on CurlyNikki's blog states:

> If you've been natural long enough—you know that shrinkage can be cray [slang for '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.[26]

This passage articulates much of the discourse surrounding shrinkage in the natural hair community, and why it is often framed as 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." Jessica 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." While Jessica's preference against a shorter afro texture is indeed personal, her aversion to the style takes places within the larger context of beauty standards that often privilege longer hair and looser curl patterns. So, much of the language of styling on the product descriptions, as well as some of the language within the blogosphere, discourages shrunken, un-styled, and short natural hair. Within these spaces, idealized beauty does not always make room for kinkier, shorter, or un-styled afro textured hair.

The narratives of Black women participants within the natural hair movement reveal critiques and negotiations of these pervasive beauty standards. Essays on websites like CurlyNikki provide space for varied and complex perspectives by a number of Black women bloggers. In fact, Ashley Glenn, the writer of the previously quoted piece called "5 Ways to Decrease Shrinkage" (2013), later wrote a piece in 2015 called "I Used to Hate My Shrinkage." Glenn states that she has grown to appreciate her shrinkage as a unique trait of her kinky coil-y hair. She says she still stretches her hair sometimes, and she is still interested in her hair growing longer. However, she takes a more critical stance on why she initially "hated" her shrinkage, and she encourages her readers to do the same. She asks, "If you're battling a love/hate relationship with your shrinkage, think about the reason why you dislike it. Is it because it affects the end result of your styling? Does it mask your truth length? Be honest with yourself and the

acceptance will start there."[27] Two years after writing a piece about decreasing shrinkage, Glenn's later piece critiques her own initial hatred of shrinkage and encourages self-reflection on one's motives for wanting to combat shrinkage.

Relatedly, another example of discursive critiquing and negotiations of beauty standards is an essay Toia B. posted in 2014 on CurlyNikki.com. Toia B.'s piece acknowledges that shrinkage is generally seen as unfavorable within the natural hair community, yet she urges her readers to instead embrace shrinkage as a "beautiful, unique trait of natural hair."[28] 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 many women want to show off their "real length, or at least something close to it."[29]

Toia also argues that the natural hair community's disdain for shrinkage may be linked to socio-historically engrained Eurocentric standards of beauty. She points out that women with naturally straight hair do not often 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 historical legacy of idealizing long hair. Ultimately, Toia interrogates why the desire to minimize shrinkage, in order to maximize appeared 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.[30]

After exploring her own relationship to the concept of shrinkage, Toia thinks critically about the natural hair movement's aversion to shrinkage, contextualizing it within decades of beauty standards that have privileged "straighter and longer" hair. Ultimately, Toia urges a re-writing of beauty ideals that privileges hair health over longer hair.

It is also interesting that Toia calls up the natural hair movement's longer lineages, stating that she will "ask [her] mother if they were complaining about shrinkage in the 1970s." Toia's mother may or may not have noticed these complaints among her friends at the time, but historicizing of the time period certainly suggests that bigger, longer, afros were the ideal even decades ago.[31] Recall in Michele Wallace's essay "Anger in Isolation: A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood" she writes: "So I was again obsessed with my appearance, worried about the rain again—the black woman's nightmare—for fear that my huge, full afro would shrivel up to my head. (Despite blackness, black men still didn't like short hair.)"[32] While Wallace may have lacked the exact language of "shrinkage," her fear of her afro "shriveling up" in the rain suggests that concerns about shrinkage are not new.

The internet-based natural hair movement has taken these private, embodied, interior feelings and moments and brought them into to a public sphere, allowing an opportunity for Black women across physical space to come together and negotiate. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Michele Wallace may not have used the language of "shrinkage," and she may have felt this fear of shrinkage caused by the rain "in isolation." The natural hair movement has allowed room for Black women participants—such as Ashley Glenn, Toia B., and Whitney White (Naptural 85)—to begin to sort out some of these complexities in their work.

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!"

Hair length is constantly desired within the natural hair community, and growing ones' hair longer is often its participants' central goal. This lauding 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 Repairing 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, because they cut off their relaxed hair to start.

Indeed, when Black women go natural, they often choose to "transition" from relaxed to natural, or they choose to complete a "big chop." [33] 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 no longer chemically altered. After "chopping" off one's 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. But 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 piece "How Long Will You Be in the TWA Stage?" published 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 product description 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, so selling promises of "length retention" (another buzzword within the natural hair community) makes sense. Whitney White's channel features several videos about growing long hair, and White herself is admired within the community for her long and thick hair. White and her hair are examples of what is known in the community as "hairspiration" or "hair inspiration." White's March 2012 video "My TOP 10 Tips on Growing Long Healthy Natural Hair" has garnered over 1,283,398 views and 17,186 "likes." Her channel also has five instances of "length checks. Length checks are a common practice within the natural hair community, during which a blogger physically measures and reports how long their hair is, via a tape measure or measuring tape.

Figure 4 - A “length check” by Whitney White on YouTube

White has posted at least five videos of “length checks” since August 10, 2010, with each one showing increased hair growth. She states on her YouTube “About” page that she big chopped in January 2009. White’s five length checks across time show the ways 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” or completed her “big chop.” Terms such as “hairspiration,” “hair inspiration,” “hair porn,” “hair goals,” and “hair idols,” are all examples of terms within community that laud long hair. These terms are all used to describe images or videos of Black women with hair that is widely admired within the natural hair community. This hair is most often the longest hair with defined curl pattern. One example of this trend is the “Hair Idols” section of the CurlyNikki.com website.

In sum, the language around styling within the natural hair community suggests that natural hair is best when it is “defined” into a recognizable curl pattern or “stretched” to look as long and curly as possible. Both of these sets of ideals sit in forced opposition to most Black hair

in its natural state—kinky and tightly coiled. Yaba Blay calls these styles that stretch and define "manipulated natural" styles. "What kind of natural are we talking about?" Blay asks.[34]

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 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, as well as the countless products that cater to this demand, suggest that for many consumers kinky Black hair in its most natural state is still frowned upon.

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 hair length is another way Eurocentric beauty standards are reinforced within the community. It makes sense that long hair would be lauded, fetishized, and feminized within the natural hair community, because it is lauded, fetishized, and feminized within society at large. While Black people can and do grow long hair, it is designed to shrink in its natural state, causing it to appear shorter than its "actual" fully stretched length. Meanwhile, Black women are constantly mocked for "not being able to grow long hair."[35]

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." 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" one's 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 beauty ideals.

Hair Texture and the Natural Hair Community

"Hair textures" and "hair typing" have proven to be both a salient part of one's embodied experiencing of these internet based natural hair spaces, as well a site of contestation and tension. Hair typing involves a number and letter system that is used to describe various hair textures. The numbers range from 1 to 4, and the letters within each category of number describe variations within the number. The Number 1 hair is at one end of the spectrum; it is virtually completely straight, with no natural curls or waves at all. Meanwhile, 4C hair is the kinkiest, coily-est type of afro textured hair. Most pertinent to the conversations about Black women within the natural hair movement are the 3s—a range of spiraled loosely curled hair—and the 4s, the kinkiest texture.

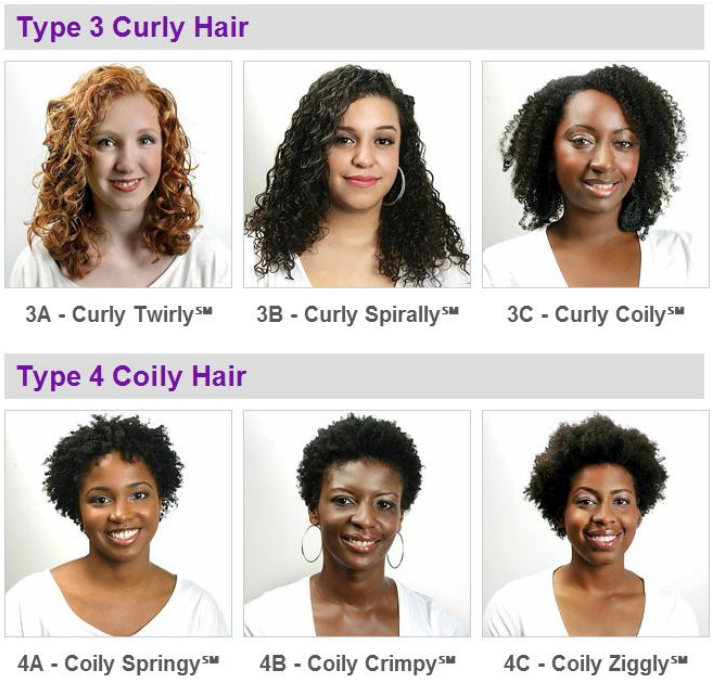

Figure 5 - Photographic Hair Typing Chart via Nenonatural.com

Many video bloggers and writers openly and consistently identify their hair type to their audience, so that viewers can easily identify hair that resembles their own. For example, Whitney White's YouTube bio reads: "HAIR TYPE: 4a, 4b in Crown." For others, their hair type is left open to interpretation. People determine their own and others' hair types most often by simply looking at one of various charts and comparing the texture on the chart to what is on their head. So, when we talk about hair typing, we are simply talking about the appearance of the hair. Some people have various hair types at the same time, for example some Black women report having kinkier hair at the back of their head/the nape of the neck (an area known colloquially as the "kitchen"). While hair typing is simply one aspect of one's hair—the aspect that is perhaps the most visible—it has proved to be a significant source of contention.

Hair Texture, Hair Typing, and Products

As I read and analyzed the product descriptions for Carol's Daughter and Shea Moisture, very few of the product descriptions explicitly mentioned the hair typing system. Instead, more general language such as "curls," "coils," and "textured" hair was much more common. One of very few examples of a specific hair type being mentioned was in the product description for Shea Moisture's Red Palm Oil & Cocoa Butter Styling Gelee, which states:

> Minimize natural shrinkage and temporarily reveal a longer? fro or curly-coily style with this multipurpose styling gelee. Rich, hair-loving butters and oils blend in this anti-shrinkage gelee that helps loosen, elongate and define tight curls and coils for twist and braid out styles. Smooths flyaways, eliminates frizz and controls edges for a flawless look. Great for 3-4c hair types.

This product description suggests that this particular product would be best for women with hair in the 3s and 4s. While the description does connote specific hair type, really there is not much that is specific about it. As the above charts suggests, saying "3-4C hair types" constitutes virtually anyone with curly hair. From a marketing standpoint, it makes sense that the

product descriptions and advertisements would not want to pinpoint a particular hair number or type to market to, particularly one that is limited to a specific race. In other words, if we are talking about "all of the 3's and 4s," we are talking about anyone with curly hair—across race. However, if we are talking about 4s—in particular "4C"—odds are likely that we are talking about a woman who would identify racially as Black. The specificity of marketing a product for 4 or 4c hair, or to Black women in particular, might jeopardize the products' ability to be marketed across demographics of race, length, texture, and hair type. These questions of texture hierarchy, in group/out group dynamics, and marketing have caused controversy for the brand Shea Moisture a few times in recent memory.

The first involved Shea Moisture's April 2016 "Break the Walls" campaign. In a commercial that aired both on television and online, Shea Moisture argued that the ways hair products are currently shelved in stores is problematic. Currently, and for many years, popular retail drugstores (i.e. Walgreens), superstores (i.e. Wal-Mart), and beauty stores (i.e. Sally's Beauty Supply) often separate the brands for products made for Black women via signs that read "Ethnic Haircare." These Black products are often all shelved together in a specific section, perhaps a certain number of rows or an area of the larger beauty aisle. Shea Moisture argued in this campaign that their products should be shelved with all the other "mainstream" beauty products on the shelves. The campaign urged stores to #BreaktheWalls, stating that Shea Moisture was no longer wanted to sit back and be relegated to the ethnic haircare section.

In an Essence.com article by Sabrina R. Perkins, the CEO of Shea Moisture explains how the racialized and gendered space of the beauty aisle is set up in a problematic way, stating:

> I have often said over the last 20 years that the beauty aisle is the last place in America where segregation is still legal, and separating 'beauty' from 'ethnic' has only served to further perpetuate narrow standards of what is considered beautiful in our industry and our society—which is why we began leading the efforts to break down those walls. […]

> This movement is about so much more than selling shampoo, or lotion, or cosmetics. We're advancing a mission and vision to change the social dialogue about how we're looking at beauty as a society and how those archaic structures and views are debilitating to the establishment of new and more inclusive ways of viewing beauty – whether in the images we see or in the aisles that divide.[36]

The commercial for the campaign suggested that the division in the beauty aisle ultimately makes Black women feel other-ed and inferior. One woman in the commercial stated, "We just have been conditioned to go the corner and find our spot where we've been placed." Another echoed, "When I go to the beauty aisle, I feel secluded and isolated." Yet another speaker objects to being called "ethnic." At the end of the commercial the voice of Shea Moisture cuts in, pronouncing: "We're Shea Moisture, and now we can be found in the beauty aisle… Where we *all* belong." The hashtag #BreaktheWalls then appears on screen.

Narratives and dialogue online appeared almost immediately, as Black women grappled with the conversation Shea Moisture was bringing up about race, beauty, and the geographic layout of beauty aisles in stores. Writer, entrepreneur, and blogger Shantae Pelt agreed with the campaign's sentiments, writing a piece that stated:

> When I saw Shea Moisture's new #BREAKTHEWALLS commercial I was so incredibly moved. I can't even explain the inspiration I felt. I watched it a few times because I was almost in disbelief that Shea Moisture would tackle an all too familiar experience in such a bold way! The experience described has been so internalized and ingrained that many just accept it as the norm, and of course, I know this experience. I live it, as do many others. The innovative, revolutionary way of thinking depicted in the commercial is fuel for a humble business owner like myself.[37]

For Pelt, the experience of feeling other-ed and isolated by the ethnic haircare section was relatable. Shea Moisture's taking up this issue was "bold," "innovative," "revolutionary," and long overdue. As Pelt is an entrepreneur who sells colorful children's t-shirts, her post goes on to discuss how she wants to #BreaktheWalls in the fashion industry, as well.

At the same time, many other Black women online critiqued the campaign. Several on Twitter questioned Shea Moisture's motives for the campaign, suggesting that the campaign was really about cross-market promotion and making themselves available to markets other than "just Black people" who shop in "the ethnic section." User @PearlsPolkaDots maintained that the campaign was about "expanding their markets" in an April 2017 tweet. User @FuckinQueer was similarly unimpressed, stating in a June 2016 tweet: "Someone said shea moisture is doing break the walls to appeal to white people for coins. I think so too."

Outside of Twitter, other women wrote essays critiquing the campaign and adding to the larger conversation about beauty, race, and the aisles in stores. One writer named Tyisha Scott for the website The Oddessy wrote: "I have to disagree with the campaign. I love that Shea Moisture is taking a stand and fighting for what they believe in, but all hair is not created equal and there are specific products designed to help maintain African American hair."[38] She later added, "The majority of hair products available accommodates hair categories one to three, while African Americans' hair texture usually falls in the fourth category. I love having a section of the store designated to my specific hair needs. It makes shopping for hair products easier and faster."[39] For Smith, the separation within the beauty aisle simply makes practical sense, because Black hair is physically, tactilely unique from others' hair. Because Black hair has different needs, it needs different products, and there is nothing wrong with categorizing like products together on a shelf. Smith compares the practical and user-friendliness of this categorizing to the placement of food at the grocery store. She states that, if anything, the issue is that the Black section should be larger, with a wider variety of Black hair products being made available to Black consumers.

Writer Jessica Cruel also pushes back against Shea Moisture's campaign, arguing that in within a landscape of a larger beauty culture that often involves vague language, false promises, and the centering of non-Black peoples, the ethnic section allows her to find exactly what she needs for her own type 4B hair. She writes:

> There are hundreds of products that seem like they are being vague on purpose, trying to appeal to as many potential buyers as possible. Is my hair type included when a bottle says it's for frizzy, textured, or curly hair? Is pomade the same thing as edge control? Will the darkest foundation shade be dark enough for my skin tone? Were these formulas even tested on black women like me? […] I like knowing where to look. I like knowing that, over here, when the bottle says 'curls' it means my kind of curls (type 4B to be exact) and not the curls of my Caucasian counterparts. To me, the ethnic hair sign is like a big arrow cutting through all the marketing BS and telling me 'this product was made for you.'[40]

My goal is not to discern who was right or wrong in terms of critiquing or affirming Shea Moisture's #BreaktheWalls campaign. I am interested in the ways the campaign engendered a specific dialogue around beauty, gender, marketing, haircare, and the politics of the geographic layout of the beauty section in stores. In this conversation, I see these women negotiating larger questions around capitalism and race, and at root this a conversation about Black separatism. It is not a coincidence that several of the articles, tweets, and Shea Moisture founder Richelieu Dennis himself use the language of "segregation," such as Cruel's piece "The Beauty Aisle Is Segregated—and I'm OK With That." Through its campaign, Shea Moisture provides two options: In the (beauty) world, do you want to be by yourself with the other Black stuff, or do you want to be "housed" with everything else and occupy a space within a more diverse, "integrated" beauty area? The answer varies depending on the politics and experiences of the Black woman answering the question. These narratives reveal Black women providing some answers, through critical negotiations of these larger themes.

Another time that questions of hair texture, exclusionary advertisements, and race caused controversy for Shea Moisture was their April 2017 #EverybodyGetsLove campaign. The company ran another commercial online that ultimately went viral for reviving conversations around hair texture, in-group/out-group dynamics, race, beauty, and marketing. The goal of the ad seemed simple: to promote self-love of one's own natural hair and simultaneously combat "hair hate." The 30-second spot features narratives of women discussing how their hair was once a source of embarrassment or shame, but they eventually combatted "hair hate" and learned to love their own hair naturally. What made the advertisement controversial; however, was the race of the models featured. The video centers on a message of "break free from hair hate" and opens with a very light skinned Black woman (some viewers in their discussion of the ad even called her "racially ambiguous") discussing the challenges of growing up with curly hair. This woman is the only woman of color in the ad, and she has loosely curled hair that is perhaps 3B textured. The ad then turns to a blonde white woman with straight hair, who says that some days she looks at herself in the mirror and simply does not "know what to do" with her hair. Then, two white women with red hair discuss the pressure to dye their hair blonde, because their red hair stands out in the crowd in a negative way.

Figure 6 - Visuals from the now removed #EverybodyGetsLove Shea Moisture ad

The campaign received so much backlash that is was removed almost immediately. I sort the subsequent critique of the ad into two central, but overlapping, arguments: a) the ad erases Black women, who are the demographic most likely to face "hair hate" as a result of anti-Black racism and b) the ad—like the #BreaktheWalls campaign—again signals that Shea Moisture is "selling out" in order to market across racial demographics. This argument suggests the ad again shows Shea Moisture's abandonment of Black women, particularly those with kinky hair, who are and have always been their most loyal core consumer base.

The first issue, and perhaps the one most directly related to questions of beauty standards, was the fact that Shea Moisture did a commercial about "hair hate" while only including one woman of color. This woman of color also had loosely curled hair and very light skin. This argument takes into account the socio-historical context that has always deemed kinky, 4B and 4C coily hair as "bad" "nappy" hair that needs to be "fixed." As writer Jihan Forbes summarizes for Allure.com: "The fact remains that black women have historically been taught to hate their kinky hair textures and this commercial could have been a good opportunity to add that point of view, to represent that particular kind of 'hair hate,' which is deeply rooted and considerably different from a white woman who hates her hair because she doesn't know what to do with it."[41]

Many Black women throughout social media echoed these sentiments. Scholar Treva Lindsey wrote on Twitter: "That @SheaMoisture 'break free from the hair hate' video is both infuriating and disheartening. The erasure is so real-an eff u 2 lots of BW [Black Women]." Another Twitter user named @MissSuccess tweeted: "You make an ad abt 'Hair Hate' and leave our thee MOST hated on hair texture (+people w/ that hair texture) on the PLANET? HOW? #SheaMoisture." Tweets such as these point to the ways that Black women were critiquing their

own erasure in a conversation about hair hate, while maintaining that they themselves hold a unique subjectivity in having the most hated hair.

For these critics, the egregiousness was the advertisement's comparing something as institutional, structural, and historically rooted as the hatred of kinky Black hair to being teased for having red hair that is "too bright" or blonde hair that sometimes falls flat. One tweet by @JamelleWD stated: "Shea Moisture just hit us with the AllLivesMatter version of a natural hair commercial." The tweet, in a cheeky way, compared the ways the hashtag #AllLivesMatter has appropriated #BlackLivesMatter's work against anti-Blackness and police brutality to how Shea Moisture has appropriated the actual experiences of women of color who experience "hair hate." In the cases of both police brutality and the good hair/bad hair dichotomy, institutions of oppression and anti-Black racism shape Black people's experiences in specific ways.

Many also argued that Shea Moisture's #EverybodyGetsLove campaign was about continuing to expand their market. Like with the #BreaktheWalls campaign, this attempt at expanding was interpreted in various ways by various consumers. For some, it was again a question of a kind of "selling out," a forsaking of the group that built Shea Moisture—and the natural hair movement more broadly—Black women. User @girlswithtoys stated within a tweet that Shea Moisture's ad was "just to appeal to Beckys," with "Becky" here used as a slang term for young white women. Another user named @Enijah_Jacquee wrote, "So they just gone continue to NOT have dark skin black girls represent their products when they're the MAIN people who support them? Sick." Many Black women customers tweeted that they would no longer buy products from Shea Moisture after this commercial, with some also bringing up the previous year's #BreakTheWalls controversy as more fuel to the fire. For these critics, the ad

was indicative of Shea Moisture's willingness to marginalize and erase the experiences of Black women in order to appeal to markets across race.

However, some online commenters did not see a problem with this expansion. One user named @ChendGolden wrote, "Isn't this what we want? To be accepted as regular as opposed to 'other'. I'm happy white girls can use Shea Moisture just like I use Dove." Here, like with the #BreaktheWalls controversy, this user does not see any inherent value in separating products based on race. She views consumers of all races using products that were not "meant" for them initially as a progressive development. Relatedly, one user named @SouthSideGAClay wrote, "So Y'all are really mad at SheaMoisture for trying to sell their product to all races, and thus, make more money?" Here, like, during the #BreakTheWalls conversation, questions of the market in a capitalist society come to the forefront of the Twitter conversation. For some, it just makes good business sense for Shea Moisture to branch out, and they should not be critiqued for doing what makes good business sense. For others, Shea Moisture should continue to appeal to Black women on ethical or political grounds, as they are responsible for the brand's success.

Still others supported the ad, because the ad was at least willing to start a conversation about hair hate. One user named @LiuKangKicks wrote: "I don't see how the Shea moisture commercial bad. It's talking about hair shaming and all that shit y'all tweet about." This user notes that at the very least Shea Moisture was willing to pick up on a conversation around the hatred of certain kinds of hair types. This tweet is also interesting because it recognizes the ways that brands like Shea Moisture are in tune with the conversations that Black women are having around hair and beauty online, and they deliberately speak a similar language that Black women often use to describe themselves and their experiences. Other brands such as Pantene Relaxed and Natural have also tapped into language of "pride," "heritage," and reclaiming and loving

one's natural hair in their commercial. It is again the tension articulated by Gill and Elias regarding the "Love your body!" discourse in advertisements. That "shift from bodily to psychic regulation" means not only selling a "makeover" of your natural hair through Shea Moisture products, but also a promise of a "physic" makeover that will cause you to finally be free of your "hair hate."

A few days later, Shea Moisture pulled the ad and apologized via a lengthy post on their Instagram and Facebook pages. The post in part read, in part:

> Wow, okay – so guys, listen, we really f-ed this one up. Please know that our intention was not – and would never be – to disrespect our community, and as such, we are pulling this piece immediately because it does not represent what we intended to communicate. You guys know that we have always stood for inclusion in beauty and have always fought for our community and given them credit for not just building our business but for shifting the beauty landscape. […] We are keenly aware of the journey that WOC [that is "Women of Color"] face – and our work will continue to serve as the inspiration for work like the Perception Institute's Good Hair Study/Implicit Association Test that suggests that a majority of people, regardless of race and gender, hold some bias towards women of color based on their textured or natural hair. So, you're right. We are different – and we should know better. Thank you all, as always, for the honest and candid feedback. We hear you. We're listening. We appreciate you. We count on you. And we're always here for you. Thank you, #SheaFam, for being there for us, even when we make mistakes. Here's to growing and building together…

The piece walks an impressive tightrope, maintaining the brand's larger aims of "inclusivity" across racial demographics, while also doing some work to acknowledge the specificity of the experiences of "women of color." The word "Black" or "African American" is never used in the apology. The statement also acknowledges the brand's mistake, or "f up," while also evoking fictive kinship in lines like #SheaFam. The brand seems to have recovered fairly well from the entire incident.

In the cases of the "Break the Walls" campaign and the "Hair Hate" campaign, Black women were vocal about their responses to the advertisements. In both cases, some supported

Shea Moisture, while others did not. However, tracing their responses via social media allows us to see that ways that they "talk back" and "return the gaze" in a dialectal process with Shea Moisture. Shea Moisture is a company that many Black women feel, rightly or wrongly, they are owned loyalty from as central actors within the natural hair movement. In other words, Shea Moisture could not grow without the flourishing of the natural hair movement (a space that the labor of Black women created and built), or without Black women as their consumer base.

My aim is not to surmise whether or not Shea Moisture has "sold out" by marketing across race. I think Shea Moisture's marketing decisions are rational, and feel almost inevitable, within a larger capitalist economy. However, what is most illuminating to me is the ways that Black women negotiate these parameters set by Shea Moisture, and capitalism more broadly, online. Their varied, critical, responses to the narratives of Shea Moisture and the texture discrimination conversation more generally reveal the multiplicity and complexity of how they experience the geographies of beauty and the buying and selling of beauty.

YouTube and Black Women's Negotiations of Hair Texture and Typing

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 the overall look of participants in the natural hair community. Former self-proclaimed 4C video blogger Jouelzy began a dialogue that resonated throughout the natural hair community in her now deleted YouTube video "So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination," posted April 27, 2014. Jouelzy also wrote an accompanying article published in March 2014 posted on both her blog Jouelzy.com and the website for *Ebony* magazine.[42] Like in her video, Jouelzy's article details her 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:

> When I eventually doing [*sic*] YouTube tutorials on 4C natural hair, I didn't feel like part of the natural hair community because I rarely saw anything close to representation of my hair texture. Tides have definitely turned as my audience has grown, and others have cultivated loyal followings by celebrating kinkier hair textures. But even as the blogs push out more content that celebrates coils and kinks, you can still scroll go on Instagram and see curly hair largely being represented as the cremé de la cremé of the natural hair movement. […] There's a host of women with textures similar to mine that opt to be 'natural under their weave' because mainstream aesthetics still don't include us. Women are still walking the beauty aisles of their local drug stores and picking up the newest gel or curling custard, hoping for the perfect spiral to bounce from their scalp, and still asking others 'How did you get your hair to curl like that,' without knowing that it isn't something they can or should aspire to achieve. As natural becomes the norm, let us celebrate the kinks and the curls alike as beautiful and kill this unhealthy hair hierarchy.[43]

Jouelzy's addresses at least two key points of discussion around hair, beauty, and Black womanhood. The first is the argument that there is a hair hierarchy within and outside of the natural hair community, which results in an erasure of 4C kinky haired women within natural hair spaces. The second is the ways these beauty ideals that privilege looser curl patterns are marketed by way of natural hair products that promise "curls" "spirals," and "bounce" to their consumers. Jouelzy's video and accompanying article caused widespread reactions throughout the natural hair community.

Many agreed with Jouelzy's arguments, while many others felt the articulations were divisive and short sighted. One example of the latter opinion is articulated in a video by another popular natural hair video blogger Taren Guy. Guy joined YouTube as a natural hair video blogger in January 2009. She has since garnered over 260,000 subscribers and 22,734,445 views. According to an August 2009 video, Guy racially identifies as bi-racial, "Swedish and Jamaican," and discusses her own hair texture as 3B/3C. In June 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 Jouelzy's "Texture Discrimination" video and essay, Guy addresses many of the issues

Jouelzy's work raised. While Guy acknowledges and problematizes advertisers' and the media's biases towards certain women "who look like her," she argues that dwelling 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," Guy says. Guy suggests that the conversation around texture discrimination conversation is further separating an already marginalized community, stating: "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."

Guy's video, posted in June 2014, has since garnered over 65, 901 views, 1,072 comments, and 3,900 "likes" of approval (compared to 285 dislikes) as of April 2019. This video continued the buzz around questions of hair texture hierarches on YouTube. As is suggested by the number of "likes," many agreed with Guy's sentiment. One user wrote, "Im with Taren, if you have kinky four hair and you want to see someone representing that, then become that person instead of waiting around for someone else to save the day." Like Guy, this user argued that though texture discrimination may or may not exist within the natural hair community, it is up to individuals themselves to help fix this problem, by being their own "representation." Some of the comments pushed back on Guy's sentiment, aligning more with Jouelzy's original claims. Another user named Peaches[44] posted a comment that states:

> It's not about self hate. It's about darker girls with kinky hair with dramatic shrinkage that love themselves to the moon and back, but still wouldn't get the recognition they deserve. Privilege is REAL. There are plenty of women putting in work 'representing what they want to see', loving their natural selves.. still with no recognition and it has everything to do with privilege. Not saying that women with the more desired look are invalid it's just to let them know that everything isn't hate, it's to raise awareness…

Peaches's comment does work to de-personalize the issues raised in Guy's video. For her, the issue is not about Guy being critiqued as an individual, or individual people "representing themselves." For Peaches, and others who argue that "texture discrimination" is real, pervasive, and harmful, the question is of something much larger and systemic. The language of "privilege" and "raising awareness" used in the comment suggests that the speaker views the hierarchy as structural and oppressive. This idea is also revealed by Peaches's direct connecting of "kinky hair" to "darker girls," reinforcing the link between hair texture and colorism. One user named Crystal commented: "Privilege always sounds the same. Whether it is white people, males, lightskin individuals, heterosexual, etc... it's literally the same response to their lack of understanding the privilege. Just smile and move on attitude." Crystal suggests that Guy's privilege as a light-skinned, biracial woman with hair that is coveted in the community contributes to her lack of understanding the systemic critiques. Like Peaches, she compared this denial to other "-isms" in society.

Whitney White has dealt with the texture discrimination controversy on her channel, as well. At face value, White appears to fit into many of the conventions regarding beauty standards discussed above, while also diverging from them in some ways. She does have long hair well past her shoulders, the length of which has become the source of admiration for many of her thousands of followers. She also self-identifies her hair as "4a, 4b in Crown," which means that while her hair is more coil-y than many, it would not be considered the kinkiest of all textures. While White is not light skinned, she is thin, able-bodied, straight, and cis (as far we know). White also seems to recognize that in a larger space that privileges long coily hair, she occupies a position where hair that looks like hers is overrepresented. She grapples with occupying this

liminal space in her video "My Natural Hair Hopes: Diversity in 2016 | Naptural85." In this video, she states:

> The second thing I hope to see more of with natural hair in 2016 is diversity. I feel happy that more women are able to embrace their curls and they're feeling really good… You know, the whole point of this is for people to love themselves, truly, who they really are. It just makes me sad that something that started out as such a 'one love' type of situation, where … Loving all different hair types has kind of turned into... Women feeling excluded. How can that happen? That can't be. Like, we cannot have women not feeling good about their hair, or not feeling beautiful because they don't see their images. How did we get here? It really makes me sad to think about. And so, I hope that going forward, we can bring the conversation back to… natural hair. Because we don't all *have* curls.

White grapples with how, in her view, the natural hair movement has gone from an inclusive space where all hair types were meant to be represented, to a space where women are "not feeling beautiful because they don't see their images" and "women feeling excluded." Like other participants of the natural hair movement in dialogue with Taren Guy and Jouelzy's videos, White is also invested in the representational sphere, arguing that the visual erasure of certain kinds of textures is a large part of the problem. White calls for a kind of reckoning within the natural hair community. She urges her colleagues to question what she views as a singular, monolithic understanding of what beautiful hair and Black womanhood is. Later in the video White states:

> We really need to […] not, not be so one-sided. Like, Black women don't only have to look a certain way. Naturals don't only have to look a certain way. Relaxed women don't have to look a certain way. We-we can look different. Let's celebrate individuality…And stop putting each other down. And I also hope that we can celebrate diversity in textures… That would be amazing… To have women not feel ostracized, or, like they're on the sidelines watching in, uh, on something that *they helped build*. Because it *can* be really disheartening.

White describes singular, narrow standards of beauty within the natural hair movement as its being "one-sided" in its depicting of natural hair as only looking "a certain way." Instead, White advocates for celebrating "individuality" and "diversity" within the space. She appears

visibly upset at the idea of women with kinky, 4C hair feeling "ostracized," particularly—as she states—"on something that they helped build." She puts stress on the phrase "*that they* [Black women with kinky hair] *helped build*." Whites' stressing of this point underscores the intellectual, physical, and technological labor that Black women with kinky hair have put into building the Internet based natural movement, only to sometimes find themselves marginalized within the space. While White herself on some level benefits from hierarchies of hair texture and length, she uses her YouTube channel as a space to think through, negotiate, and critique these hierarchies.

Discussion & Concluding Thoughts

This practice of hair typing itself (3A-C, 4A-C) seems to inadvertently provide new language to discussing hierarchies of hair texture. Some call this hierarchy "curlism,"[45] or "curl hegemony,"[46] while others call it "texture discrimination."[47] 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. In response to the texture discrimination, Black women with 4C hair began to carve out a counter space within the natural hair movement counter space, by creating fan pages dedicated to their own hair type such as @4CHairChicks, an account popular on both Twitter and Instagram, as well as the Tumblr page "ILoveMy4C-Hair." The Tumblr homepage reads "This blog is dedicated to the thickest hair texture, 4C! Big and beautiful." The subtitle adds, "I love this cotton hair!"

In all of my research, I have not seen scholars or thinkers predating the contemporary natural hair movement time period provide a substantive unpacking of notions of "texture discrimination" or "curlism" the ways these Black women online have theorized them.

Conversations about "good hair" versus "bad hair" have existed for many decades, as well as conversations about colorism (generally defined as a preference for lighter skin tone, but sometimes linked directly or indirectly to hair texture). However, the hair typing system discussed here is generally credited to Andre Walker's 1998 book *Andre Talks Hair*, and the natural hair movement breathed new life into this hair typing system as it gained traction within the community. I would argue that the notion of a systemic "texture discrimination" or "curlism" that privileges 2s and 3s at the cost of 4s is something participants within the natural hair movement autonomously theorized at the intersection of social media, Walker's hair typing chart, and Black women's own embodied experiences within this specific socio-historical context. This theory building around the idea of "texture discrimination" that Black women like Jouelzy, Ama Yawson, and Jamilah Lemieux have completed is one example of the material legacy of the work Black women have done online to critique and negotiate notions of beauty online.

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. 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. The natural hair movement as a commodified entity is a space where certain kinds of hairstyles and textures are being privileged—styles and textures that are least often associated with Blackness. The natural hair movement has seeming contradictions and multiplicity, because Black women—like all people— have contradictions and multiplicity. The movement comes complete with its own set of tensions, questions, redefinitions, and negotiations of identity. As Patricia Hill Collins reminds us, "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."[48]

Though this tension does not define the totality of Black women's subjectivities, this negotiation of identity shows up in spaces such as the natural hair movement. Black women have created their own space to (re)theorize and (re)create meanings of adornment and "acceptable" forms of beauty. At the same time, the natural hair movement is also a space where deeply embedded Eurocentric standards of beauty may sometimes shape 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 monumental. As a scholar and a Black woman interested in concepts of embodiment, body politics, and beauty, this moment matters a great deal. More people need to talk about how Black women *experience* these systems from their own standpoints.

In the future, the natural hair movement will likely continue its streak as a growing, commodified entity. Buzzwords involving "hair love" and "all-natural ingredients" will probably continue to be found from brands as diverse as Pantene, to L'Oréal, to Shea Moisture, to Dove. It will likely continue to be commodified, until a new trend within the mainstream beauty culture appears. However, I think that a core group of women of color will continue to perpetuate the movement by teaching, learning, and sharing via the Internet for years to come. And I think there is nothing wrong with them keeping that insular space for themselves. As columnist, cultural critic, and editor Jamilah Lemieux aptly writes in a 2014 piece for Ebony.com: "… 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."[49]

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CHAPTER THREE - "NOTHING ELSE MATTERED AFTER THAT WIG CAME OFF": BLACK WOMEN, UN-STYLED HAIR, AND SCENES OF INTERIORITY

"*Being without a done 'do was like being naked*."
- Robin M. Boylorn, "Beauty Shop Politics," *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (2017)

"Peace be still now before we touch my head/we are still now/so i can get in this head."
- Ntozake Shange, "Peace Be Still," *Tender Headed: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories* (2000)

Within a timeframe of three years, the ABC nighttime drama *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014), the romantic music film *Beyond the Lights* (2014), and the fan favorite cable drama *Being Mary Jane* (2015) all feature climactic scenes of Black women protagonist looking in the mirror, removing a wig or a sewn-in hair extension (known as a "weave"), and revealing their un-styled hair to both a loved one, as well as to the viewers of the scene. In all of these scenes, each Black woman's removing of her extensions is paired with some kind of emotional breakthrough or catharsis. These perhaps seemingly small hair reveals may actually hold great meaning for Black women, due to their complex, often politicized, and historically rooted relationship with hegemonic standards of beauty and their own natural hair texture.[1]

This chapter explores these climactic, contemporary on-screen representations of Black women removing wigs or hair extensions as spaces that reveal intimate moments of Black women's "inner lives." First, the chapter provides more exposition regarding the intimate nature of un-styled hair, particularly for Black women. Then, the chapter details how Black feminist scholars have thought about "interiority" and "inner lives," particularly for Black women. Next, the chapters focuses on a pivotal on-screen wig removal moment in Season 1 Episode 4: "Let's Get to Scooping" of ABC's nighttime drama *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*), as well as viewers' responses to this scene on social media, in news articles, and in comedian Phoebe Robinson's non-fiction book *You Can't Touch My Hair: And Other Things I Still Have to Explain* (2016). Additionally, I consider two other filmic scenes featuring Black women

protagonists that depict a comparable stripping of extensions and wigs in front of a mirror to reveal un-styled hair—namely scenes from *Beyond the Lights* and *Being Mary Jane* (Season 2, Episode 7), respectively. I focus more on *HTGAWM*, because this hit primetime series is the most watched of the three scenes, thus this show has produced the most traceable narrative discourse (online and otherwise) in response to the scene.

In these spaces, each of the Black women protagonists removes the hair extensions that she consistently adorns herself with daily and reveals un-styled, sometimes matted or tangled hair underneath. This uncovering produces a specific kind of vulnerability, an undoing of a "dissemblance" that eventually leads the character to a different place mentally and emotionally. By depicting these moments of "undoing" cinematically, Black women directors, producers, actresses, and viewers converge to create moments that Black women viewers actively mark as intimate and authentic, which Black women viewers seem to relate to in particular ways. What is revealed in these visual moments, and why do they seem to resonate with Black women specifically? By considering these moments, I argue these visual narratives capture representations of Black women's experiencing of beauty and hair politics, as negotiated through the "inner lives" of these characters. These moments quietly unpack Black women's relationships to their own hair, and beauty politics more broadly.

Intimacy in Un-styled Hair

Ideals of beauty place immense pressure on women to manage their appearance in public spaces. Scholarship has detailed the ways "aesthetic labor" and ideals of "professionalism" intersect to create conditions where there are material stakes for women in the workforce to manage their hairstyles, make up, and general physical appearance.[2] For Black women and girls at work and at school, the stakes of having their hair done in a "proper" way while navigating

public spaces are even higher, with Black women and girls getting suspended, expelled, fired, and otherwise disciplined for the way their hair is styled.[3] Whether the chosen style is natural, relaxed, straightened, or otherwise, socio-historical concepts of beauty place much weight on Black women's hair being *done*—that is polished, managed, and properly styled. Relatedly, Black women scholars and thinkers have documented the cultural significance, and ritual-like nature of Black women getting their hair done by another person.[4] Others have written about the hair salon as a space of fellowship, and the intimate (almost therapy/therapist like) relationship between hair stylists and their Black women clientele.[5]

Because so much emphasis is placed on Black women's hair being styled in aesthetically pleasing ways, and there is a certain level of interpersonal intimacy involved in the process of styling it, it follows that there would be a certain level of intimacy and vulnerability involved when Black women reveal their *un-styled* or "un-done" hair. Being seen by others with undone hair may leave some Black women feeling exposed. Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps detail the ways that Black salons in major cities may flout traditional business hours, staying open "til wee hours in the night" to accommodate Black women who may need to get their hair fixed at random times, stating: "Some women are so self-conscious, so unwilling to let people see them even for one day without their hair styled, that when it's time for a new 'do, they make midnight appointments to ensure a perfect coiffure by the time the rest of the world is rising."[6]

Robin M. Boylorn writes about the Black women's beauty shop as a "sacred,"[7] "all-woman space"[8] of "bonding."[9] Critical conversations about current events, Black women holding space together, and the indulgent "self-care" like nature of pampering oneself all make the salon an "empowering" space for "Blackwomanlove at its finest."[10] For Boylorn, part of that bonding and fellowship comes from Black women exposing their un-styled hair to each other. She states:

"At the shop' we were sisters, even when we were strangers, because being without a done 'do was like being naked. Between our sing- alongs and gossip, no one noticed what our 'before' hair looked like. The salon was a meeting place, the great equalizer—like church but without the judgement."[11] Boylorn argues there is something humbling, even "equalizing," about Black women showing up to the same space with their hair un-styled. Their guard is down, leaving room for "sing-alongs and gossip," to the point that no one is interested in judging one another for what their hair looks like. Instead, "women of all sizes, colors, backgrounds, and religions" come together.[12] Boylorn does not characterize the salon as a kind of egalitarian space where class, education, background, and language do not matter. However, in spite of class, education, and regional differences, Boylorn argues that the commonalities across various Black women's engagement with beauty culture help serve as an equalizer within the space of the hair salon.

Boylorn characterizes Black women's hair salons as "public-private spaces, almost exclusively occupied by Black folk."[13] This public/private interplay she names is part of what is worth noting about the dichotomy between hair that is un-styled versus hair that is done. Un-styled hair is meant to be "private"—hair that is matted, tangled, un-styled, or dry is not fit to be seen. Styled hair that is properly twisted, pressed, constructed, and placed is more presentable for public viewing. Hair salons are one of few spaces where this binary is blurred, as Black women are among each other with un-styled hair. Part of what is noteworthy about the cinematic scenes in question is that they make public—that is, place on television and film screens—moments that Black women most often experience privately.

"Dissemblance" and "Interiority"

Questions around the public versus the private, protection, and Black womanhood have existed for years within Black women's knowledge production. Historian Darlene Clark Hine

famously captured the idea of Black women's "armor" through privacy with her notion of their practicing of "dissemblance."[14] According to Hine, Black women "protect the sanctity of their inner lives," as a response to "the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations."[15] The intersections of race, class, gender, and region all make Black women and their bodies vulnerable in particular kinds of ways. In the context of this vulnerability, Black women may try to hide and protect their private selves, whatever that private self is constituted as. For Hine, "Black women as a rule developed a politics of silence, and adhered to a cult of secrecy […] creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma."[16] As is the case with all three of the Black women protagonists under study, situations such as being at work may require a Black woman to appear open and approachable by day. However, according to Hine, Black women's "inner lives"—their vulnerability, their complexity, their feelings—have historically been "dissembled" as a mode of protection from certain embodied forms of oppressions inherent in Black women's subjectivities. There is agency in Black women's dissemblance, as Hine presents it. These women choose secrecy and invisibility with intentionality, and dissemblance enters as a result of a pairing of/juxtaposition of an "appearance of disclosure." In dissembling, Black women use apparent openness and self-selected invisibility as tools.

Hine's theorizing around the "inner lives" of Black women allowed room for conversations about Black women's "interiority."[17] This interiority articulates the existence of that which Black women have covered or suppressed, in the interest of self-preservation and self-protection. Joan Morgan offers the notion of "Black female interiority" within her own work on Black women and pleasure, erotics, and sexuality. In part, Morgan's work on interiority speaks

to Hine's groundwork on dissemblance, as she frames "interiority" as encompassing "the quiet composite of mental, spiritual and psychological expression"; "the broad range of feelings, desires, yearning (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by 'the politics of silence'"; and "the codicil to cultural dissemblance."[18] Hine wrote in the context of Black women being sexually assaulted and harassed in their workplaces throughout American history, while Morgan unpacks Black women's relationship to pleasure, the erotic, and sexuality. Both are by extension interested in questions around Black women's body politics, their relationship to their bodies, and how their bodies move throughout the world. For me, it makes sense that conversations around hair and beauty would be tangled up in this conversation—as these issues are also wrapped up in how the body experiences a particular structural context. I maintain that hair, beauty, and sexuality are linked because they are all "embodied" and "felt" in particular ways. In understanding these "hair moments," we can start to unpack this push and pull between the public and private, and how Black women negotiate and navigate larger structures. Black women's experiencing of hair moments, and beauty politics more broadly, give way to their "feelings, desires, yearning" as well as "mental, spiritual and psychological expression."

Elizabeth Alexander's 2004 work *The Black Interior* pushes to consider the interior, within the context of Black literature and culture production. These spaces have the potential to reveal interior moments, in "identifying complex and often unexplored interiority beyond the face of the social self."[19] She asks, "When we are not 'public,' with all that word connotes for black people then how do we live and who are we? And how does this visual work make the move from public to private explicit?"[20] The analysis of these scenes reveals spaces of potentiality when what is not "public" becomes "public." Cultural production such as the scenes

I discuss here may reveal the complexities, vulnerabilities, intimacies, and "inner selves" of Black women. The hair moments under study open up space for possibility in terms of conversations around hair politics, beauty culture, and how systems of oppression can impact Black women's relationships to these constructs within the day-to-day.

Actress Viola Davis and Hair Politics

Before actress Viola Davis began starring in *How to Get Away with Murder*, she too decided to "go natural," making waves for wearing her natural hair publicly. In February of 2012, 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 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 women's 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 "powerful statement."[21]

However, Davis's decision to wear her natural afro was criticized by some observers. Many questioned whether afros and natural hair could be "formal" enough for a Hollywood red carpet event. Black celebrity show host Wendy Williams joked that she did not want to see "a *Room 222* look" on the red carpet. Madame Noire charted the comment, and the subsequent backlash, noting:

> After doing some research on the show, *Room 222* was a show from the late '60s and early '70s about a history class taught by a black man. […] Coincidentally, the teacher, Pete Dixon, had a short afro, and the only other black female character I saw had a small curly style that later became a larger curly 'fro style. I'm hoping Williams wasn't saying

> Davis resembled the male teacher with her natural hair, or maybe she was saying the natural look was out of touch as a '70s thing, but either way, […] No matter what she was trying to say, she gave off the impression that natural isn't acceptable around the grown and classy on the red carpet.[22]

Indeed, many Black women spoke out against Williams's statement, including Madame Noire, who stated, "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."[23] Similarly, editor and publisher of the popular website ForHarriet.com, Kimberly Foster, wrote: "When Wendy Williams made a comment about Viola Davis' natural hair not being 'glamorous' or 'formal' enough for the Academy Awards on her daytime talk show, I was horrified but not surprised. You'd hear countless Black women echo the same sentiments just about anywhere you go."[24]

Viola Davis's wearing of an afro on the red carpet caused an array of reactions, because it was (and still is) 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 they questioned if it was formal or appropriate enough for an Oscars-related Hollywood function. Still others, such as Wendy Williams, openly mocked the look. This array of responses reflects the ambivalence and vulnerability many Black women face by their colleagues, significant others, co-workers, and family members after "going natural." The ambivalence also reflects the sorted and complex ways beauty standards and social norms are mapped onto Black women's bodies, by way of hair politics. Questions of "professionalism" and "appropriateness" are determined and regulated by (mostly white controlled) institutions of power—in this case, the Oscars. Meanwhile, other Black people may police hair via their own opinions and comments that are formed within this context of power. Still other people—women in particular—may see themselves represented in the sporting of the natural texture, eliciting feelings of recognition, praise, connection, and admiration. All of these moments might circulate and inform a Black

woman's experiencing of going natural in public, whether this "public" is a workplace in a small town or a red carpet in Hollywood, Los Angeles.

On *How to Get Away with Murder*

Elsewhere in Hollywood, Black writer and producer Shonda Rhimes produces the show *How to Get Away with Murder*, and she is also known for her incredibly popular television shows *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*. Rhimes was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1970 and raised in University Park, Illinois. She majored in English literature and creative writing at Dartmouth College, and also received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Southern California School of Cinema- Television. Rhimes's earlier films include *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge* (1999)—Halle Berry's first Emmy award-winning role, *Crossroads* (2002), and *Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (2004). Rhimes has been nominated for several Emmys, TV Guide Awards, and NAACP Awards, to name a few.[25] Rhimes's company "Shondaland" has distributed three incredibly popular programs—*Grey's Anatomy, Scandal,* and *How to Get Away with Murder*. Up until recently, for several years, these three programs aired back to back on Thursday evenings (however *Scandal* aired its last episode in May 2018). This level of success, particularly the "owning" of an entire evening of network television, has been widely recognized as unprecedented for a Black woman.

Rhimes's most recent show, the ABC network television show *How to Get Away with Murder,* premiered in September 2014.[26] *Murder* stars Viola Davis, perhaps previously most known for her starring role as a domestic worker in 2011's *The Help*. Born in South Carolina in 1965 and raised in Rhode Island, Davis attended both The Julliard School and Rhode Island College.[27] She began working in the New York City theater scene and went on to work in Hollywood. Davis has appeared in films such as *Antwone Fisher* (2002), *Doubt* (2008), *The Help*

(2011), *Ender's Game* (2013), *Get On Up* (2014), *Suicide Squad* (2016), *Fences* (2016), and *Widows* (2018) She has been nominated for awards from the Academy, BAFTA, the Broadcast Film Critics Association, the Golden Globes, and the Screen Actors Guild. Davis is the only African-American performer to win three prestigious awards—a Tony, an Oscar, and an Emmy.[28]

In the world of *How to Get Away with Murder,* Viola Davis is Annalise Keating, a brilliant and cutthroat defense attorney and law professor at a prestigious Philadelphia law school. Annalise has hand-picked a group of her best five law students to serve as her protégés, and the six of them become involved in a twisted and mysterious murder plot. Meanwhile, Annalise continues to stun in the courtroom, as she successfully defends clients. Along with its intriguing crime drama aesthetic, the complexity of the show's protagonist Annalise resonates with many fans. She is emotional, strong, smart, assertive, successful, sexually active, and queer. It is arguably unprecedented for a fifty-something-year-old dark-skinned Black woman to embody all of these complexities and "contradictions" on primetime network television.

Davis spoke to these limitations for women in Hollywood during her acceptance speech at the 2015 67th Annual Primetime Emmy Awards. Davis received the award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series, and she was the first Black woman in history to receive this award. During the speech Davis said, "The only thing that separates women of color from anyone is opportunity."[29] She called for Hollywood to write more diverse and complex parts for Black women, stating, "You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. […] Here's to all the writers, the awesome people, […] people who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black."[30] *HTGAWM*, and the work of Shonda Rhimes more broadly, has achieved undeniable heights in terms of both critical acclaim and

ratings numbers. However, the show, complete with a Black producer and star, sometimes manages to also reflect specific intra-racial experiences to its viewership of Black women. It is here we turn to the specific October 2014 episode "Let's Get to Scooping," and the reaction that followed this episode.

At the end of this episode, lawyer Annalise Keating prepares to confront her husband—Sam—regarding his alleged affair with a white woman undergraduate student. This student, named Lila, has been murdered earlier on in the series. Annalise has discovered that her husband, also a professor at the same institution, was sending nude photos to the now deceased young woman. In a climactic scene preceding Annalise's confrontation with her husband, Annalise completes her nightly beauty routine, undressing and "un-doing." At the start of the scene, and throughout its duration, Annalise watches herself in the mirror. She wears a silk blue robe, signaling the act as a private and intimate part of her nighttime routine. She sits in front of a mirror and dresser lit only by a small lamp. The sparse and intimate lighting focuses on the viewers' eyes onto Annalise's face and hair alone, as the lighting also highlights the glow of Annalise's skin.

Figure 7 - Annalise Keating looks at her reflection after she takes off her wig

First, Annalise removes a few rings that she wears on her hand. Then, she reaches towards her scalp, and removes her signature straight-haired, bob-shaped wig that she has worn consistently throughout the season. The viewer sees Annalise's natural kinky hair texture, matted, flat, and un-styled from sitting under the wig throughout the day. She continues to watch herself in the mirror, patting and smoothing her hair. She looks down, a look of vulnerability and wistfulness. Then, she continues her un-doing by removing her false eyelashes, lipstick, eye shadow, and face make up (likely foundation, powder, or concealer). After removing the jewelry, the wig, and the make-up, Annalise moisturizes her face and hands. Then, her husband Sam walks into the room. Fully vulnerable, Annalise is now ready to confront Sam with the infamous question that helped define and shape the first half of Season 1: "Why is your penis on a dead girl's phone?"

After the airing of "Let's Get to Scooping," many mainstream news outlets noted the dramatic significance of Davis's Annalise removing her wig on camera. Janine Rubenstein of *People* magazine stated: "Thursday night's *How to Get Away with Murder* was a shocker for more reasons than one. Aside from the episode's jaw-dropping plot twists, there was one wardrobe change that still has folks talking. Toward the end, Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) makes a shocking discovery that links her husband to a murdered sorority girl. This then called for a little me-time. After running a hot bath and watching *The Colbert Report*, she takes off her wig, lashes and makeup to reveal her – and Davis's – natural side beneath."[31] Similarly, Lily Karlin of *Huffington Post* called the moment, "One of the most memorable scenes of this year's television season."[32] Black Entertainment Television (BET.com) writer Clay Cane said, "…If reactions of other *How to Get Away with Murder* fans were similar to those at my house last night, there were dropped jaws around America."[33] Buzzfeed writer Alison Willmore stated: "*On*

How to Get Away With Murder, Viola Davis' removal of a wig, then eyelashes, then makeup, was played out like a warrior shedding pieces of plate mail after returning from war, her formidable character left bare and open at the end of the day."[34] Evidently, many viewers were greatly impacted by this particular scene.

Star Viola Davis was public about her own role in helping to create the scene, framing the on-screen moment as important glimpse of realism regarding the lived experiences of women like herself. On an interview on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Davis said: "I was so adamant about it. I said listen, she can't go to bed with her wig on. She cannot be in that bedroom with a wig on, because women don't go to bed with their wigs on. And I said, 'a whole portion of women out there are marginalized. I wanna be a real woman.' Let's go for it; I'm a character actress!"[35]

Davis pitched the idea of the wig removal herself, particularly as a moment that depicted a "real" authentic aspect of some women's nighttime beauty routine. Both as a Black woman who is "marginalized" and a "character actress," Davis states that she was adamant regarding the necessity of the wig scene. Davis's use of "marginalized" is critical, particularly speaking as an older, dark skinned, Black actress in Hollywood. Given Davis's own aforementioned hyper-scrutiny after "going natural," it is fascinating that she chose the on-screen revealing of her own natural, kinky, un-styled texture as an ultimate space of authenticity and vulnerability.

It appears that for many audience members that impact was felt, particularly audience members of color. Clay Cane's piece for BET.com notes:

> Of course Davis would pitch a scene this powerful. Her hair, her skin, her look has been dissected time and again, both before and after she became a star in Hollywood. The two-time Tony winner has candidly talked about being bullied for her look — as recently as last month, she was called 'not classically beautiful' by the *New York Times*…Annalise's

> actions on *How to Get Away with Murder* broke a long-standing taboo for Black women on television. For decades, they have been taught to be ashamed of their hair — natural or not: 'Never go out with your hair not done! Make sure that 'kitchen' is cleaned up!' From Clair Huxtable in *The Cosby Show* to Pamela James in *Martin* to music videos to reality shows, a Black woman on television without a weave, wig, or hair-perfection is a rarity.[36]

Cane's piece connects Davis's own struggles with navigating the body politics unique to Hollywood to her choosing to pitch the wig scene on the *How to Get Away with Murder* set. Again, there is a link between the ways she as a Black woman experiences beauty, to the ways the particular scene lays bare these experiences. Relatedly, Cane's piece notes the ways that the wig removal scene breaks away from a longer legacy of Black women characters (such as Clair Huxtable and Pamela Jones) who were constantly expected to conform to imaginings of "perfect" hair that was "perfectly" styled, shaped, and contained. Cane evokes both Clair Huxtable—an icon in Black matriarchal respectability from *The Cosby Show* and Pamela Jones—a Black woman constantly teased for her "nappy" hair on the sitcom *Martin*. For both of these characters, the shadow of an imagined, idealized Black womanhood impacted their relationship to their hair and bodies.

The wig scene engendered various interpretations from various audiences. On and offline, Black women actively critiqued, analyzed, and located meaning in the scene. They used Internet-based platforms such as the microblogging site Twitter, social networking platform Facebook, blogs, and non-fiction writing to unpack the various nuances of the work. Here, Black women's internet use in part served as a space for what hooks might call "critical spectatorship,"[37] or what German philosopher Habermas might name a "counterpublic" or a "parallel discursive arena"—a concept Roderick Graham and 'Shawn Smith use to describe "Black Twitter" as a discursive space.[38] As Catherine Knight Steele notes, Black women often

use blogs, social media, and gossip online as spaces to engage critical discourse and to "talk back" to representations of their subjectivities.[39]

Black comedian, actress, podcaster, and YouTube personality Franchesca Ramsey remarked of the scene:

> …As a woman of color who proudly rocks her natural hair, I think it's important for a few reasons. First off, these days there are very few black women on TV wearing their natural hair. That's not to say there's anything wrong with wearing a wig or a weave or having a chemical relaxer, but it's pretty much the norm for black women in Hollywood. Second, there's a long, complicated history of black women being told by society that their natural hair is unprofessional, ugly, distracting, and a whole host of other insults. […] And lastly, in recent years Viola Davis has opened up about her struggle to embrace her natural hair after struggling with alopecia. (I told you there were layers to this awesome scene!) So as much as I'd love to see Viola Davis rock her beautiful fro full time on 'How to Get Away With Murder,' it's huge that she was able to bring some honesty to the scene by taking her wig off and revealing her and her character's true self. Sure, it's a fictional primetime drama, but that moment made it so incredibly real.[40]

Ramsey's response to the scene also situates Black women's hair within a longer historical context, as well as Davis's own personal experience She also read the scene as a moment of authenticity, noting the moment was "incredibly real." Black Buzzfeed writer Kelley L. Carter's reaction piece is aptly titled, "Nothing Else Mattered After That Wig Came Off On 'How to Get Away with Murder."[41] Carter notes the power of the climactic scene, stating: "She revealed her natural hair, matted up from being tucked under the fake […] mane all day. Because before you drop a nugget like that, you have to take off all your armor."[42] Carter's use of "armor" is apt, as it speaks to the ways that Black women might use an item like a wig as a barrier or a tool of protection—one aspect of dissemblance, per Darlene Clark Hine. Wig off, hair undone, is in turn a particular form of "nakedness," making what is not "public" become public.

For some Black women writers, the power of Viola Davis's wig scene in *HTGAWM* relates to the scene's depiction of a piece of Black women's inner lives. Comedian and writer Phoebe Robinson describes the wig removal scene as "THE SINGLE GREATEST MOMENT IN BLACK WOMEN TELEVISION HISTORY."[43] For Robinson, the scene is powerful because of its mirroring back of such a private moment within Black women's daily beauty routine. She states:

> It's not an overstatement when I write that watching a part of the black woman's beauty routine reflected back at me made me praise dance [...]. This scene was so real, so honest, so raw, so everything because this is what a lot of black women look like when not in public. To present that to America was huge. Not only did it show what beauty preparation is like for many black women, it let most, if not all, nonblack people into a world that had previously been off-limits to them. Usually, the media has shown black women as resilient and unbelievably strong in the face of crisis, so for a show to reveal a BW's vulnerability is monumental. This scene, and in particular the wig removal, illustrated that black women do have emotions, do get hurt, and do express themselves. To have this happen on an extremely popular nighttime show on ABC was incredible.[44]

Robinson unpacks the public/private tension that exists regarding Black women's hair politics, as the scene resonated with her in large part because it involved a "reflecting back" of the beauty routine that she practiced in private for so much of her life. "This is what a lot of black women look like when not in public," she reminds us. As with many viewers, the authenticity of the scene gave way to a feeling of exposure. For Robinson, this exposing of Black women's vulnerability in and of itself is subversive. This exposing demonstrates that "black women do have emotions, do get hurt, and do express themselves."[45] For Robinson, that scene made public what is so often private for Black women, a type of unveiling that she ultimately describes as, for her, "monumental."

On *Beyond the Lights*

Meanwhile, *Beyond the Lights* is a 2014 romantic drama written and directed by Black writer, producer, and director Gina Prince-Bythewood. Prince-Bythewood was born in 1969 and raised in Pacific Grove, California. She majored in film at the University of California, Los Angeles.[46] Bythewood has written for television shows such as *A Different World* (1987), *South Central* (1994), *Courthouse (*1995), and *Felicity* (1998). Her first film feature credit was the movie *Biker Boyz* (2003), which she worked on with her husband, writer and director Reggie Rock Bythewood. Prince-Bythewood's most notable film is *Love & Basketball*, a beloved romance within the Black community that debuted at Sundance Film Festival in 2000. The film earned both an Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature and a Humanitas Prize for her work on the film.[47]

Bythwood's feature film *Beyond the Lights* was released November 14, 2014. The film grossed in $14,612,840 in the United States, and it stars Gugu Mbatha-Raw, Nate Parker, Minnie Driver, and rapper Machine Gun Kelly.[48] Born in Oxford, U.K., Mbatha-Raw is of Caucasian English and Black South African descent.[49] Mbatha-Raw's television appearances include *Bad Girls* (1999), *Doctor Who* (2005), *Marple* (2007), *Easy* (2016), and *Black Mirror* (2016). Her film credits include *Larry Crowne* (2011), *Odd Thomas* (2014), *Belle* (2014), *Concussion* (2015), *Beauty and the Beast* (2017, and a *Wrinkle in Time* (2018)."[50]

Beyond the Lights centers Mbatha-Raw as protagonist Noni, a biracial pop star who struggles with loneliness, depression, and intense pressure to conform her music and image to clichéd, but lucrative, tropes of sexuality and consumption. Noni is so troubled, that she meets love interest and eventual bodyguard Kaz while attempting to die by suicide by leaping off the balcony of her hotel suite. Noni struggles to find and maintain who she "really" is within a

dreamy haze of sexualized stage performances, revealing costumes, and hair extensions. Noni is a "performer" in the word's most literal sense, but she finds herself performing off stage—for her mother, the paparazzi, and her superstar suitor rapper Kid Culprit. Within the film, hair extensions, overt sexuality, and indulgent parties are not necessarily "wrong" or "bad," but in this case they are not true to the "real" Noni. Ultimately, with the support of her new lover Kaz, Noni is able to reclaim her true self and make amends with her troubled mother.

Throughout the film, Noni's hair serves as one physical symbol of tension, and eventual growth. The film opens in the U.K. with Noni as a child. Her mother Macy, a single white woman, frantically drags child-aged Noni to a Black beauty salon. Noni will be singing on stage at a talent show the following day, and as a white woman (her Black father is out of the picture), Noni's mother feels unequipped to style her daughter's hair in preparation for the show. The hair stylist, a Black woman, exasperatedly points out that Macy could not even manage to get a comb through Noni's twisted, curly locks. The hair dresser manages to "fix" Noni's hair in time for her public appearance at the talent show. The chronology then fast forwards to Noni present day, and she is now a famous pop star living and working in Beverly Hills, Los Angeles, California. In spite of her fame, Noni is depressed—even suicidal—from loneliness, isolation, and pretending to be someone she is not. Noni is always pretending—singing graphically sexual songs that she did not write and does not approve of; engaging inauthentic interactions with cameras, paparazzi, and her fans; and wearing her clothes and hair the way that her image consultants have determined is best. Indeed, in pretending to be someone she is not, Noni wears a long, straight, purple "weave" (hair extensions sewn in on top of her natural hair).

Throughout the film, Noni falls more in love with Kaz, the young, Black male police officer who saves her from taking her own life. Kaz is humble, honest, kind, and sees Noni for

who she truly is. As Noni reconnects with her own wants and needs and evolves more into the person she wants to be, her connection to Kaz grows stronger. During an intimate and spontaneous trip to Mexico, Noni and Kaz spend days growing closer to each other. In one climactic scene, Noni decides to go into the bathroom and cut out her hair extensions. She takes a silver knife, and she cuts the first pieces of thread that hold the extensions onto her head. Looking into the mirror, she cuts out the hair extensions, piece by piece. The camera then cuts to a pile of each row of hair extensions (colloquially known as "tracks") sitting on the counter. Noni exits the bathroom and reveals her bare face and her natural un-styled curly hair to Kaz. Kaz then grabs Noni's face, kissing her and rubbing his fingers through her naturally curly hair. In this moment, we are to understand Kaz and Noni are sharing a particular level of intimacy, which is revealed at least on one level through Noni's willingness to share her natural un-styled hair first with Kaz.

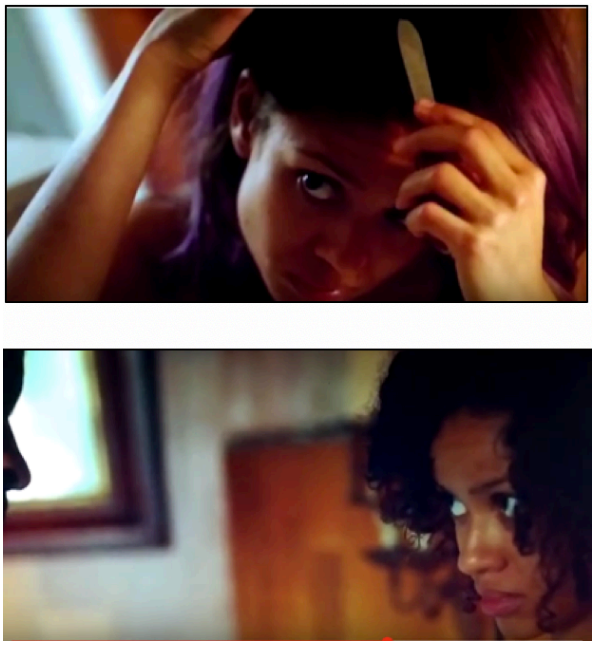

Figure 8 - Noni cuts out her hair extensions and reveals her un-styled curly hair to Kaz

For the rest of the film, Noni wears her natural hair out and about, including during a concluding performance in front of thousands of fans in the U.K. During this performance, Noni is singing a song that she has written herself and adorning herself in ways she has chosen. The film's take on Black hair politics, like its take on women's sexuality, is a bit normative in some ways. That is, the narrative suggests that women who wear straight hair extensions are somehow less authentic or less "conscious" than those who wear their hair natural. However, the film can also be read as not demonizing hair extensions, her sexually charged lyrics, or material things in and of themselves, but instead as a critique of the coerced and assumed employment of these tropes within the work of the vast majority of women recording artists. In other words, the issue is not that Noni wore a weave throughout most of her singing career, but that she and those around her felt she had no choice but to wear a weave if she wanted to appear beautiful, sexy, or marketable. Weaves are not inherently inauthentic, but they are inauthentic to Noni's own wishes and self-concept. In spite of the film's larger message around the wearing of hair extensions, what I find interesting is the choice of Noni's removal of these extensions as the sort of ultimate, climactic, vulnerable moment for Noni's identity, as well as her relationship to Kaz.

In promotional interviewers for the film, director Gina Prince-Bythewood spoke of her own difficulties accepting her own curly hair texture when she was younger. Prince-Bythewood was adopted and raised by two white parents, and she notes that she was "jealous" of one of her sisters with "blonde hair and blue eyes." Later in life, Prince-Bythewood states, she was able to "fall in love" with her curly hair. Channeling her particular experiences negotiating concepts of beauty and body politics, Prince-Bythewood states that she intentionally wanted viewers to watch the Noni character grapple with her relationship with her hair. For Prince-Bythewood,

Noni's narrative relationship with hair, climaxing with the removal of the weave, represents a step in a larger journey towards self-discovery and self-acceptance:

> That was this character Noni as a little girl being told that the way she is, is not good enough and needs to be fixed. You think of little girls sitting in the salon and getting their hair straightened and the pain of going through that. […] It's not just the physical pain. It's what that can do to anyone psychologically. So I really wanted to put that in the world. For Noni, that moment [when she takes out her weave] is her going back to her truth and being brave enough to do that for herself. And to show this man that she loves her truth. However you want to be is my point. Be authentic to who you are. Don't create an image that you *think* people want.[51]

Kim Kimble, the film's hairstylist, echoed these sentiments, noting, "The one thing about this movie is that the hair tells the story. Noni starts off as this pop star wearing extensions, and then she progresses into this natural person."[52] Buzzfeed also connected the significance of Black women's hair in the *How to Get Away with Murder* wig removal scene of October 2014 and the weave removal scene in *Beyond the Lights* (released in November 2014). [53] This article states:

> When she first decides to remove herself from it, she reaches for scissors and carefully snips out her weave, pulling away those long purple locks to reveal the same springy curls that belonged to that little girl with the big voice in the film's opening. Yes, it's hair, but for Beyond the Lights, it also can be a symbol of the difference between being the woman they want you to be and being the one you are.[54]

Gina Prince-Bythewood and Kim Kimble were quite intentional in their producing hair, specifically a transition to natural hair, as crucial to the characterization of Black woman protagonist Noni. However, by discussing her own prior self-loathing of her curly hair texture, Bythewood alludes to social standards that lean towards the acceptance of straighter hair textures. Thus, Noni the character revealing her own curly hair texture has specific socio-political implications and engenders a specific vulnerability.

On *Being Mary Jane*

The final narrative that depicts a kind of revealing of un-styled hair as a moment of vulnerability for Black women is from Season 2 Episode 7 of the Black Entertainment Television

(BET) drama *Being Mary Jane. Being Mary Jane* premiered on BET in July 2013. The show follows the private and professional life of a successful news anchor known as Mary Jane Paul. The show was BET's first scripted drama, and its debut was the most watched cable television show of the night, garnering 4 million viewers during its premiere.[55] The show has received generally favorable reviews.[56] By way of protagonist Mary Jane and her extended family, the show has tackled complex issues such as intra-racial class dynamics; aging, fertility, and egg freezing; police brutality; the prison industrial complex; the politics of representation; and beauty standards. Like *How to Get Away with Murder*, the show's core Black women fanbase has proven dedicated to "live-tweeting" the show amongst each other, dialoguing about the drama the characters offer. The show has always pitched Mary Jane as a deliberately complex and "flawed" protagonist, as the shows tagline is "beautifully flawed."[57]

Being Mary Jane is executive produced by screenwriter and producer Mara Brock Akil. Brock Akil has written or produced a number of shows that center Black characters and experiences, including: *The Jamie Foxx Show*, *Moesha*, *Girlfriends* (another cult classic among Black women), *The Game*, *Being Mary Jane*, and mostly recently *Black Lightning*. Brock Akil has been vocally critical of "colorblind casting,"[58] and she has stated that throughout her career she has worked to create characters that are "Black on purpose." She stated in a 2015 interview with Vulture.com:

> What's interesting to me is that when it comes to sometimes getting things made, we have to [cast color-blind]. I'm like, *No, I'm not fucking color-blind! I have a rich history, can you include that?* It's a roadmap for how I'm able to write my characters. I don't know why race and culture would not be important to a character. The problem is when I want to go into the room and be black on purpose, the chances of me getting that program on are nil. Typically, an entry point for television creators is when a new network is trying to launch and wants to build off a large demographic to garner some success.[59]

Brock Akil's characters have been, to quote the *New York Times*, both "unapologetically Black" and "Black on purpose" throughout her career.[60] Hair has consistently been a space where this work is done, as Brock Akil "had to jump through hoops" to allow the title character of her sitcom *Moesha* (1996-2001), played by young R&B star Brandy Norwood, to wear box braids throughout the show. As Times writer Jada F. Smith notes, "It was a seemingly small thing that would go on to show a generation of black girls that they didn't have to straighten their hair to be cute, or to be respected, or to be depicted on network TV."[61]

Brock Akil's *Being Mary Jane* (2013-2018) stars actress Gabrielle Union as Mary Jane Paul. Union is a Black actress, writer, and activist. She began acting in the 1990s, and she has starred in films as diverse as: *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *Bring It On* (2000), *Deliver Us From Eva* (2003), *Bad Boys 2* (2003), *Daddy's Little Girls* (2007), *Think Like a Man* (2012), *Top Five* (2014), and *Birth of a Nation* (2016).[62] In 2017, she published a memoir titled *We're Going to Need More Wine*: *Stories That Are Funny, Complicated, and True.*[63] Union has been outspoken about being "sex-positive," sexual assault (as a survivor), and her experiences as a Black actress in Hollywood. Regarding the latter, Union has discussed the ways that Black movies and Black actors are never fully recognized when they are critically successful and financially lucrative. In an interview with comedian Trevor Noah, she stated "When you look at creatives of color based on the budget that we're given and what we're able to do… There's so many superstars that never get acknowledged."[64] In the same conversation, she spoke about how her subjectivity as a Black woman affects both the opportunities she is given, and how she navigates her acting career. She stated: "I'm a Black woman, and my acting is completely informed by my Blackness."[65]

Together Mara Brock Akil, Gabrielle Union, and the cast and crew of *Being Mary Jane* have created moments that speak to particularities of Black women's interiority—intimate moments that resonate with particular experiences of Black womanhood. One such moment occurs in Season 2 Episode 7, entitled "Let's Go Crazy"—an episode directed by another accomplished Black actress Regina King. Within the episode, Mary Jane experiences quite a few ups and down. She ends things (again) with her on again/off again lover David, after finding out that she is not pregnant with his child. She experiences struggles at the news station, as she receives pushback on her request to cover more underreported stories about Black communities. She also gets in an argument with her niece Niecy, pushing further in the wrong direction their already strained relationship. The crux of their argument, and the strain in their relationship in general, stems from Niecy perceiving Mary Jane as judgmental of her life choices and outcomes. Specifically, Niecy is 19 years old, a single mother of three, heavyset, and living with her grandparents (Mary Jane's parents), because she is not able to support herself financially. Following their argument earlier in the episode, Niecy and Mary Jane are not on speaking terms.

Towards the end of the episode, a scene opens with a frame of Mary Jane looking in her bathroom mirror. The song "On & On" by neo-soul artist Erykah Badu is playing, and she is gazing at her huge, stretched, un-styled, afro-textured hair. We can assume that Mary Jane's hair extensions have just been removed, as the hair extension "tracks" lay on her bathroom sink. Mary Jane smiles at her reflection and tugs at her stretched strands, seemingly pleased with the length of her own hair. Mary Jane calls Shanice—her hair stylist—on her cell phone. When she reaches Shanice, Shanice tells her that she will be unable to install a weave in Mary Jane's hair the following morning, despite the appointment that they had previously scheduled. A loved one of Shanice was in a car accident, so she will not be able to make the appointment the next day.

While on the phone with Mary Jane, Shanice realizes she forgot to cancel Mary Jane's appointment with her.

Mary Jane panics immediately. She responds to Shanice on the phone asking in a panicked tone, "So wait, you can't do my hair?" Dejected, she complains to Shanice, "I already had Tammy take out my weave." Mary Jane now looks at her un-styled hair in the mirror with shock and panic, a swift change from the calm she felt just moments ago while believing her hair was going to be restyled soon.

Figure 9 - Mary Jane gazes at her un-styled hair in her mirror

Desperate, she calls Niecy, who also is skilled in styling hair. In spite of their currently fraught relationship, Niecy immediately comes over to help Mary Jane. Niecy finds Mary Jane at home swimming in her backyard pool. Niecy asks what Mary Jane what she is doing as she walks out of her pool, and Mary Jane replies smugly, "I'm getting my hair wet." In the next scene, the viewers' eyes pans over the room, landing on Mary Jane sitting in Niecy's lap between her legs. Calmly, Niecy stitches a new weave into Mary Jane's hair, as the two reconcile their differences. Once Niecy points out that she has always looked up to Mary Jane, Mary Jane says to Niecy: "You know why I begged you to come over here? Because your 'perfect' aunt was terrified of going to work without her weave… Terrified that no one would think I was beautiful,

that people would… think I was average, and I'd be invisible. So maybe that pedestal you put me on is a little too high. I'm human." Niecy and Mary Jane have had tensions across their variety of differences; however, in Mary Jane's frantic moment of un-styled hair, she calls out to Niecy for help.

To use Mary Jane's language, the moment reinforced that she is "human," and serves as a bridge to allow them to reconnect. Niecy at times feel distant from her aunt, but in that moment hair—something that they both have extended connection to and lived experience with—has the ability to do some of the work to remind them to see the humanity in each other. In her panicked state of un-styled hair, Mary Jane calls Niecy for help. Though their relationship is on the outs, Niecy is still willing to come over to help. She knows that Mary Jane must have been upset about the un-styled hair if she was willing to swallow her pride and reach out. Also, Niecy, as another young Black woman, likely understands the stakes and pressure for someone as visible as Mary Jane (as a news anchor) to go to work the following day with hair that is un-done. For both Niecy and Mary Jane, the un-styled hair feels like a small emergency, and the mutual recognition of this fact is enough to bring them together again.

When the two do come together again in the next scene, hair and beauty again serves as bridge to bring them back together again. Earlier in the episode, during their fight, Niecy says to Mary Jane: "Let's be honest, Auntie. You don't think that I'm beautiful." In their reconciliatory conversation that occurs when Niecy installs Mary Jane's weave, Mary Jane confesses to Niecy that she, too, grapples with doubts regarding beauty. This moment reveals a common experience between them that stretches across their differences in class, education, size, and worldview. Mary Jane's acknowledgement of this reality helps bring down the "pedestal" that has created distance within their relationship.

Discussion: Un-Styled Hair and Black Women's Inner Lives

In each of these climactic filmic scenes from 2014 to 2015, Black women's un-styled hair serves as a space of authenticity and of intimacy. Of course, in terms of narrative content and context these moments vary: Annalise takes off her wig before confronting her husband about his extramarital affair with one of his students, Noni cuts out her extensions during a romantic getaway with her soulmate and guardian angel Kaz, and Mary Jane is caught in a bind when her hair stylist cancels after she's just taken out her weave. All of these characters, due in part to their career success, have high levels of visibility. As an active lawyer and law professor, Annalise speaks in front of courts and classrooms. Noni holds perhaps the ultimate level of hyper-visibility as a budding, platinum-selling pop artist. Finally, Mary Jane is a television news anchor. In the midst of this public hyper-visibility, these women "dissemble" certain aspects of their life, privately. In hiding certain pieces of themselves, they protect pieces of themselves. Sam Keating, Kaz Nicol, and Niecy Patterson are among the few loved ones with access to their private relationships to their hair.

In each of these scenarios, the scenes are in part so impactful because they demonstrate the individual Black woman's reckoning with larger concepts of beauty. Each protagonist in each scene also views the role of hair extensions, and their relationship to their subjectivities, differently. For Annalise Keating, the wig comes off to confront her husband, and then it goes back on for the remainder of the episodes. This singular, dramatic removal of her wig in Season 1 Episode 4 does not mean that Annalise will now discontinue wearing wigs, but instead she removes the wig in preparation for battle. Meanwhile, for Noni, the removal of the weave symbolizes a shift in her self-concept. From that moment forward she is done with weaves, because for her they in part symbolize the ways that she was managed, controlled, and forced to

assimilate throughout her career as a popstar. Finally, for Mary Jane, the weave removal was just a part of her normal hair care routine, until her hair stylist bailed on her and put her in a predicament. Once Niecy sews her weave back in for her, she continues to wear straight hair extensions the remainder of the series—this episode is the one of the only times we see Mary Jane's natural hair throughout the series.

The three visual moments, taken individually or as a collective, do not offer any sort of cohesive, moralistic, or definitive message "for" or "against" the wearing of wigs and hair extensions. They do not invest in the longstanding "straight hair is self-hate" versus "natural hair is self-love" dichotomy that many in both scholarly and public discourse use to frame Black women's hair practices. Instead, each of them offers a nuanced take on hair as a space of agency, negotiation, and embodied experiences of beauty. Part of this nuance comes from the participation of Black women in the construction of the moments. Each of the scenes involves a Black actress and a Black woman director or producer, and as the written narrative responses to Annalise's wig removal scene suggest, they seem to resonate with Black women viewership in particular kinds of ways.

The argument is not that Black women share a singular monolithic experience and that they all did or would respond to these visual moments in the same way. Instead, I am suggesting that some of their lived experiences sometimes meet at similar intersections of Black cultural practices, gendered standards of beauty, and conversations around hair texture—particularly produced by "intersecting" systems of oppressions.[66] As women navigate these sometimes tumultuous terrains, they are able to both independently and collectively see their experiences reflected back in scenes like the wig moment.

One limitation to this sample, and arguably a limitation to popular representations of Black women in general, is that all of the Black women protagonists featured are similar in many ways: upper class to wealthy, cisgender, able-bodied, and thin. Also, two out of three of the women are presented exclusively as heterosexual (Annalise Keating of *HTGAWM* is queer, and she had an extended romantic and sexual relationship with a woman in the past). Many of television's most popular Black women protagonists today are financially and professionally "successful," brilliant (if measured in terms of traditional markers of educational background and career success), normatively pretty, and often presented as heterosexual.[67] However, while much is similar about these Black women, moments like the hair moments discussed here attempt to articulate with nuance and detail some of the complex experiences that these women face.

Conclusion

In 2016 interview with Fader.com,[68] *Being Mary Jane* producer Mara Brock Akil was asked about her work and her viewership (mostly Black women) being framed as "forgotten." The interviewer asked: "There's this dialogue that's surrounded you for a while now—and it implicates some of us in the audience as well—that relies on the word 'forgotten.' Your work is talked about as 'forgotten,' your viewership is 'forgotten.' I find it frustrating because there are millions of people watching. Where exactly do you think this 'forgetting' [is] happening?"[69] Brock Akil responded:

> We've been here, we are here, and we'll always continue to be here. But there is no value in us until they need to exploit us. I used to want to make sure that the powers that be could see value in us. Now I'm over it because that ain't my problem anymore. If you don't see us, then you've missed out on something beautiful and rich and interesting or even boring—black girls can be boring too. It's really not my job anymore to make people see our value.[70]

Brock Akil's thoughtful response is valuable in terms of the hair reveal moments discussed in this chapter, and cultural representations of Black women in general, for at least two

reasons. First, it speaks to the kinds of intra-racial call and response that the hair scenes enact. As I have argued in this chapter, the scenes speak to experiences that may be distinct to Black women and Black women's embodiment. The reporter's inquiry begs the question "Forgotten by whom?" In these moments and spaces of representation, the goal is not necessary to appeal to or interest predominantly white audiences. If they resonate across audiences as powerful, like the wig removal scene in *HTGAWM* did, that is great—but engaging that cross-racial gaze that does not appear to be the *goal* of these scenes. As Brock Akil states, "It's really not my job anymore to make people see our value."

Also, Brock Akil's response to the question speaks to the hair reveal moments as part of the "boring," the small, the "everyday" ways that Black women actively experience, negotiate, subvert, and reify concepts of beauty and systems of oppression. These hair moments were important and noteworthy in terms of the individual characters' lives for the reasons discussed in this chapter. However, they are still very much rooted in the quotidian lives of the characters. In other words, these moments of negotiations are not "overtly" political, linked to any sort of political or community organizing. They do not even occur publicly. However, they demonstrate agency within the complex ways Black women complicate, experience, and negotiate hair and beauty politics. Ultimately, the implications of the scenes suggest an immense *value* in Black women having safe spaces to negotiate body, beauty, and hair politics on their own terms.

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[1] Throughout the chapter, I use the term "un-styled" hair as related to, but distinct from, how I have used the term "natural hair" so far. "Natural hair" is a woman of color's hair whose texture has not been straightened through chemical processing. Natural hair can take on a number of different styles and formations: braids, twists, dreadlocks, afros, and so forth. However, natural hair that is *un-styled* has not been twisted, pressed, pinned, maneuvered, manipulated, or otherwise constructed into a particular shape or look. It is simply existing on top of someone's head, undone. So, when I discuss scenes in which un-styled hair is revealed, it refers to hair in the latter state.

[2] Scartlett Brown describes aesthetic labor as "a current trend in work practices and workplace expectations, where importance is place upon individuals' appearance, dress and other 'embodied dispositions' and the employee is expected to 'look good and sound right.'" See: Scarlett Brown, "PhD Barbie Gets a Makeover! Aesthetic Labour in Academia." In *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism*, edited by Ana Sofia Elias, Christina Scharff, and Susie Orbach, by Rosalind Clair Gill, 149-63. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

[3] Paulette M. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender." *Duke Law Journal*, no. 2 (1991): 365–96. https://doi.org/10.2307/1372731.; Kayla Lattimore, "When Black Hair Violates the Dress Code." NPR. July 17, 2018. Accessed April 3, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/07/17/534448313/when-black-hair-violates-the-dress-code.

[4] For narratives about the practices and rituals of Black women getting their hair "fixed" from childhood into adulthood see: Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories*, (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2001); Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York, NY: St. Martins Griffin, 2014).

[5] For more on the Black women's hair salon as a social, political, and economic space, see: Julie A. Willet, *Permanent Waves: The Making of the American Beauty Shop*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000); Lanita Jacobs-Huey, *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), Adia Harvey Wingfield, *Doing Business with Beauty: Black Women, Hair Salons, and the Racial Enclave Economy*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009); Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

[6] Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York, NY: St. Martins Griffin, 2014), 144.

[7] Robin M. Boylorn, "Beauty Parlor Politics," In *The Crunk Feminist Collection*, edited by Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, 282-84 (New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2017)., 284

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[9] Ibid., 283

[10]Ibid., 284.

[11]Ibid., 283

[12] Ibid., 282

[13] Ibid., 283

[14] Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women."

[15] Ibid., 915.

[16] Ibid., 915.

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Joan Morgan, "Why We Get off: Moving towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure," *Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015): 36–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915.

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[19] Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays*, (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004, 4-5).

[20] Ibid., 11

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[57] When asked about the tagline "Beautifully flawed." in a 2015 interview with Vulture.com, Brock Akil stated: "Oftentimes the African-American audience will ask for a positive image because so much of the stereotype has been what gets in the landscape of our images. They want to counteract that with a positive image, but I personally believe strongly that the positive image is just as damaging as the negative image. Humanity does not exist in those polar extremes."

[58] Kristen J. Warner's *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (2015) describes colorblind casting as "how American society is endeavoring, consistently and insistently, to cast/miscast difference in roles of race neutrality and of same- ness." (xii) See Kristen J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015).

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[66] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299. doi:10.2307/1229039.

[67] Consider *HTGAWM*'s Annalise Keating, *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope, *Black-ish*'s Rainbow Johnson, *Being Mary Jane*'s Mary Jane Paul, and *The Quad*'s Dr. Eva Fletcher. Even a complex Black woman character like *Empire*'s musical genius Cookie Lyon, who served time in prison and comes from a working-class background, is ultimately redeemed in part by way of her successful A&R career and corresponding financial capital.

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid.

CHAPTER FOUR - BEYOND "GOOD HAIR": NEW RE-FRAMINGS OF A HAIR HIERARCHY

As Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps remind us, "more than one hundred years after the terms 'good' and 'bad' hair became part of the Black American lexicon, the concept endures."[1] A hierarchy that privileges loosely curled type "3" hair to the marginalization of tightly coiled type "4" hair has continued within the context of the contemporary natural hair movement. However, the natural hair movement era has also carved out spaces for Black women to (re)negotiate these longstanding concepts and assumptions on their own terms. Natural hair movement icon Nikki Walton named her 2013 book *Better Than Good Hair: The Curly Girl Guide to Healthy, Gorgeous Natural Hair!,* in order to subvert and reframe the phrase "good hair" to mean that all "healthy" hair can be considered good hair. While we should be critical of ableism, and therefore perhaps critical of who and what defines "health" and "healthy" hair, it is important to note the ways that Walton and others like her attempt to challenge longstanding notions of what "good hair" is and can be.[2]

So, while Black women exist within a larger anti-Black society which has denigrated kinky textured hair as "bad hair," they are constantly acknowledging, critiquing, and negotiating this landscape. What might that kind of work look like? I argue that one way to view it is through a set of 2016 song lyrics by superstar Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, as well as the subsequent responses to these lyrics. But first, what does "good hair" tend to mean? How has this phrase been understood in recent cultural memory? We know of course that the phrase is in large part rooted in anti-Black racism, colorism, and hierarchies of aesthetic beauty. Black male comedian Chris Rock's 2009 documentary *Good Hair* makes this point in what I argue is a pathologizing and incomplete way. But how can we look at this term with more nuance and complexity? How

can we center Black women's voices within the conversation? How does the phrase ultimately help us to try to understand how Black women (re)negotiate, critique, and experience beauty through current representations of hair?

This chapter explores contemporary understandings of the concept of "good hair," arguing that the phrase is a site of negotiation where work to reveal and subvert beauty standards is done. First, I will provide a brief refresher of what "good hair" has meant historically. Then, I will offer a critique of Chris Rock's 2009 comedic documentary *Good Hair*, which I argue de-centers Black women's experiences, and ultimately offers an incomplete and pathologizing account of Black women's hair practices. Next, I will unpack the lyrics "you better call Becky with the good hair" in Beyoncé's Knowles-Carter's 2016 single "Sorry" as a space where the idea of good hair is subverted and played with. Finally, I will offer some concluding thoughts regarding the ways that the idea of "good hair" is passed down inter-generationally, which can be viewed through the lens of Knowles-Carter's relationship to her daughter Blue Ivy's hair. Ultimately, I argue that within the context of the contemporary natural hair movement era, tracking Black women's narratives and experiences around "good hair" reveals how concepts of beauty and body politics are constantly being (re)negotiated.

What is "Good Hair"?

Scholars have documented the ways that "Eurocentric" beauty norms are reflected in the fact that Black hair has been socio-historically sorted into a dichotomy of "good" and "bad" hair. "Good" hair is most often defined as hair with a wavier or loosely curled texture, while "bad" or "nappy" hair is kinkier and afro-textured.[3] Kobena Mercer 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.'"[4]

Historically, "tests" were done to determine if Black people's skin was light enough or their hair was "good" (wavy or 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" simultaneously policed hair textures.[5] Obiagele Lake's work depicts advertisements for products as far back as the 1880s that promised to make "kinky hair grow long and wavy."[6] The good hair/bad hair dichotomy is also linked to questions of maintenance, because some Black women feel that "bad hair" needs to be straightened and styled, while "good hair" is more ready-to-wear.[7] 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."[8] Patton says that this standard of beauty privileges "very light skin," "blue or green eyes," and "long, straight or wavy hair."[9] Furthermore, Cynthia L. Robinson maintains "good" and "bad" hair are correlated to the concepts of colorism. Robinson defines colorism as "an intra-ethnic hierarchy that communicates light ethnic superiority" and as "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."[10]

Relatedly, "good hair" as previously defined by loosely curly or wavy hair texture, is often attributed to bi-racial or multi-racial ancestry.[11] 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.[12] Accordingly, Byrd and Tharps describe the dichotomy by stating, "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."[13]

"Good Hair" Through the Lens of Chris Rock

A public conversation around the term "good hair" was generated in 2009, with the release of Chris Rock's documentary called *Good Hair*. In the film, Rock decides to explore African American hair culture, after his daughter asks him one day in tears, "Daddy, how come I don't have 'good' hair?" Rock sets out to investigate the various meanings of good hair by interviewing celebrities and scientists, visiting beauty supply stores and sources of hair weaves, talking with Black patrons of barbershops and salons, and following a Bronner Brothers hair show competition taking place in Atlanta, Georgia. Directed by Jeff Stilson and produced by Chris Rock Productions, the film debuted at the Sundance Film Festival on January 18, 2009. The film opened nationwide on October 23, 2009, and it received widespread critical acclaim—currently holding a 95% score on the Rotten Tomatoes' "Tomatometer" (an aggregate score of the opinions of professional critics).[14] The film has also received scholarly recognition. Kathy Russell-Cole, Midge Wilson, and Ronald E. Hall endorse the film, stating, "Rock did much to raise awareness and consciousness."[15] Meanwhile, Rhonda Baynes Jeffries and Devair Jeffries argue that the documentary can engender critical conversations among its audiences.[16] Jeffries and Jeffries attribute the film as the major cause of what we now know as the natural hair movement, stating: "Rock's work is impactful, resulting in a wave of Black females who have embraced their nappy hair since the release of this documentary."[17]

However, some viewers—often Black women themselves—have been more critical of the film. Teresa Wiltz, of the website The Root, states, "There are two things that [Rock] does not bring to the conversation: Context and compassion."[18] Similarly, shortly after the film's

release, *Entertainment Weekly* writer Alynda Wheat heavily critiqued the film citing its lack of Black women directors or writers, its centering of whiteness and the white gaze, and its lack of relevance within this historical moment.[19] She writes:

> Look, I'm not saying that *Good Hair* has no purpose. The film introduces a conversation that's so important [...] But there's rampant misinformation and theories that just don't hold up. And no one ever seems to really address the cultural roots of Rock's daughter's question. [...] Neither the director nor any of the writers on *Good Hair* are women. It's no surprise that a group of fellas got together and came up with a film that, while well-intentioned, just doesn't get it.[20]

Along with Wheat, other Black women journalists were also critical of the film. Shortly after the film's release, Lori Tharps was quoted in *USA Today* stating, "I love that there's a film dedicated to hair; I just wish there had been more context."[21] This *USA Today* article notes that some Black women viewers disliked Rock's film, for they felt that the film made them into a "laughingstock."[22] Mikki Taylor, then beauty and cover editor for *Essence*, noted at the time that while it is a "good thing" that the film broaches the topic of Black hair, the concept of good hair is "no longer relevant to most black women, especially young women." Taylor says, "Good hair now is healthy hair. [...] When will our hair cease to be political? Every other group of women can do what they want with their hair, and it's not seen as making a statement. We're over that, and we wish everyone else would be over it, too."[23]

Scholar Joi Carr also critiques the film for its refusal to engage the "ideological structures" that shape our notions of beauty.[24] She maintains there is no real critique of or problematizing of the "good hair question," but instead the film reveals "symptoms" of the problem. Carr uses the concept of what Nathanial West calls "the paraphernalia of suffering" in order to demonstrate the ways the film is more interested in hair weaves and hairstyling as "fetish." Like Alynda Wheat, Carr also critiques the film's centering of whiteness, stating: "The ethos that resonates throughout the film casts a negative perspective on Afrocentric hair texture

since most of the conversation is unwittingly cast in relation to whiteness. Whiteness is the shadow-side to black beauty."[25] Ultimately, Carr concludes, "*Good Hair*, as a documentary, is inadequate. [...] The documentary inevitably defines good hair [...] without having a critical discussion about the underlying ideology or engaging in a discussion about natural hair textures. [...] As a result, the exploration is too reductive and conceals the destructive ideology functioning underneath the commentary."[26]

The film does do a few things well, shining in moments such as its portrayal of the Bronner Brothers hair competition and its discussion of capital within the hair industry. While discussing capital within the hair weave industry, the film tries to unpack some complex economic power dynamics—revealing that human hair is grown and collected in India, then sold within a market dominated by Chinese and Korean beauty supply owners. Meanwhile, while showcasing the hair competition, the film depicts four hair stylists putting together elaborate on-stage displays of hair styling and cutting in order to take home the grand prize. This portrayal of the competition demonstrates the glamour, the energy, the showmanship, and the creativity that Black hair culture can engender. We meet the four hair stylist competitors, and we get to know them intimately. Here, Black hair practices are made complex and generative—they are a space for possibility and creativity.

Unfortunately, in much else of the film, Black women's hair practices are viewed through a simplistic, monolithic, and pathologizing lens. First, the film seems to suggest that all Black women wear weaves or relaxer. At one point, Rock states that indeed at the time "all" Black women wear relaxers to chemically straighten their hair, when in reality it was a bit more than 60% of women.[27] While the film's production largely predates the contemporary natural hair movement, some Black women have always worn their hair natural throughout American

history. Indeed, when Rock interviews the late Maya Angelou, she notes that she went most of her life without a relaxer (she first relaxed her hair at the age of 70). It would have been interesting to hear more narratives about women such as Angelou, who have spent years wearing various natural hairstyles and negotiating varying socio-cultural expectations around their hair. Instead, the film is more interested in Black women's hair practices as spectacle.

For example, the film spends ample time conveying the dangers of relaxers, in an alarmist sort of way. Multiple experts discuss relaxer's key ingredient—sodium hydroxide—as hazardous. One scene shows sodium hydroxide burning a hole through the skin of a raw chicken breast "down to the white meat." After zooming in on the image of the chicken breast damaged from the direct and extended application of sodium hydroxide, Rock has a brief exchange with "Professor Berry," a "world renowned" "chemical genius."

> **Rock** – Now, you realize this goes in people's heads, right?
> **Berry** - Sodium Hydroxide?
> **Rock** – Yea. People... uh, Black people. *Black women*... Some men. You know—Morris Day, Prince—Put, uh, sodium hydroxide in their hair to straighten it out.
> **Berry** (*puzzled*) - Why would they do that?
> **Rock** (*with a shrug*) - To look white.

Professor Berry goes on to offer a more detailed scientific explanation about how sodium hydroxide is damaging to hair strands themselves. This exchange summarizes the simplified take the film has on Black women's hair practices. We see something visually stimulating, even shocking (the sodium hydroxide burning through the chicken breast) tangentially related to Black women's daily hair practices. An explanation is offered as to why this is noteworthy by someone who is not a Black woman (a white man scientist). Another explanation as to why Black women do these kinds of things to their hair is then offered by a Black man— "to look white." This explanation is brief, and it lacks nuance. Other possible reasons such as ease of care, workplace expectations, and ritual are never considered. The *material stakes* of these hair

decisions, such as gaining and maintaining employment by way of hair that is deemed more socially acceptable, are not engaged seriously or in depth.

Instead, Black women seem to go through these outlandish and dangerous processes simply "to look white." The film engages in "playing in the dark" through the dominant ideological gaze. Toni Morrison describes playing in the dark as framing through "racial object" instead of "racial subject."[28] Not only is whiteness centered in the film in that "wanting to be white" is given as the central reason for common Black hair practices, but whiteness is also centered in that Black hair culture is constantly discussed in relationship to whiteness.

White standards, white people, and the white gaze lurk in the background of the film, rather than defining the contours of a Black hair culture that exists at least partially on its own terms. As Hortense Spillers states: "The politics of culture are not solely made by the logics of domination; the dominated have some say, especially 'where we live.'"[29] In intra-racial spaces with rich histories like Black hair salons, hair shows, and beauty supply stores, it is frustrating that Black women's hair practices are framed exclusively in relationship to whiteness. However, in the world of *Good Hair*, these processes are just a part of Black women's assimilationist daily lives and something they are "addicted" to—as is indicated by the use of the phrase "creamy crack" in the film to describe relaxers. At one point in the film, it is stated that Black women are "more hooked on [weaves] than, say, cocaine."

Another thread of the pathologizing narrative that *Good Hair* presents is its policing of Black women's spending habits regarding their hair practices. This policing of spending is particularly true throughout the film's lengthy discussion of the cost of hair weave extensions. The film begins the hair weave conversation by introducing weaves to viewers who may not know about the different definitions, types, and installation methods of weaves. This "teaching"

of white people is also a constant theme throughout the film. The teaching happens perhaps most explicitly when Rock is defining hair relaxers, and he verbally addresses "All you white people out there that don't know..." in regards to the purpose of the product.

After introducing the concept of a weave, the women celebrities interviewed (including hip-hop legends Salt-N-Pepa and model Melyssa Ford) begin offering figures in the thousands in terms of the costs of their own individual weaves. Some viewers may be able to deduce that because Rock is interviewing successful Hollywood actresses and musicians, these numbers are much higher than the average weave consumer, but this fact is never explicitly stated. Rock then returns to a beauty salon to discuss the cost of weaves with Black women patrons and a hair stylist. The stylist states that the cost of a particular head of hair begins at $1,000 and can reach up to $3,500. Rock responds:

> **Rock** - 3,500?? And who's paying for this?!
> **Hairdresser** - Ladies! Working people.
> **Rock** - Black women?!
> **Hairdresser** - Black women—everyday people that are working and wanna look good and look as natural as possible.

Rock goes on to ask several women in the shop where they work and what their careers are, in order to be able to pay such high prices for weaves. Again, the film has no room for nuance, as not all weaves cost anywhere near this much to purchase or install. And while probably asked in jest, Rock's exclaiming the question "Who's paying for this?" reifies notions of financially irresponsible Black women who spend their own or other people's money "foolishly" for their own "selfish" desires. The policing of Black women's funds in order to suggest that they are irresponsible (to the point of self-sabotage) with regard to their finances returns several times throughout the film. At one point, Los Angeles stylist Elgin Charles states

offhandedly, “Once the ladies get it [a weave], they want more. And they won’t pay their rent [in order] to get their hair done.”

His stance here is also reiterated by longstanding civil rights activist, minister, and talk show host Reverend Al Sharpton, who says: “The problem is when it becomes something that’s beyond your means, and we buy what we *want* rather than what we *need*. And, I tell women all the time, ‘What do you have $1,000 weave on for, and don’t have food in the house for the kids?!’” Again, Sharpton’s comments suggest Black women are selfish and irresponsible, because they have ridiculous hang ups about their hair (that just come from nowhere, because ample context is never given). Sharpton’s somewhat egregious claim that there are many cases of Black women allowing their children to go hungry in order to have their hair extensions installed, of course, goes unsupported by data or even anecdotal evidence.

The spectacle and pathologizing around Black women’s hair practices, particularly as it pertains to their spending habits, not only presents a dehumanizing and incomplete picture of their lived experiences. It also feeds into the sort of larger, individual, respectable, “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” narrative that *Good Hair* often indulges. As Joi Carr argues, the film obscures larger structures of white supremacy, and instead focuses on and fetishizes individuals’ suffering.[30] Al Sharpton drives this point home later in the film stating: “No wonder the schools and everything else is out of control. I mean, you get up and comb your oppression and exploitation every morning. Or you attach your economic exploitation to the back of your head every morning. [...] How are you gonna think right when you’re wearing exploitation all the time?” Here, Sharpton suggests that “the schools and everything” are “out of control” in Black communities in part because Black people are so wedded to “symbols” of “exploitation” such as hair weaves and beauty ideals.

The argument resonates with the "sneaker buying" argument that culturally conservative Black people have leveled at young working-class Black men—the idea that they "waste" money on expensive sneakers like Air Jordans that could somehow be used towards racial and economic uplift. These kinds of financially irresponsible decisions, such as wasting money on aesthetics, are what is "holding the Black community back" from economic success and "integration" into wider society. Black cultural conservative and television icon Bill Cosby famously disparaged Black parents who are willing to spend money on "$500 sneakers" but not "$250" on "Hooked on Phonics." Black studies scholars such as Michael Eric Dyson have since critiqued the sneaker argument, as Dyson situates the argument within a larger set of ideological "ramblings" which are "united by one theme: the miserable condition of the black poor [is] brought on by their own self-destructive behavior."[31]

My point is not to argue for or against the idea that an infatuation with hair weaves or expensive sneakers is a "good" or "bad" thing. Instead, I want to maintain that these conversations are deserving of complexity and nuance led by the people who are the subject of them. Black women who choose to wear weaves or relax their hair have agency, and they make these decisions within a complex set of individual, inter-personal, communal, and structural factors. To reduce their decision-making to "wanting to be white," and to frame their diverse hair and beauty culture practices *solely* in relationship to whiteness and white people, presents an incomplete picture. Also, it is problematic to blame those are who are oppressed for their own oppression due to these purchases, especially without putting these purchases within a larger social context. In other words, not only is it damaging to blame Black women's oppression on themselves because they "waste" money on weaves, but it is also impossible to divorce their weave purchases from a larger anti-Black society that denigrates their own natural hair.

These kinds of arguments that blame oppressed people's behavioral patterns and individual choices as the reasons for existing inequalities are not new. Daniel Patrick Moynihan has been critiqued by Black feminist and Black Studies scholars for decades for his deeming Black woman headed households as a "tangled web of pathology" in his 1965 work *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Here Moynihan pathologizes the prevailing structure of Black families, blaming the prevalence of Black households lead by single mothers as part of the reason existing inequalities exist between Black and white communities and families. Meanwhile, in *Good Hair*, Rock, Stilson, Professor Berry, and Sharpton begin to craft a tangled hair-based pathologizing of Black women's beauty practices. Ironically, at the end of the film, Rev. Al Sharpton offers much more nuance regarding his *own* straightened hair as an older Black male civil rights activist. He states: "Once we realized and identified who we were, then it became personal. Now, I am also free to be who I wanna be no matter what. So, my relaxed hair is just—to me—as African based as an afro... Because all of that came out of black culture." While Black women wearing weaves is frivolous, irresponsible, and "a symbol of exploitation," Sharpton is apparently able to situate his own hair straightening within a long line of diverse Black cultural hair practices. And, this is a smaller quibble, but "afros" do not originate within continental Africa as Sharpton suggests here, either.[32]

It should perhaps not surprise us that *Good Hair* found a high level of commercial and critical success. For one, it frames itself as a teaching tool for the general public. And, ultimately, it offers several values that many of us are familiar with and comfortable accepting, such as: Black Americans in general, and Black women in particular, are to blame for their own oppression, because they spend time and money prioritizing frivolous and expensive habits—such as wearing straight hair. Black people in general, and Black women in particular, will be

forever held back by their struggles with self-love and self-acceptance—issues that have not crippled white people and other people of color to nearly the same extent.

Ultimately, I would argue, many of the issues with *Good Hair* stem from the fact that Black women's experiences and narratives are not centered in the film. Women do not seem to frame or steer these conversations around their own bodies, their own subjectivities, their own understandings of "good hair"—despite that the film is largely about their own hair practices. They are not the "knowers" of their bodies, and the opinion of others such as Black men comedians are placed on equal footing as their own. Throughout the film, the specter of "good hair" and all of the expectations it brings seems to haunt the narratives presented. Good hair and all of the expectations that come with it are a burden that limit Black women—from the fact that they spend so much money to achieve it, to the fact that white women don't have to worry about their hair while going swimming or having sex. As is often the case, Black women are made the butt of the joke often throughout the film. As Carr writes: "Moreover, Rock and Stilson fail to critically interrogate the misogynistic ideological attitudes represented by black men in the documentary, i.e. stereotypical notions of the submissive sexually accommodating white woman, of the angry black woman, and of the black male buck who dominates women."[33] Black women's voices and knowledges should be centered in a film largely about their hair practices and experiences with beauty—a film that is purported to be inspired by the musings of Rock's own young Black daughter. And Black women should also be centered in order to neutralize some of the dehumanizing and condescending arguments made (often by Black men) throughout the film.

As I have argued thus far, the 2009 film *Good Hair* depicts a conversation around the phrase "good hair" that is in many ways limited. Black women are not squarely centered in this

conversation, and "good hair" itself is a burden, a ghost, a weight that Black women struggle to break free from throughout the film. The film does not allow them much room to negotiate, redefine, or unpack for themselves what the phrase means. The film also relies on outdated tropes to tell its story such as the angry and irrational Black woman, Black people who are brainwashed by white supremacy, Black men comedians making Black women the butt of jokes, and trite "don't touch my hair" quips.

Almost ten years since the inception of the current natural hair movement, a new conversation around "good hair" was ignited, when the phrase was used in superstar entertainer Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's single "Sorry." What follows is an unpacking of the way "good hair" is used in this context, and what the subsequent reaction to the lyrics may tell us about Black women's unique experiences with both storytelling and standards of beauty. First, it is essential to situate Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and her work within larger scholarly conversations around race, gender, beauty, and feminism.

"Good Hair" in Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's "Sorry"

Gender, Race, and "Beyoncé Feminism"

Scholarly and public interest in Knowles-Carter's art and stardom in terms of questions around gender, race, and sexuality has existed for at least a decade. Knowles-Carter flourished within a popular R&B group called Destiny's Child from the late 1990s to the early 2000s. The group was named one of the most popular girl groups of all time by Billboard magazine.[34] Destiny's Child created songs with themes around "girl power" such as "Independent Women" (2001) and "Survivor" (2001). After Destiny's Child broke up in 2006, Knowles-Carter continued releasing singles that purported to be about women's empowerment such as "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" (2008), "If I Were a Boy" (2008), and "Run the World (Girls)" (2011).

In the late 2000s, Knowles-Carter was cementing herself as a global pop superstar, and began to garner a bit of scholarly attention, as well. Daphne A. Brooks's 2008 article argued that the work of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's 2006 album *B'Day* offers a kind of "black feminist surrogation," an "embodied performance that recycles palpable forms of black female sociopolitical grief and loss as well as spirited dissent and dissonance."[35] Meanwhile, Ellis Cashmore's discusses Knowles-Carter as a "commodity," arguing that her work sells a particular "dream" that "embodies a narrative, a living description of a culture in which race is a remnant of history and limitless consumer choice has become a substitute for equality."[36] Brooks's reading of Beyoncé's work through the lens of her feminist offerings, and Cashmore's choice to read her through the lens of consumer driven celebrity culture would come to predict two major "strands" of criticism of Beyoncé's work.

More scholarship around Knowles-Carter began cropping up after the surprise December 13, 2013 release of Knowles-Carter's self-titled album *Beyoncé*. The album broached a number of topics such as sex, feminism, monogamy, post-partum depression, politics, and miscarriage.[37] The album also signified Knowles-Carter's "coming out" as a feminist. On the track "***Flawless" Knowles-Carter samples a TedTalk called "We Should All Be Feminists" by author Chimamanda Ngozi Achie. After releasing *Beyoncé* in December 2013, Knowles Carter received the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard award at the MTV Video Music Awards in August 2014. At this event, Knowles-Carter's self-identification as a feminist was made more overt than ever before. While performing the song "***Flawless" during a melody of songs from the album, the word "FEMINIST" appeared in large, bold, lettering behind Knowles-Carter's silhouetted frame. In addition to claiming feminism within the lyrics and iconography of her art, Knowles-Carter has completed other initiatives, such as writing a piece called "Gender Equality

is a Myth!" for The Shriver Report in January 2014 and participating in two campaigns geared towards empowering women globally called "Chime for Change" (2013) and "Ban Bossy (2014). Since the release of *Beyoncé* and Knowles-Carter's overt and public claiming of feminist identity, much of the scholarship regarding the star has centered on gender, race, and her feminist (or lack thereof) politic. In other words, much of the more recent scholarly and popular discourse on Knowles-Carter asks in one way or another: "To what extent is Beyoncé/Beyoncé's work '*really*' feminist?" Janell Hobson tracks some of the popular and scholarly discourse around this question in her chapter "Feminist Debates About Beyoncé."[38]

Some scholars have been receptive to the idea of Beyoncé as a feminist, often arguing that her art pushes us to imagine and grapple with new possibilities around how we understand Blackness, motherhood, sexual pleasure, entrepreneurship, and relationships with men.[39] Meanwhile, other scholars and public figures have been more critical of her feminist politics.[40] These arguments often take Knowles-Carter to task around her investment in neoliberal capitalism, her reification of Eurocentric beauty standards, and her reiterating of well-worn sexual scripts. A widely discussed criticism of Knowles-Carter's feminism came in the form of Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks. At a 2014 panel discussion, hooks argued that it is society's fascination with Knowles-Carter's wealth within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that undermines any and all other subversive possibility within her work.[41] She stated:

> I think it's fantasy that we can recoup the violating image and use it… You are not going to destroy this imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy by creating your own version of it… Even if it serves you to make you lots and lots of money… Because… I've really been challenging people to think about, would we be at all interested in Beyoncé if she wasn't so rich? Because I don't think you can separate her class power and the wealth from people's fascination with her.[42]

Other panelists, including writer and trans activist Janet Mock, pushed back on hooks's assertions, with Mock speaking to the ways that Knowles-Carter's self-titled visual album *Beyonc*é, particularly the song "Partition," has positively influenced her own understandings of Black women's sexuality and her own sensuality. Mock stated, "It's not that I don't see her without critique […] It was freeing to have Beyoncé showing her ass and…owning her body and claiming that space. That meant a lot to me, cuz it gave me the okay as someone who I looked up to since I was fifteen to have that."[43] In response, hooks made her now infamous assertion that Knowles-Carter is a "terrorist," maintaining that there is a part of her that is "anti-feminist"—particularly her music and images' relationship to "young girls."[44] While hooks's comments about Beyoncé were surprising to some, they also seem to fit squarely into bell hooks's longer career trajectory.[45] For hooks, the commodification of sexuality appears to be antithetical to more organic and authentic emergences of Black women's sexual pleasure.

Still others have written about Beyoncé, race, and gender outside of direct engagement with the merits of her feminism. For example, Aisha Durham examines the range of "classed" "Black female sexualities" in Beyoncé's 2005 video for "Check On It"—the girl gang member, the diva, the "ghetto" Black woman, and the dancer. Durham argues all of these representations reinscribe colonial constructs, and she suggests that ultimately Beyoncé's ability to traverse and weave in and out of these tropes is essential to her mainstream success.[46] Meanwhile, Anne M. Mitchell's favorable reading of a range of Beyoncé' music videos argues that Beyoncé is able to present as a femme who troubles and engages both aggressive and submissive femininity through her campy performances of gender.[47] Like Durham and Mitchell, I am less interested in contributing directly to the debates on the merits of Beyoncé's performance of feminism. Rather than commenting directly on Beyoncé's feminism, instead I analyze the "Becky with the good

hair" line (and the album *Lemonade* more generally) as a discursively productive moment, in that it reveals some of the ways Black women engage the particularities of the work—and by extension—Black womanhood. Beyoncé's work may offer "feminist moments" of exchange, which seem to resonate and engender discourse among Black women in particular kinds of ways.

Introduction to "Lemonade"

On April 23, 2016, Knowles-Carter released an album and accompanying short film called *Lemonade*. The album tells the story of the various stages of a Black woman finding out, coping with, and healing from the fact that her husband has been cheating on her. Throughout the visual album, this tale of infidelity, despair, and redemption is also a metaphor for Black women's subjectivities and oppression throughout society. "The most disrespected person in America is the Black woman...," we hear Malcom X's booming voice state during the track "Don't Hurt Yourself," and in some ways this serves as the "thesis statement" for the album. However, this album and its corresponding short film—which bell hooks named a "visual extravaganza"—does not focus only on Black women as "disrespected" and oppressed. In the *Lemonade* universe, Black women are also musicians, conjure women, dancers, cultural producers, goddesses, and freedom fighters, thus functioning as agents. The visual album featured or referenced the likes of Nobel prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison, tennis star Serena Williams, Somali poet Warsan Shire, directors Kasi Lemmons (*Eve's Bayou*) and Julie Dash (*Daughters of the Dust*), as well as the mothers of Mike Brown, Eric Gardner, and Trayvon Martin—three Black men extrajudicially murdered by the police. However, perhaps one of the most notably "Black feminist" aspects of the visual album was the amount of criticism and theoretical engagement by Black women that the project engendered. People in general, and Black women in particular, were writing a lot about this project. It is rare that Black women's

pop cultural production, particularly content that marks itself so distinctly as Black feminist, is at the center of mainstream discourse.

For example, Candice Marie Benbow created and published a widely circulated "Lemonade Syllabus"—a long list of wide-ranging Black feminist and womanist writings to engage alongside the *Lemonade* visual album.[48] Benbow credits dozens of Black women scholars and writers as helping to contribute to the *Lemonade* syllabus. Meanwhile scholar Professor Regina Bradley and film director dream hampton held a conversation with NPR about *Lemonade*'s musical influences, homages to southern Blackness, and nods to creators such as Julie Dash and Carrie Mae Weems.[49] Janell Hobson wrote about Beyoncé as a conjure woman for *Ms*. magazine's blog,[50] and Joan Morgan wrote about Lemonade as "Black feminist art" and its use of a Yoruba "Orisa/Goddess/Witch" named Oshun.[51]

Black women also wrote critical responses to *Lemonade*, as well. For example, queer, agender, fat Black femme activist Ashleigh Shackleford, while also gushing about the film, critiqued it for its lack of representation of fat bodies, stating: "I discovered I was missing in *Lemonade*. […] There is no *Lemonade* for Beyoncé without the bitter violence against Black fat femmes and women. There is no *Lemonade* for any Black woman or femme without the sweet resilience, complicated experiences, beauty and existence of fat Black women and femmes."[52]

Whether in critique, praise, or something in between, *Lemonade* generated sustained scholarly and popular discourse about Black women's cultural production and Black feminism. In addition to its cultural impact, *Lemonade* found immense commercial and critical success. It first streamed on HBO, then on streaming service Tidal, and then on all other major streaming and music purchasing platforms. Like her previous self-titled album, the actual release of the album was a surprise, and it was also a visual album, complete with a set of motion picture

visuals that corresponded with all or part of each song. *Lemonade* was both a commercial and critical success. The album charted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200, giving the Knowles-Carter the sixth chart-topper of her career, and, upon its release, *Lemonade* was the biggest album of 2016.[53] Knowles-Carter also made history by marking the first time a woman simultaneously charted 12 or more songs on Billboard's Hot 100 list because all twelve of *Lemonade*'s tracks made the list.[54] The album was also a critical success: the review curating website Metacritic gathered thirty-three reviews from major publications and noted that the album received nearly "universal claim," with a 92% "MetaScore."[55] Jonathan Bernstein of The *Telegraph UK* wrote, "*Lemonade* is by far Beyoncé's strongest album,"[56] while Greg Kot of The *Chicago Tribune* called the album "the singer's most fully realized music yet."[57]

Lemonade and Black Feminist Criticism

Because *Lemonade* offered a particular imagining of Black feminism, many of the aforementioned feminist debates around Beyoncé reemerged in the scholarly literature. Several scholars praised Beyoncé's *Lemonade* as a Black feminist work that complicates, reveals, and celebrates nuances of Black womanhood. Zeffie Gaines calls the *Lemonade* album a "masterwork" that should be understood as an important intervention against racist and patriarchal representations of black womanhood."[58] Gaines cites the following themes that *Lemonade* broaches, arguing that they are integral to the black feminist archive: multiple fronts of oppression, self-love, interconnectedness of the Black community, African and diasporic references, anti-Black racism, and "a black feminist ethos that makes space for black women to be angry loving, vulnerable, powerful, healed, and whole." [59] Meanwhile, Cienna Davis argues *Lemonade* makes space for light skinned Black women to articulate their grievances in relationship to oppression.[60] Davis uses the concept of "diasporic melancholia" to suggest that

Lemonade is less about one's dark skin as an indicator of suffering and endurance, and more about linking "the trauma of the past and the struggles of the present to articulate grievances and express desires for improved Black future."[61] Davis argues that light skinned, mixed race, and Creole women such as Mary Peazant (a character of the film *Daughter of the Dust*) and Beyoncé are often fetishized and marginalized within struggles against anti-Black racism; however, *Lemonade* allows room for these women to articulate their politics and experiences.

Both critical and praising of the project; Erica B. Edwards, Jennifer Esposito, and Venus Evans-Winters explore both the "limits" and "possibilities" of the text.[62] They argue the project is indebted to a Black feminist literary tradition, which unpacks the vulnerability of Black womanhood and the value of community among Back women. However, Edwards, Esposito, and Evans-Winters are also critical of the project, the two major issues cited as being its glorification of money and capitalism and its seemingly unchecked reifying of beauty standards and colorism.[63]

Indeed, many scholars have been critical of Beyoncé's work, articulating again these arguments around Knowles-Carter's complicity in neoliberal capitalism, Eurocentric beauty standards, and the exploitation of Black culture and trauma. Alicia Wallace analyzes *Lemonade*'s lead song and video "Formation" through a capitalist critique, citing the following as problematic: Beyoncé's exploitation of Black trauma that is not "her own" by way of evoking New Orleans and Black Lives Matter, Beyoncé's evoking of the Black Panthers divorced from any sort of radicalism, Beyoncé's complicity in normative beauty by wearing weaves and calling herself "Creole," and Beyoncé's reinforcing of capitalist oppression by praising wealth and the hoarding of money.[64] Corey Miles also notes Knowles-Carter's lack of "class analysis" in *Lemonade*, pointing out that she does not speak specifically to or about poor Black women.[65]

Sarah Olutola's argues that the *Lemonade* era ultimately reifies a neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist system. Olutola argues this point through a close reading of Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance and "Sorry" video, arguing that in each of these spaces Beyoncé (as the "superstar" "Queen B") actively elevates herself above the other (often dark skinned) women she is surrounded by.[66]

Additionally, bell hooks again critiqued Beyoncé in the context of the *Lemonade* era. In her essay "Moving Beyond Pain," hooks states that her first response to *Lemonade* was: "WOW—this is the business of capitalist money making at its best."[67] In her review, hooks critiqued *Lemonade* for its: "stylized, choreographed, fashion plate fantasy representations," glorification of violence, and fetishizing of Black women's pain. hooks states, "*Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza—a display of black women's bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary."[68] Janet Mock once again responded to hooks's critiques of Beyoncé, this time in a series of May 2016 tweets. Mock's tweets read, in part:

> I hold bell hooks close. We are friends and have consistently disagreed privately and publicly about many topics like most friends do. [...] 'Utterly-aestheticized,' 'not dressed up bodies,' 'fashion plate fantasy' reeks judgment of glamour, femininity & femme presentations. This echoes dismissal of femmes as less serious, colluding with patriarchy, merely using our bodies rather than our brains to sell. Lets stop. [...] Our 'dressed up' bodies and 'big hair' do not make us any less serious. Our presentations are not measurements of our credibility. These hierarchies of respectability that generations of feminists have internalized will not save us from patriarchy.

In terms of questions around beauty and body politics, hooks's critique and Mock's response reveal some of the major sites of contention at play. Like Edwards, Esposito, and Evans-Winters and others, I think that we can and should have nuanced conversations about the different kinds of work a project like *Lemonade* does. I became interested in the work that Beyoncé has done with *Lemonade*, primarily because it seems to resonate and register so much

with so many Black women on various levels. There must be a way to talk about how while Beyoncé herself may be complicit in beauty norms, she also reveals and mocks them in moments like the "Becky with the good hair" line. Next, I unpack the meaning of this line in the song "Sorry," and the varied responses to it, in attempt to do this kind of nuanced reading.

Introduction to "Sorry"

"Sorry" is a triumphant, first-person, breakup track as the narrator experiences both strength and vulnerability, by way of the chorus's repetition of "Sorry, ain't sorry." The track fits within a larger narrative that the album weaves together, the story of a Black woman discovering, experiencing, forgiving, and reflecting on her husband's infidelity. "Sorry" is the fourth track on the *Lemonade* visual album. The song juxtaposes vulnerability and strength; Knowles-Carter calls for "middle fingers up" to her lover. The song was written and produced by the artists Melo-X, Diana Gordon (formally known by stage name "Wynter Gordon"), and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter herself. Jon Pareles of the *New York Times* calls the track "a twitchy, flippant song that's by no means an apology. It's a combative, unglossy track on an album full of them."[69] The song found commercial success, peaking at #11 on the US Billboard Hot 100 and becoming certified platinum by selling 1,000,000 copies.

"I Ain't Sorry": Race, Gender, and Beauty in Lemonade *and "Sorry"*

The visual album for *Lemonade* pairs each song with an affective stage. These emotional stages chart and correspond with stages of discovering, grappling with, and healing from marital infidelity. The stages occur in the following order: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Loss, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. The song and music video for "Sorry" appear as the "Apathy" stage of this larger narrative of *Lemonade*. Before "Apathy" is "Anger," which is paired with the song "Don't Hurt Yourself (featuring Jack

White).” Immediately preceding the “Anger” is a poem credited to Somali poet Warsan Shire. The passage involves the narrator offering to physically take and put on physical characteristics or body parts of “the other woman,” in order to embody her and please the husband. In part, the passage reads:

> If it’s what you truly want...
> I can wear her skin over mine.
> Her hair over mine.
> Her hands as gloves.
> Her teeth as confetti.
> Her scalp, a cap.
> Her sternum, my bedazzled cane.
> We can pose for a photograph, all three of us.
> Immortalized... you and your perfect girl.

Here, Shire/Knowles-Carter’s work begins to link corporeality, physical features, and beauty (via “perfection”). As later in the piece the “mistress” in the narrative is coded as non-Black, via the “Becky with the good hair” moment, Knowles-Carter’s work implies early on with this poem that they are different and distinct corporeally. The violent and graphic nature of the poem stands in for the violence of beauty standards and body policing upon Black women. The speaker is willing to wear the mistress’s skin over her own—her scalp as a cap, her teeth as confetti, and her sternum as a cane. As Shirley Anne Tate argues, Black womanhood exists as an “alter/native bodies,” which are sites of negotiation both as bodies and within national bodies. Tate states:

> Enslavement, colonialism and settlement in the metropole constructed Black women’s bodies as alter/native. As affective other/ same, these bodies draw attention to the negotiations through which the semblance of consensus on the national body is created. At the same time they rupture this consensual, collective body formed through the (re)iteration, (re)interpretation and (re)presentation of the meanings of muscle, bone, fat and skin—the materiality of the body itself.[70]

It follows that Knowles-Carter would early on establish the body as a site of struggle between the literal mistress of the story versus herself, in a story where the betrayal and infidelity also represent the oppression and denigration of Black womanhood.

Knowles-Carter continues this metaphor with the use of the "Becky with the good hair" idea in the "Sorry" song. The video opens with Knowles-Carter and several dancers sitting together on a bus. The dancers, painted in Nigerian artist Laolu Senbanjo's Sacred Art of the Ori paint and traditional hairstyles, begin dancing on the bus. The video then cuts to what appears to be a plantation house, the camera panning through the house past more dancers to tennis legend Serena Williams. Williams begins gyrating and twerking (a dance that involves bouncing one's bottom up and down to the beat) while in the house. The dancing is defiant, yet playful, as Williams returns the camera's gaze.

Throughout her lengthy career, Serena Williams has been castigated and masculinized on and off the court for her physical strength and appearance, as well as her engagement with Black culture on the tennis court (i.e. "Crip Walking" after a win and wearing her hair in culturally specific styles). Indeed, when she and her sister were quite young, their hair was hyper-scrutinized when they wore tiny braids with beads on the end. As Shirley Anne Tate argues, Serena Williams, Michelle Obama, and other Black women with muscles engender combinations of "fascination," "fear," and "disgust" within mainstream coverage. Tate reminds us: "These women carry the burden of the differential meaning of whiteness and femininity on their bodies and this is what we see being displayed in the media coverage."[71] Thus, Williams's dancing in this moment can be read as a kind of reclaiming of her body, beauty, and sexuality.

The final lines of "Sorry" now famously state: "He only want me when I'm not there/He better call Becky with the good hair… /He better call Becky with the good hair."[72] Here,

Knowles-Carter is thought to reference her husband's mistress as "Becky," which is a slang term within the Black community for an average or otherwise unremarkable white woman. The term was popularized by the iconic 1992 single "Baby Got Back" by rapper Sir Mix-A-Lot.

In the 1992 music video for "Baby Got Back," two white women stare, mouths agape, at a Black woman's body. One says to the other in a vocal fried, "valley girl" tone, "Oh my god, Becky… *Look* at her butt… *It's just so… big*."[73] Here, Becky and her friend are represented as judgmental and ditzy, standing in complete opposition (literally, physically, and symbolically) to the Black woman in question and her large "butt." In many ways, Becky sits in complete opposition to Black women, which speaks to the ways that the category of "woman" is defined in opposition to Black womanhood. As Hortense Spillers reminds us, "...Woman—a universal and unmodified noun—does not mean *them*. 'Woman/women' belong to that cluster of nominatives that includes 'feminist,' 'lesbian,' even 'man, that purport to define the essence of what they name, and such essence is inherently paradigmatic, or the standard from which deviation and variation are measured."[74] Becky is the standard for womanhood, and the Black woman who's "got back" is "other-ed." As a non-Black woman Becky is defined in opposition to Black womanhood, and each of them gain coherence from these oppositional definitions. As a non-Black woman, Becky is everything a Black woman is not, especially in terms of her physicality—including, of course, her hair.

Over time, "Becky" became symbolic for all stereotypical, generic, or unremarkable young white women. In "The Complete History of 'Becky with the Good Hair,' from the 1700s to 'Lemonade,'" Swann maps the evolution of the term, framing it, in part, through the lens of *Lemonade* and the question of sexuality .[75] She cites Simone Drake, associate professor of African American and African Studies at Ohio State University, who links Becky to "Miss

Ann,"—coded language from the 1700s onward that Black enslaved women used to denote the white mistress of the household. Today, Swann defines Becky in this way: "Becky is white. Becky is basic [average, unremarkable]. Becky is bitchy. Nobody likes her."[76] Becky may also be image obsessed, promiscuous, annoying, and—perhaps most pertinently—"never, ever," Black.[77] As Zeffie Gaines argues, "It's important to the narrative unfolding of Lemonade that the 'other woman' is somehow less black than Beyoncé, or not black at all. This is a vital part of understanding the symbolic logic." [78]

In an album about Black woman's power, Knowles-Carter subverts the meaning of "good hair," a term socio-historically ascribed to women of color whose hair most closely fits a Eurocentric standard of beauty—loosely curled rather than kinky or coil-y. In "Sorry" Beyoncé removes "good hair" from its pedestal within the hierarchy of hair textures, as a cheeky revealing and critique of the ways Eurocentric beauty norms may have influenced her partner's choice of mistress. The "Becky" moment is less about malice, spite, or bitterness, though—to be sure—there is some anger being claimed there. It is more of an "I see you" moment, a kind of revealing and checking of assumptions that may be present in the literal (and metaphorical) crime of infidelity against the Black woman. Spillers states, "The subject is certainly seen, but she also sees. It is this return of the gaze that negotiates at every point a space for living, and it is the latter that we must willingly name the counter-power, the counter-mythology."[79] There is a "mythology" of Becky as a representative of idealized beauty and femininity, in opposition to Black women's bodies. However, in discursive moments like these "the subject"—Black women—are able to return the gaze and negotiate by revealing, toying with, and subverting the Becky trope.

Interiority, Critical Responses, and the Search for "Becky"

Black women's unique relationship to "Becky with the good hair" is in part highlighted by the ways that mainstream media exhausted itself in trying to uncover the identity of the "real" Becky. Despite the fact that *Lemonade* has never been confirmed as autobiographical in a 100% explicit way (i.e. there is no interview with Beyoncé or Sean Carter in which they confirm the stories from the music), many mainstream media publications became preoccupied with speculating on the "true" real life identity of "Becky," and whether or not this "Becky" did indeed nearly destroy Sean Carter and Knowles-Carter's marital union. Rather than viewing "Becky" and her "good hair" as rhetorical, signaling Black women's relationships to both beauty standards and non-Black women, mainstream media was incessant in this pursuit of Becky's "true" identity. The Internet swarmed with theories regarding the identity of the mistress of Beyoncé's husband—hip-hop icon Sean "Jay-Z" Carter. Major publications such as *People* magazine speculated on whether or not "Becky" was white British pop singer Rita Ora, or half Indian and half Dutch fashion designer Rachel Roy, both of whom have been rumored to be linked to Carter in the past.[80] According to writer Greg Tate, the search for Becky after the release of *Lemonade* "broke the internet."[81]

As Zeffie Gaines notes, "...Though much of the initial public attention focused on the question of infidelity in Beyoncé's high-profile marriage to Jay-Z, black women were quick to see that this album was about much more than a cheating husband." [82] Online, Black women actively critiqued, analyzed, and located various themes and references within *Lemonade*, and "Sorry" in particular. They used Internet-based platforms such as Twitter, social networking platform Facebook, blogs, and response videos on YouTube to unpack the various nuances of the work. Here, Black women's internet use in part served as a space for what hooks might call

"critical spectatorship," or what Habermas might name a "counterpublic" or a "parallel discursive arena"—a concept Graham and Smith (2016) use to describe "Black Twitter" as a discursive space.[83]

Commentary from Black women suggested that *Lemonade* and "Sorry" laid bare what is often kept private—the embodied complexities, contradictions, and varied lived experiences of Black women's lives. As writer Zandria F. Robinson observes for *Rolling Stone*, Knowles-Carter's work reveals parts of Black women's "inner lives."[84] Citing Darlene Clark Hine's "culture of dissemblance," Robinsons states: "Part of black women's magic, born of necessity, has been the ability to dissemble: to perform an outward forthrightness while protecting our inner, private lives and obscuring our full selves."[85] Meanwhile scholar Zeffies Gaines also argues that *Lemonade* gives voice to "a range of complicated experiences" and an "interior landscape" that is "all too often elided in a culture that is mostly interested in demonizing and dismissing black femininity."[86]

Lemonade, and "Sorry" in particular, make public some of these sites of complexity and vulnerability. I view the "Becky with the good hair" moment as a particular point in which what is experienced and embodied privately in specific ways for and by Black women (hair, beauty standards, body politics) is revealed. Ultimately, songwriter Diana Gordon stated that indeed, "Becky" was never penned with the intention of referencing one specific person or incident. In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, Gordon stated, "The idea started in my mind but it's not mine anymore. It was very funny and amusing to me to watch it spread over the world. If it's not going to be me saying it, and the one person in the world who can say it is Beyoncé."[87] Gordon said she "laughed" at people attempting to pin the designation on various celebrities and

thought to herself, "This is so silly. Where are we living?... 'What day in age from that lyric do you get all of this information?"[88]

Predictably, the "Becky with the good hair" moment was not met favorably universally, particularly among non-Black women. For example, in a much-discussed Twitter thread written by popular Australian white rap/pop artist Iggy Azalea, Azalea critiqued the general use of "Becky" as a blanket name for white women. She compared the use of "becky" to calling a Black woman "Sha nay nay," a Black man "Deshawn," or an Asian woman "Ming Lee."[89] As *US* magazine reported, the impetus for Azalea's commentary was a fan on Twitter referring to Azalea as a "Becky," to which the recording artist replied with a series of tweets that stated in part:

> Don't ever call me a Becky. […] WE ALL KNOW 'becky' started because you all think white girls just go around slobbing on everyones d--k. […] Its in no way close to a slur, just rude to replace someones name with a generalized name representing their race. […] No i dont think Beyonce is racist nor do i think calling someone 'BECKY' is the same as a racial slur. I actually like her and the project. […] BUT, no i dont think its great to use stereotypical names to describe ANY race. I think we can all agree on that.[90]

Overall, Azalea's comments appear to have been taken with a grain of salt, likely due to her own history of being accused of cultural appropriation and racially insensitive lyrics.[91] The popular woman's celebrity website *Jezebel* cheekily titled one article, "Do Not Call Iggy Azalea a 'Becky' Even Though She's Acting Like One."[92] Azalea is of course within her rights to find the idea of "Becky" offensive; however, the comparison of calling a Black woman "Sha Nay Nay" to calling a white woman "Becky" is a difficult one. Classism, anti-Black racism, sexism, and histories of the denigration of "Black sounding" names all together shape a specific context for the utility of "Sha Nay Nay" as a joke or an insult. While dismissing a non-Black woman as "Becky" could be interpreted as rude or flippant, does not necessarily carry the same ideological weight.

As writer Kadia Blagrove maintains in *Huffington Post*, the use of "Becky in "Sorry" was less about the naming of individual white women and more about the critique of systems of oppression that often privilege them as a class. In making this point, Blagrove pushes back against Azalea's claims, stating:

> Aspiring rapper Iggy Azalea is fighting to end racism against white women by urging people to stop using the term "Becky." […] What a time to be alive. The 'race card' is now being used by white people! 'Becky' is not racist, but it is a term for 'generic white girl.' The moniker comes from a long history of frustration with white female supremacy in regards to femininity, beauty, and overall worthiness. Can it be seen as offensive? Sure, I guess. But it's not racist ...[93]

Blagrove articulated connections between Becky with the good hair, beauty, and Black women's specific subjectivities, noting: "The whole line refers to the very common insecurity many black women have had when being compared to or scrutinized against the often preferred eurocentric beauty standard. [....] She uses the 'Becky' line in 'Sorry' to illustrate the unique sting of colorism, racism, and misogyny hurled at black women by black men who prefer white (or just non-black) women over black women."[94]

Indeed, alongside queries over Becky's identity and allegations of racism, some writers and cultural critics—many Black women—pointed to the ways that Knowles-Carter's lyrics can be read as subversive Black feminist commentary on hegemonic beauty standards, rather than fodder for celebrity gossip. Black journalist Bené Viera wrote a post shortly after *Lemonade's* release, stating towards the beginning of the post:

> Beyoncé made #Lemonade for Black women first, then Black people as a whole. Sure, others can enjoy it. But it's for us. Therefore, we really should be the ones writing about and dissecting it. If you didn't know what 'call Becky with the good hair' meant without Googling, put your pen down. We don't want to read it. […] It's heavily African influenced in every way imaginable. Then we have black feminist theory all up and through.[95]

Here, Viera marks the "Becky with the good hair" line as the ultimate "insider" moment of *Lemonade*. If you had to actively research that particular line because you were unsure of its meaning, for Viera, that signals that perhaps *Lemonade* wasn't written entirely with you in mind. A lack of instant identification with the line indicates a lack of the embodied, lived, inner familiarity with the construct of "good hair," and what it means for women of color in relation to the "Beckys" of the world. In short: those who know, know. Black womanist writer, artist, and cultural critic Trudy of the website "Gradient Lair" also articulated the relationship between "Becky with the good hair" and Eurocentric beauty norms, tweeting: "'Becky' & 'good hair' comment. And the wearing 'her' skin/teeth etc. Like awareness of the *violence* of Eurocentric beauty norms."[96] Here, the use of "wearing" and "violence" again speaks to the embodied nature, what is physically felt, of Black women's experience of hegemonic beauty standards and white supremacist patriarchy more broadly.

Concluding Thoughts: On "Baby Heir[s] with Baby Hairs"

Knowles-Carter also evokes hair specifically, and beauty politics more broadly, in several other places throughout *Lemonade*—from her evoking of ancient queen Nefertiti with "crowned [...] braids [and] a bejeweled headdress" in the music video for "Sorry;" to her cornrows, headwraps, and box braids throughout the short film; to her featuring of young biracial actress Zendaya Coleman (an outspoken rising starlet, who was publicly both praised and mocked for wearing faux dreadlocs at a red carpet event).[97] To discuss every "hair" moment in *Lemonade* is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, a few lines from the lead single "Formation" may also be worth a concluding mention. Here, Knowles-Carter now famously sings, "I like my baby heir with baby hairs and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils."[98]

The moment is not only another nod to and subversion of Black women's specific experiencing of hegemonic, Eurocentric standards of beauty, but it is also a direct "clapback" (retaliatory quip) at critics who lambasted Beyoncé for the appearance of the hair of her four-year-old daughter, Blue Ivy. In 2014, Beyoncé and husband Sean Carter were being criticized online for the appearance of Blue Ivy's hair, which often stuck straight out of her head in an afro. Her critics would have preferred that Blue's hair was straightened, permed, smoothed down, plaited, or otherwise contained and made smaller. One woman went as far as to create a Change.org petition requesting that Blue Ivy's parents "properly" comb her hair. While likely created as a mean joke, the petition ultimately garnered over 5,000 signatures.[99] As scholar Sonita R. Moss argues, the moment revealed the unique nature of racialized sexism, and the ways in which even Beyoncé cannot escape the hyper-scrutiny and demonization of "bad Black mothers" that Black women have faced for many years.[100]

Knowles-Carter's mentioning of her daughter Blue Ivy's hair on the same album as "Becky with the good hair," speaks to the ways that these politics are passed down inter-generationally and are very much rooted in Black women's girlhood. As Zandria F. Robinson observes, "*Lemonade* is Beyoncé's intimate look into the multigenerational making and magic of black womanhood."[101] The nod to Blue Ivy speaks to additional intimacies of Black girlhood, which will ultimately evolve into Black womanhood. In order to garner the shared understanding of Black womanhood that is revealed through "Becky with the good hair," one must also experience "baby hair" with "baby hair" turned to "afros."

Ultimately, Knowles-Carter's use of "Becky with the good hair" lays bare and subverts Eurocentric beauty standards, while suggesting shared meaning and experiences regarding Black women's experiencing, negotiating, and critiquing these standards. The repetition of the two

lines, and a charting of Black women's unique responses to them, suggests that many Black women instantly identified with the phrasing, and thus "knew" the experience without needing it explained or named. The argument is not that Black women share a monolithic experience, but that there are lived experiences that sometimes meet at similar intersections of Black cultural practices, gendered standards of beauty, and conversations around hair texture—partially produced by "intersecting" systems of oppressions.[102] As the women navigate these sometimes-tumultuous terrains, they are able to both independently and collectively sing their experiences along with Knowles-Carter. Ultimately, this is the work that *Lemonade* does. The crux of the album's "Black feminism" may be its ability to speak to the complexity, depth, and diversity of Black women's experiences. The implications of the lines, and the subsequent mixed reactions online, suggest an immense value in Black women having "intramural"[103] spaces to negotiate body, beauty, and hair politics on their own terms—without fear of misinformed allegations of jealousy, racial bias, or surveillance. Cultural production like *Lemonade* at the very least opens up a space, a step towards self-knowledge and ultimately self-acceptance—through depictions of intimacy that Black women read, claim, and relate to in specific ways.

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[1] Byrd, Ayana D. Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, (New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2014), 174.

[2] As (Black feminist) disability scholars have suggested, we should constantly be critical and self-reflective around what it means to be "healthy" or have a "healthy body," as well as the cultural compulsion towards "health." See: Moya Bailey and Izetta Autumn Mobley, "Work in the Intersections: A Black Feminist Disability Framework," *Gender & Society*, (October 2018). doi:10.1177/0891243218801523. This tension within the natural hair movement—specifically the ubiquitous adage "Good hair is healthy hair" in efforts to reclaim the term "good hair"—is something I would like to think about more in the future.

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CHAPTER FIVE - ON "THE BIG CHOP" NARRATIVES AND BLACK FEMINIST STORYTELLING

In this chapter, I focus on the intra-communal aspects of Black women's natural hair culture, particularly in regard to storytelling and going natural. I examine social media discourse, the 2018 Netflix film *Nappily Ever After*, and a 2018 short film called "The Big Chop" as spaces where a kind of Black feminist storytelling is occurring. These stories articulate diverse experiences around what it looks like to complete "the big chop," a phrase used to describe the event of cutting off all or most of one's hair in order to leave only natural afro-textured hair in place. The big chop typically results in the wearing of a "teeny weeny Afro" or a "T.W.A."—a short (perhaps an inch or less) afro. These narratives allow us to de-center whiteness and center Black women's feelings, embodied experiences, and knowledge production around the contemporary natural hair movement.

Storytelling and Black Feminism

In this chapter, I consider the stories of Black women completing the big chop through the lens of Black feminist storytelling. Storytelling is crucial for our understandings of Black women's subjectivities, and it can serve as a tool for producing knowledge. For years, Black feminist writers have considered the ways that narrative and storytelling do this kind of work. Alice Walker writes about the urgency of Black women's stories.[1] She states: "Through the years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories—like her life—must be recorded."[2] This idea of Black women's stories as urgent, both in how they are spoken and how they are recorded, is important to understanding Black feminist storytelling. Walker also speaks to the communicative nature of

Black women's stories, as they are shared from Black woman to woman—in this case from mother to daughter.

Quoting this passage from Walker, scholar April Baker-Bell offers the concept of *Black feminist–womanist storytelling* that is relevant for understanding the exchange of narratives in this chapter.[3] Though Baker-Bell situates Black feminist-womanist storytelling by way of her own autoethnography, she offers a way of weaving together "the African American female language and literacy tradition," "Black feminist/womanist theories," and "storytelling" in order to "create an approach that provides Black women with a method for *collecting* our stories, *writing* our stories, *analyzing* our stories, and *theorizing* our stories at the same time as *healing* from them."[4] Black feminist and womanist theories offer a way of gathering, analyzing, and healing from Black women's narratives specifically.

As Robin M. Boylorn reminds us, Black feminist storytelling allows us to understand how Black women make sense of their lives.[5] Boylorn's work on the stories and narratives of rural Black women demonstrates how storytelling from a Black feminist perspective can serve a tool for insight into the embodied lived experiences of Black women. Boylorn uses theories of "Black feminist thought," "intersectionality," "womanism," and "muted group theory" to characterize the positioning and lived experiences of Black women.[6] For Boylorn, Black women's stories expand the ways that they are represented, by revealing the ways that they "cope and resist" with these forms of oppression. She notes:

> The narratives I have shared acknowledge the nuances and complexities of rural black experiences. I sought to expand, not limit, the representations. I was committed to showing the women in my study as women with problems, not problemed women. By showing, through stories, the way they cope and resist, I was privileging black women's subjectivity. I know I cannot control how people read and interpret these stories, and I have to be content knowing I have at least given representation to rural black women from an insider perspective.[7]

By gathering and sharing Black women's stories, Boylorn aims for storytelling to shift from "problemed women" to "women with problems." That is to say, while these rural Black women face problems that may sit at the intersections of various forms of oppression, these problems do not define and shape their entire being. Moreover, they actively "cope and resist" in this context. In the case of Black women's relationships to hegemonic hair and beauty politics, their relationship to these systems as "problems" do not define and shape their entire beings. They actively negotiate, critique, cope with, and resist these systems. By understanding "the big chop" through the storytelling of various narratives, we can begin to understand the diverse ways that Black women do this work. The things that they write, produce, and create reveal the affective complexities within these narratives of coping and resistance.

On "The Big Chop" and "Big-Chopping"

The "big chop" is a term within the natural hair movement to describe the event of cutting off the straightened ends of one's relaxed hair, leaving only a short natural afro on one's head. It is essentially a dramatic haircut from longer hair to short hair, with the added aspect of simultaneously going from straightened relaxed hair to natural hair. Natural hair blog Curl Centric defines The Big Chop as: "The act of cutting off all of your relaxed hair, leaving only your beautiful new growth, which is natural hair. Big chopping is the quickest way to go natural and unlike the alternative, transitioning from relaxed to natural hair. It's not only different in physical approach, but it's also different mentally."[8] As this definition suggests, the big chop is one of two ways to "go natural": one can gradually "transition" their hair by growing out their natural hair, or one can "big chop" all of their relaxed hair away in one sitting. Because the big chop involves such an instantaneous shift, it is viewed as a more emotional or drastic choice.

One can big chop on their own by cutting or shaving off their hair themselves, or they can go to a hair stylist who will cut, shape, and style the hair.

The blog CurlyNikki.com features a sub-category of pages called "I Big Chopped," which feature first-hand accounts, advice, and styling tips for those who have just cut off their hair. Writer and YouTube Vlogger Jacsmeen wrote a piece for Curly Nikki in December 2015 called "The Reluctant Natural- Jascmeen's Journey to Natural Hair."[9] In this piece, Jacsmeen details through photos and narratives her journey from relaxing her hair, two "big chops," and the current healthy natural hair she has today. Jacsmeen calls herself a "reluctant natural" because, like many women, she felt forced to go natural due to intense breakage and damage from relaxers. She writes, "I'm what you'd call a 'reluctant natural.' After years of relaxers, something just changed and my hair started to behave differently. It was dry, breaking off, and it just wasn't the hair I was used to."[10] Jacsmeen proceeds to take her readers on her journey through her big chop, attempting various hairstyles and product regimens, leading up to tutorials that describe how she currently cares for her natural hair. Today, the hair appears thick and full. She ends the piece by writing, "It took a LOT of trial and error, YouTube fails, and epic bouts of frustration, but I've finally found products and techniques that work for me."[11]

Through the engagement with Jacsmeen's storytelling, it is evident that it resonates in a particular way with the predominantly Black women readership of Curly Nikki. One commenter replies, "Thanks for sharing your journey! We all have trial and error when it comes to our hair but it's all worth it at the end. Your hair is beautiful by the way." Another woman remarks, "I know the struggle but I had to do another big chop because I had heat damage. This time around I don't want to have any set backs. This article will definitely help people." A third commenter said, "I went natural for a similar reason. During and after my pregnancy, my hair changed and I

just didn't know how to deal with it any longer. On top of that, I didn't have the time with having to care for an infant. So one day, I just decided to cut it off. My family freaked out, but I was at peace with it. I big chopped 4 months ago and while it has taken some getting used to, I'm loving it. I've realized that I've been afraid of my natural hair for so long for nothing!" Through Jacsmeen's candid storytelling of her natural hair journey, other Black women find that her story also resonates with their journey. While their journey may not match Jacsmeen's precisely, the natural hair movement has carved out a space for these exchanges of stories to occur. While in previous decades this kind of storytelling exchange may have happened in the beauty shop or the kitchen table (and to be sure, it still does), the narratives are also being articulated and expressed across sweeping geographical spaces via social media.

Within the context the natural hair movement of the 2000s and prior, novels and films have also served as a space to tell Black women's narratives around a big chop. Television and film streaming giant Netflix released an original film called *Nappily Ever After* in September 2018.[12] The film was loosely based on a 2000 novel of the same name, written by author Trisha R. Thomas.[13] Both the novel and film follow the journey of a woman named Violet, a young Black professional who chooses to cut off all of her hair after a break up with her longtime boyfriend name Clint. The break up is the "final straw" in Violet's life of conforming to others' expectations of "perfection"—at work, in her family, and in her romantic relationship.

In the 2000 novel *Nappily Ever After*, Violet's big chop occurs at the hair salon, as her stylist Tina completes the chop. Because the book was printed in 2000, about eight years before the contemporary natural hair movement, Thomas/"Violet" does not use the language of "a big chop." Instead, she describes in detail the day she went to her salon to cut off all of her hair. At first, Tina protests Violet's requests to get the haircut. Tina pleads with Violet to reconsider,

stating “Please don’t make me do it. Maybe you should think about it some more.”[14] Then, Tina questions Violet’s sanity, saying “You have lost your mind. That’s it, you have lost your mind.”[15] Yet, Violet is steadfast in her decision. She details her description of what her own version of the big chop was like that day in the salon: “‘Here goes nothing.’ The buzzing in my ears sounded like angels with coal black hair and glossy brown eyes who looked like me, singing, calling me to the freedom I knew I deserved and craved. It sounded like my name had been called at the Sunday night raffle. The sound couldn’t even match Clint screaming my name at the height of *his ecstasy*.”[16]

Violet likens her big chop to a religious awakening, complete with “angels” “calling” her to “freedom.” Alongside religion, Violet also calls up sexuality, comparing the moment to an intimate climax between her and her ex-boyfriend Clint. The comparisons to religion and sex again speak to the embodied ways that hair and beauty politics can exist within Black women’s lived experiences. For Violet, the moment of cutting off all her hair in the salon that day was a moment of release, of freedom, and of climax.

It should be noted that there is a longer history of scenes of Black women cutting their hair after an emotionally tumultuous break up, in order to start anew. In the beloved 1995 romantic drama film *Waiting to Exhale*, one of four Black women protagonists (and best friends) named Bernadine (played by Angela Basset) sees her hair stylist and good friend Gloria for a landmark haircut.[17] Bernadine decides to cut off her long hair after her husband announces he is divorcing her and leaving her for a white woman from his workplace. When Bernadine goes to Gloria (played by Loretta Devine) for the haircut, Gloria—like the stylist Tina from the novel *Nappily Ever After*—questions her mental state. “Bernie this is the stupidest move you’ve made yet” she states, adding, “But I’ve been doing your hair for 11 years… One ignorant move by

your husband, you gonna come in here and chop off all of your hair?" Tina and Gloria both question Violet and Bernadine's decision to cut off their long hair, in part because of normative beauty standards that insist long hair is representative of idealized beauty and femininity for all women, particularly Black women. Relatedly, there is a notion that Black women "work hard" for their hair length, so if they suddenly want to throw that labor away by cutting it off, their motives, certainty, and mental stability should be questioned. In *Waiting to Exhale*, in spite of Gloria's protests, Bernie insists loudly she wants the haircut. She grabs a pair of scissors and chops off a handful of her own hair, yelling "[If] You don't wanna cut this fuckin' shit off my head, I'll do it my goddamn self!" Bernie feels desperate to cut off her hair, in part because of what it represents—the past 11 years of her life with an unfaithful and unsupportive husband, as well as the ways in which this marriage forced her to conform to social norms of a "proper" womanhood and wifely duties. The proper wife is submissive, conventionally beautiful and feminine, and puts her own dreams (in Bernie's case, dreams of her own catering business) on hold for the good of the family. As Bernadine chops off her locks, she cuts away at these restraints within her marriage and society as a whole. Ultimately, the scene serves as an emotionally cathartic moment, signaling a new beginning and a new confidence for Bernie.

A similar kind of post-break up shift happens in both the novel and filmic versions of Trisha R. Thomas's *Nappily Ever After*. In Fall 2018, Netflix offered a film adaption of the aforementioned 2000 novel by Thomas, and the film is also titled *Nappily Ever After*. The film itself is a bit mediocre, receiving mixed reviews and an average of 69% on review aggregation website Rotten Tomatoes. As Black feminist YouTuber and cultural critic Kimberly Foster notes in her video review "Nappily Ever After' is fun but dated," while the film does some things well, it overall feels a bit outdated and regressive.[18] The conversations around going natural are

simplistic and linear, and Violet's self-acceptance is aided by an Afrocentric Black man hairstylist (Will) who teaches her how to care for her natural hair. Eventually, Violet and Will decide they are going to go into business together, to fill a void of natural hair products for Black women. In the context of the contemporary natural hair movement, where information and products by and for Black women about how to care for their natural hair is abundant, this aspect of the plot falls flat. Additionally, the film is rife with clichés around helicopter Black mothers, "inner beauty," the "natural hair is more conscious" trope, and successful career women who need to be taken down a peg. However, the most powerful and memorable moment of the film comes in the form of the character Violet/the actress Sanaa Lathan completing "the big chop."

Actress Sanaa Lathan, who plays Violet in the film, cut her actual natural hair during the scene. Obviously, she and the crew only had one take to get this scene right. In a promotional interview for *Nappily Ever After*, Lathan speaks about the gravity of the experience.[19] At first, Lathan did not want to shave her head in real life for the part. She researched bald caps and other technology that would allow her to mimic the shaving of her head during the film. However, the more Lathan dove into the character and the narrative, she became convinced that actually cutting her hair would bring more to the role. She stated that after the haircut, she realized that she had "hair exhaustion" from years of working as a Hollywood actress in roles that constantly demanded fresh weaves, wigs, or straightened hair. She says:

> I was just so tired ... of the hair merry-go-round. You know? Like, you know, get your hair done, and then you have to schedule your work outs...Or, you know... What wig am I gonna wear to this? And then it's the itching of the weave. Like, I just ... after 20 years of being an actress, especially where you're always having to do something new...I just was tired of it. I didn't even realize that until after I shaved it though.... I still was resisting it... That I just was tired of the whole... I was *exhausted*.

For Lathan, all of the work and energy around this manipulation of her hair for two decades left her feeling drained. In her view, the cutting of her hair made her portrayal as Violet

richer, as well as her own lived experiences outside of the film. It is impossible to say the extent to which Lathan's "hair exhaustion" enriched her portrayal of the big chop, as well as her portrayal of Violet more broadly. However, the big chop moment is among the most powerful and emotive of the film.

The scene begins with Violet drunkenly returning to her home after confronting her ex Clint. Earlier, following her break up with Clint, she gives herself a makeover—wearing a new, form fitting outfit and dying her hair blonde. Her hair has gotten wet, so it is un-styled and sticking up out of her head. Once home, she continues to drink and begins to pack up Clint's belongings, haphazardly throwing photographs, clothing items, and grooming items into a box. When she goes into the bathroom they once shared, she notices Clint's hair clippers. She turns them on, and much to her delight, they begin to buzz. She grasps a chunk of the front of her hair and shaves it off. After cutting off this first chunk, she smiles, smirks, and giggles. Violet then continues to cut off more hair, chunk by chunk, until there is none left. The song "Building a Home" by The Cinematic Orchestra plays in the background. A floating, piano heavy record, "Building a Home" captures the emotional gravity of the scene.

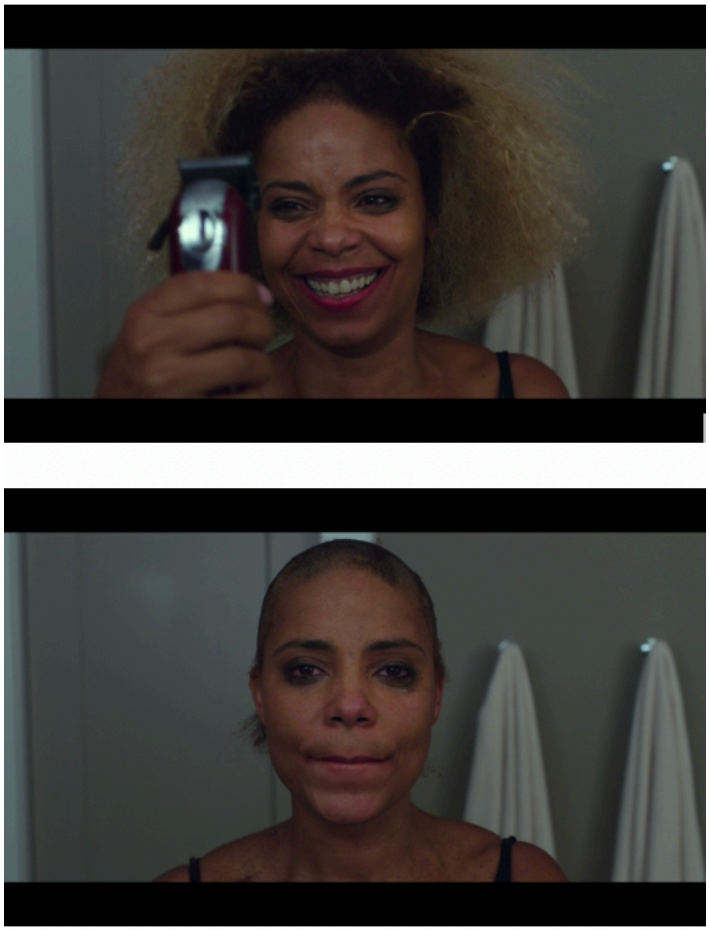

Figure 10 - Violet completes a “big chop” by cutting her chemically processed hair

Throughout the scene of Violet cutting off her hair, she moves through a range of emotions. After cutting the first chunk, she is smirking, smiling, and laughing. Very shortly after, she begins weeping, mourning the loss of her hair and former self. Then, she is smiling again, a sort of manic and incredulous smile. Then, her smile turns content and assured. A look of determination spreads across her face, as she cuts off more hair more and more quickly. The song’s lyrics state, in part: “*I built a home for you/for me/until it disappeared/from you/from me/ and now it’s time to leave*,” shifting a turning point in terms of Violet’s relationship to Clint and understanding of self. Violet laughs a sad laugh, then begins to cry again, as perhaps three-quarters of her hair is gone at this point. Once all of the hair is gone, a look of “What have I

done?" spreads across Violet's face. The viewer is left with a small chuckle and smile from Violet, then the shot goes black.

The care with which Sanaa Lathan and the film take this big chop speaks to the complexity of emotions they view the moment engendering. Violet's sadness suggests a kind of mourning or loss, both of the hair itself and everything that she attaches meaning to it. The joy and laughter suggest a kind of release, the actualization of a moment she has anticipated for a while. The smirks and small smiles suggest Violet knows she is doing something she "shouldn't" be doing, something that she knows others will not approve of—her judgmental helicopter mother, her uptight white men bosses, and society more broadly. Sure enough, the first person she calls after she cuts her hair is her mother. Ultimately, the few moments of Violet cutting off all of her hair are able to capture some of the complex factors and emotions that some Black women grapple with when completing their big chop.

After the Big Chop

The big chop itself can be a monumental and emotional event for Black women who choose to go natural. The internet-based spaces such as Curly Nikki allow room for a level of vulnerability, as women also articulate and share experiences of regret, loss, and conflict after completing the big chop. They share experiences of feeling vulnerable, unattractive, and afraid what of what friend, family, and loved ones will think about their new looks. In one April 2015 essay on the Curly Nikki website called "Real Hair Talk: 'I Regretted The Big Chop" by blogger Kanisha Parks, Parks articulates feelings of regret after cutting off all of her hair.[20] She writes:

> It was exciting, chopping off hair with the help of my sisters and my mom, but when that two inch fro stared back at me, I knew I had made a mistake. The "freeing" feeling that I'd heard so many other naturals describe never came. I had planned on transitioning for two years and now here I was looking like a child who got ahold of the scissors. [...] Everywhere I went, I was wondering what people were thinking. I wasn't confident at all

> and I didn't feel like myself, which was the worst feeling of all. I had done something just because everyone else was doing it, and now I had to face the consequences.[21]

Here, we see that not all big chops result in feelings of joy, freedom, or release. Instead, Parks articulates regret, a feeling that she has made a mistake. Parks completed the big chop because of the "trend" of going natural, but she did not feel like it was the right decision for her. Parks's piece prompted over 200 reader comments in response to her story. Many women agreed that they regretted their big chop immediately afterward. Some ultimately grew to love wearing their hair natural, and some did not. No matter where they sat in relationship to Parks's experience, many commenters articulated an appreciation for her transparency and honesty in sharing her story. One commenter wrote, "I like how Kanisha was so honest and very reflective in her story. Thanks for sharing." Still others saw Parks's story as a vehicle for critiquing and negotiating larger questions around beauty. To this end, one commenter wrote: "I think that we see our hair as part of our identity. Also, when you big chop, you suddenly find yourself exposed to yourself and others. We wonder and question ourselves, our power, our beauty, our identity, based upon the thoughts and reactions of others..."[22] Whether they had experiences similar to Parks's story, or just found her story as a useful representation of Black women's relationship to beauty, Parks's honest sharing of her story provided a space for Black women to come together to grapple with the messy, the negative, the less fun aspects of completing the big chop.

The 2018 comedic short film "The Big Chop" largely deals with the aftermath of protagonist Kris's decision to big chop.[23] The film was created in 2016 and released on the popular video streaming and social media site YouTube on October 7, 2018 (about three weeks after Netflix's *Nappily Ever After*). Running at just 15 minutes and 42 second, the film was released as a part of the YouTube channel @IssaRaePresents monthly #ShortFilmSundays series. @IssaRaePresents features web series and short films endorsed by actress, director, writer, and

producer Issa Rae. Rae is most known for her starring in and writing her own acclaimed web series *Awkward Black Girl*, as well the popular and critically acclaimed HBO comedy *Insecure*. The film series #ShortFilmSundays features "a new short by a new creator, the first Sunday of every month." The film "The Big Chop" was written by Alisha Cowan and directed by Derek D. Dow. It had a budget of $10,000 and currently has over one and half million views on YouTube.

In the film, Kris is a young Black woman who once loved her natural hair as a child, until her mother and other children pressured her into relaxing it and wearing it straight. Now, as an adult, Kris is fed up with the cost and maintenance of relaxers and weaves. So, one day, she stands in the mirror and does "the big chop," as she takes a pair of scissors and cuts off most of her (then straightened) hair—leaving only an afro of about 2-3 inches long on her head. Through flashbacks to her childhood, the viewer understands the freedom Kris felt with her natural hair, alongside the pressure she felt from her mother and other girls to straighten her hair. Today, now that Kris has big chopped, she feels a wide range of emotions. In a comedic moment, she exclaims in frustration to her partner Thomas that she "...looks like a freed slave!" In another comedic moment, she begs Thomas to buy her some packs of hair extensions from the beauty supply store ("Get me that Rih-yoncé. [...] It's a new hair line, it's got Beyoncé and Rihanna hair all in the same pack.") However, as she waits for Thomas in the parking lot of the beauty supply store, she overhears a woman speaking negatively to her granddaughter about her natural hair.

Her words, aimed at a child who looks between 7-10 years old, are biting—"*I ain't about all this natural hair movement and stuff. I can't take it no more. How is that liberating? How is that free, wearing your hair like that?... You don't even look like my baby no more; you look like Jaden Smith. Your hair look like wild kingdom*." In this moment, Kris flashes back to her younger self, looking in the mirror after her mom has given her her first relaxer. After her mom

asks if she likes her new straight hair, she responds wistfully, “I’m supposed to, right?” Her mother replies, “I wish you did. Now it will be so much easier to comb.” After the flashback, Kris stands up for the young girl being berated by her grandmother, as well as her childhood self. Amidst the grandmother’s protest, she says to the younger girl, “I think your hair is really pretty. So, don’t change it for anyone okay? Especially not for her. You will regret it later.”

From Kris’s journey through the big chop, we see the nuances of what it potentially looks like for a Black woman to cut off all of her hair and go natural. Unlike something like *Good Hair*, the film (despite its short run time) offers a nuanced, humanized depiction of the layers involved with Black women’s relationships to their hair. For example, the Black mothers in the film—both the grandmother in the parking lot and Kris’s mother during childhood—are not demonized or pathologized for wanting their girls to have straight hair. In both instances, the mothers are given a motive and rational for wanting to straighten their girls’ hair, beyond just “wanting them to be white.” When Kris was young, her mother struggled to comb and style her natural hair in a timely and efficient fashion. We see her wrestling with a comb, physically hurting Kris as she struggles to contort her un-styled natural hair into a style that will be viewed as acceptable to the outside world. Once Kris finally does relax and straighten her hair, Kris’s mother doesn’t tell her, “Now you are prettier.” Instead, she says that her hair will now be “so much easier to comb.” In Kris’s mother, we see a woman that is exhausted, overworked, and concerned with how her young Black daughter will be perceived as she moves about the world. Relaxing her hair provides a solution that will make the maintenance of her hair a quicker and easier process for her. The practicality of this solution is revealed to the viewer.

Even the grandmother in the story, who is more overt about her prejudices against her granddaughter’s natural hair, is still given a rational and way of understanding her views. When

Kris calls her on rude words against the natural hair movement aimed at her granddaughter, the grandmother responds with concerns regarding her future employability. When Kris says that the little girl will later regret relaxing her hair, the girl's grandmother replies, "The only she gon' regret is not being able to get a job!" Again, while one can be critical of the grandmother's berating her granddaughter and pressuring her to straighten her hair, this treatment cannot neatly be chalked up to internalized white supremacy, "self-hate," or other simplified and pathologizing narratives. The grandmother has tangible concerns about her granddaughter's future employability, her ability to make money to survive in a capitalist society potentially being jeopardized through her refusal to conform to larger standards of professionalism and beauty. And, in a society in which Black women are fired from major companies for natural hairstyles, Black girls are suspended from school for natural hair, Black women and girls are berated in the media for their hair's appearance, and institutions like the military have histories of regulating and policing natural styles, the grandmother's concerns in many ways are rational and supported by evidence.[24] With both Kris's mom and the little girl's grandmother, their pushing children to relax their hair comes from specific, socially mandated places.

Like in the depiction of the big chop in the film *Nappily Ever After*, we also see nuance in the ways that Kris responds post big chop, as she runs through a wide range of complex emotions in just a few short hours—an "emotion rollercoaster."[25] However, the film is rife with comedy, as these emotions and her relationship to Thomas are played for laughs. The Black woman is not the butt of the joke, but rather the use of comedy in the film brings levity to issues that the film takes very seriously and with nuance. After big chopping, we first find Kris hiding herself and her hair from Thomas. When Thomas finds her, her eye makeup has been smudged, as it is clear that tears have been running down her face. After showing Thomas her new short hair, she

becomes frustrated, panicked, and angry (though he responds relatively positively to the change). Next, she and Thomas are in the parking lot of the hair supply store, where she is desperate to buy the packs of hair. Here in the parking lot, a moment of clarity occurs with the grandmother and the other young girl. After this moment, in a comedic turn, a couple outside of the car thinks that Kris is a man, then they realize she's just "an ugly woman." Kris begins crying again, telling Thomas "This is a difficult time for me!" as she works through her emotions. The film then ends back at home in the bedroom with Thomas, as Kris and Thomas look at old pictures of themselves at children. Feeling content with how her hair looks today, she strikes a pose while requesting of Thomas, "Take my picture." Like in *Nappily Ever After* and *Waiting to Exhale*, a man love interest is central to the big chop narrative—a limitation of these cinematic representations.

In just a few hours post big chop, Kris feels a range of complex emotions—mourning, denial, desperation, anger, frustration, and finally contentment. Her narrative within these few hours also illustrates a constellation of factors that might impact how a woman might experience the big chop—her childhood memories, her socialization around notions of beauty, the opinions of her significant other, how strangers read her body, and her own understandings of herself.

Concluding Thoughts: "I Don't Love My Hair"

New (counter)narratives and forms of storytelling also occur in this contemporary moment through podcasting. Sparked in large part by the 2013 debut of the powerhouse podcast *The Read*, Black people have taken the world of podcasting by storm.[26] A number of podcasts by Black creators have become popular (particularly among millennials of color), and they take up topics such as race, sex, career and workplace advice, and popular culture. Podcasts are usually pre-recorded conversations or musings, sort of like "talk radio" in the form of individual

episodes listeners can download or stream. Podcasts are unique in that they may feel like a sort of testimonial or confessional, as the podcasters (usually anywhere from 1-4 people are in the recording studio) are speaking directly to the listeners in an unscripted way. The podcasters will likely record a given episode having done research, with notes, an outline, or particular guiding questions. However, the episodes are not usually "scripted" word-for-word.

The podcast *Tea with Queen and J* stars two Black women creators and co-hosts named Queen and Janicia (also known as "J"). Queen and J described their podcast as "womanist race nerds talking liberation, politics & pop culture over tea. Dismantling white supremacist patriarchal capitalism one episode at a time."[27] On a November 27, 2018 episode of the podcast Queen and J received a question from a Black woman about how to love her 4C hair (recall this is kinky, tightly coiled, afro textured hair) after going natural. When receiving this question this episode, Queen and J launched into a lengthy conversation around natural hair, mentioning topics such as their early entry into the natural hair movement, the privileging of certain curls/women within the movement while erasing 4C, being told they have "*pelo malo*" (Spanish for "bad hair") at Dominican hair salons, and the perils of the concept of "shrinkage." Queen and J responded to the listener's inquiry with practical advice, such as trying out different styles, as well as urging her to follow people on social media with hair similar to her own. However overall, on the question of loving their natural hair, they were—perhaps surprisingly to some—a bit ambivalent.

Queen states, "Do I love my hair? No, I'm not in love with my hair. I don't hate it, I don't have—like—hate for it, but I'm not in love with it. [...] I was never a 'get up every day and do my hair' type of bitch." For Queen, she has never been a woman who is "into" the daily maintenance of doing her hair. She would rather do braids, a wig, or a weave—"protective

styles" as they are known in the natural hair community, which require little manipulation. Ultimately, Queen says, "Am in love with my hair? I'll be honest and say I'm not. [...] But I don't hate it." For Queen, this is what self-acceptance of her natural hair looks like—finding what works best for her daily lifestyle. J articulates a similar sentiment, saying "To answer the question [...] I'm with you, Queen. I don't feel bad about it... But I don't feel like, 'Ooo my hair is bomb; it's poppin'!" J concludes the segment by saying in part: "What does loving your hair look like for you? For me, it looks like taking care of it. Even if I'm in a protective style, or if I'm wearing wigs, or whatever I'm doing...I make sure that I value and take care of the hair that I have underneath it, my natural hair." For Queen and J, loving your hair means taking care of it, doing what is necessary to have what they define as healthy hair—not necessarily loving how it looks aesthetically, or loving the processes of styling and maintaining it. After big chopping, Black women are carving out and articulating their own meanings of what self-love, hair love, and embodied acceptance can and should look like.

I unpack all of these narratives around "the big chop" not to argue that Black women experience the big chop similarly, or even to suggest that the big chop is *always* a sort of monumental, emotionally charged event. For some Black women, it can be nothing more than another a haircut. However, in understanding the multiplicity, complexity, and dynamism of these narratives, we can begin to understand the nuances of how Black women experience and negotiate their relationships to their bodies. For Queen and J, self-acceptance and means maintaining healthy hair, and living their life and wearing their hair on their own terms as much as possible within—to quote J (who is likely quoting bell hooks)—"the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." For internet content creator Jacsmeen, it looks like finding products and techniques that work for her. For Violet in *Nappily Ever After* it looks like shedding her

processed hair along with others' expectations for who she should be. For Kris from *The Big Chop,* it means making peace with your younger kinky-haired self, as well as taking a carefree photograph derived from the gaze of your loving partner. For these women, self-acceptance may or may not mean being "in love" with their hair. It doesn't have to mean getting excited about it or feeling a passionate version of self-love. It means finding what makes sense for them and doing that.

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[1] Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1983)

[2] Ibid., 240.

[3] April Baker-Bell, "For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar's Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation and Black Feminist–Womanist Storytelling," *Journal of Literacy Research* 49, no. 4 (December 2017): 526–43. doi:10.1177/1086296X17733092.

[4] Ibid., 531.

[5] Robin M. Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*, (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013)

[6] Ibid., 4-7

[7] Ibid., 115

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[13] Trisha R. Thomas, *Nappily Ever After*, (New York, NY: CROWN Publishers, 2000)

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[15] Ibid., 13

[16] Ibid., 13

[17] *Waiting to Exhale*. Directed by Forest Whitaker. Screenplay by Terry McMillan and Ronald Bass. Performed by Angela Bassett and Loretta Devine. United Stated: 20th Century Fox, 1995. Amazon Prime Video.

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[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

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[24] See: Ayana. D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (First revised ed.). New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014; Paulette M. Caldwell, "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender." *Duke Law Journal* 1991, no. 2 (1991): 365-96. doi:10.2307/1372731.; Kayla Lattimore, "When Black Hair Violates the Dress Code." NPR. July 17, 2018. Accessed April 3, 2018. https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/07/17/534448313/when-black-hair-violates-the-dress-code.; Sonita R. Moss, "Beyoncé and Blue: Black Motherhood and the Binds of Racialized Sexism." In *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism*, edited by Adrienne M. Trier-Bieniek, 155-76. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Publishers, 2016.

[25] "The Big Chop." IMDb. Accessed November 24, 2018. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5724238/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1.

[26] *The Read* is a weekly podcast starring comedians Kid Fury and Crissle West, two queer Black millennials living in New York City. The show features celebrations of Black excellence, discussion of celebrities and pop culture, a time to answer question and provide advice to listeners, and finally "the read" portion in which Kid Fury and Crissle offer a "read" (Black queer slang for a run of harshly voiced grievances) about a particular person, place, or thing. The podcast peaked at number three in the "New and Noteworthy" section charts and at number one in the comedy section charts on iTunes. As of 2019, the podcast had over 85 million listens around the world and received over 1.5 million individual listens every month. In 2019, Kid Fury and Crissle announced that the television network Fuse has greenlit a variety and talk series based on the podcast. See: Linette Lopez, "How 2 Friends Started The Most Hilarious Podcast Of The Year By Being Brutally Honest," Business Insider. December 13, 2013, Accessed January 13, 2019. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-the-read-podcast-blew-up-2013-12.; Erik Pedersen, "Fuse Unveils Upfront Slate: New & Returning Series, Premiere Dates, More." *Deadline*. March 13, 2019. Accessed March 13, 2019. https://deadline.com/2019/03/fuse-unveils-upfront-slate-new-returning-series-premiere-dates-more-1202574591/.

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation is intentionally a Black feminist project, informed by a Black feminist theoretical framework. Black feminist scholarship has always stressed the importance of locating oneself in the work. Patricia Hill Collins articulated the significance of the "standpoint" of producers of knowledge.[1] She maintained, "One key reason that standpoints of oppressed groups can be powerful is that self-defined standpoints can stimulate oppressed groups to resist their domination."[2] As a Black feminist scholar locating myself, and my own story, is critical for situating this project on Black women's body politics.[3] In the interest of locating myself in this work, I conclude my sharing a bit of my story in relationship to body and beauty politics. I also provide a place that this scholarship could continue to go moving forward, namely in pursuit of understandings of natural hair and beauty politics in the burgeoning field of Black girls' studies.

As a child, singer and actress Brandy Rayana Norwood – simply known as "Brandy" to most people – was my favorite entertainer. I saw bits of myself in her, and in her headstrong, smart, but sometimes overzealous TV character counterpart, *Moesha* Mitchell. Brandy was everything a young girl is raised to want to be—beautiful, an actress, a singer, and a model. She was even the *Cinderella*, for crying out loud, with the late, great Whitney Houston as her fairy godmother. But perhaps most importantly to me, Brandy had power, fame, talent, and beauty as a brown-skinned woman with box braids in her hair—braids that looked remarkably similar to my own.

My crush on and infatuation with Brandy, and her 1998 album release *Never Say Never,* spanned several years. One evening in 1999, when I was nine years old, my mom let me stay up late to watch MTV's latest installment of their *Behind the Music* style TV show, *Bio-Rhythm*. Here, Brandy told her life story, and provided a rare glimpse into her background, childhood

photos, and rise to fame. I'll always remember, during this interview, that Brandy recounted a moment with a high school counselor: "I remember…my counselor at school wouldn't send me out on an audition. She says, 'You're not going, because *you're not drop dead gorgeous*.' And I said, 'But what about my talent? What about what I have inside of my heart?' She said, 'That's not gonna work in Hollywood.'"

Re-watching this episode of *Bio-Rhythm* on YouTube today reminds me of the disappointment and confusion that I felt at nine. Brandy, of course, ultimately triumphed over her counselor's disparaging words (though I would argue that brown-skinned women like her in entertainment are still often marginalized). But watching Brandy's interview as a child ushered in a host of questions for me at the time: *"Brandy* wasn't 'drop dead gorgeous'? Why not? Was it her hair, her skin? And what did her 'gorgeousness' have to do with her talent, her ability to make it as an entertainer in 'Hollywood'?" Like so many aspects of young Black girls' socialization, the interview taught me early that 1) looks, bodies, and appearance mean a lot regarding our perceptions of women, and 2) these dynamics play out in specific ways for Black women.

When I was a child and into my teenage years, I used to dance. Most of my training was in ballet, and I danced for almost ten years. For much of this time, I was one of few Black ballet dancers, which meant often feeling "different" – socially, culturally, financially, and of course physically – from my white counterparts. Like many dancers, the rehearsals made me hyper-aware of my body and my appearance. Dance studios are typically all designed the same way: They are long, rectangular rooms with wooden floors, and the back of the room has a *barre*—a long wooden bar fixed to the wall that allows support and balance during warm up exercises. Here, all of the dancers line up in a row, and when they look across the room opposite of them,

there is a mirror. The mirror is at the front of the room, and it takes up the entire wall. Everyone, usually in some sort of line, is always looking at themselves, and each other. Everyone is always seeing; everyone is always looking. At themselves, at others in the class, at the ways bodies are moving.

Everyone also always thinks they are "fat," and "fat" is never a good thing as a dancer, particularly a ballet dancer. To some extent, of course, this is not unique to dance. Studies show many girls as young as five-years-old—*children*—think that they are "too" fat, and that this fat is a negative thing that they should change.[4] Indeed, feminists critics have written extensively about the nature of patriarchy, self/objectification, beauty culture, and sizeism. Black women add more nuance by writing about the ways race, gender, class, and sexuality intersect to shape their unique experiences with these phenomena. In other words, the hyperawareness of bodies that comes with dance was made unique to me as a Black woman. I, of course, dealt with many of the same struggles that white dancers did – but I experienced others, too. My hair never laid down in a "neat" bun or ponytail, and my skin tone never matched the "nude" tights that everyone else got from the dance shop. And when the dance instructor barks to "stand up straight and tuck your butt under your hips!" it doesn't quite look the same when your butt is bigger than everyone else's, and you actually *have* hips. You're different—your body, your hair, your skin, your experiences.

In these not-so-comfortable moments of a '90s childhood, I was fortunate enough to have Black girl friends, as well as media representations, that on some level reflected my experiences. Mya, Janet Jackson, Destiny's Child, TLC, Kelis, and of course Brandy were brown women who were vibrant, told interesting stories, and projected confidence and control within their bodies. "*I'm bossy! I'm the first girl to scream on the track*," Kelis reminded each one of us on her hit

single, as her golden-brown skin shimmered in the sunlit accompanying music video. Then, like now, I loved getting lost in music, television, books, and movies. My favorite book of my childhood was a novel called *Another Way to Dance* by Martha Southgate. Though I didn't have the language for it then, I now know that I loved the book because it represented me in so many ways. The protagonist is a Black middle-class preteen named Vicki Harris who is also a ballet dancer. Her hair and her body don't fit into dance, but she has a Black girl best friend who also dances and who also relates to these embodied experiences. Vicki deals with particular issues that involve her class, her gender, her age, and her race.

Eventually, my obsession with books and film led me to enroll in the University of Delaware as an English major, and I ended up completing undergraduate research and double majoring in English and Black American Studies. While English exposed me to the stories and films that I loved so much, Black Studies gave me a critical lens to understand these narratives within the context of larger society—a lens that took into account power dynamics, colonialism, and intersections of identity. Courses in each of the majors, as well as conversations with professors, exposed me to the kinds of texts that gave language to many of the experiences I felt throughout my life. These authors, many of whom were feminists, were grappling with some of the same issues I never really realized that I was thinking through. For example, why were some of my girl peers in middle school and high school given labels like "slut" and "ho," but the boys were never, ever given the same? In fact, why did it seem that these names were the worst, most discrediting thing you could call a woman? On this note, how was I to contend with the fact that the music that I loved most, hip-hop, was constantly denigrating Black women with these words? Why did it seem like the world was constantly denigrating Black women? Black people? Why

were our skin, our hair, and our bodies constantly wrong or in need of "fixing"? Why were the experiences of Black queer women often made invisible, and Black masculinity so tenuous?

These Black feminists didn't have all the answers to all of these questions, but they were grappling with many of them. They understood and valued the specificity of being a Black woman, and the ways that intersecting aspects of our identity help define and shape our subjectivity. They understood the importance of advocating for Black women's bodily autonomy, when at every turn our bodies are being denigrated, attacked, and erased. I don't think that Black feminism is an infallible framework for understanding all experiences, or even all of my experiences. But I do think that it has provided me language and a framework for how I see and experience some critical aspects of the world. I think above all, it's about riding for Black women. And sometimes we need that.

When I reflect on my childhood, I think about the unique ways that Black girls grapple with Black hair politics, standards of beauty, and understandings of their bodies. Brandy, Kelis, books, Pantene hair commercials, princess dolls, my mother, my peers, my cousins, my sexuality… All of them impacted my understandings of the world, my body, and myself. Today, conferences, books, articles, activism (such as #SayHerName), studies, and mantras (#BlackGirlsAreMagic, #BlackGirlsRock, and #CarefreeBlackGirls) are flourishing—all of which celebrate, investigate, analyze, and advocate for Black girlhood. Books such as Aimee M. Cox's 2015 *Shapeshifters*: *Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship* highlight young Black women's experiences. Meanwhile, the new and flourishing field of "hip-hop feminist pedagogy" works to center young black girls' worldviews and experiences.[5]

Activists and Black feminist scholars continue to agitate on behalf of the dire needs of Black girls regarding their experiences with hyper-policing and schooling. Kristie Dotson

reminds us "Black feminist theory, in general, has many aims. One of these aims to address the pervasive ignorance that exists around the lives, experiences, and plights of cis- and trans* Black women, girls, and gender-non-conforming people."[6] The 2015 report "Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected" by Kimberlé Crenshaw, Priscella Ocen, and Jyoti Nanda published by the African American Policy Forum completely reframes contemporary conversations around policing and education, by centering Black girls and young women, rather than Black boys and young men. The report includes vital statistics, such as the fact that Black girls are six times as likely to be suspended from school than white girls, a ratio greater than Black boys to their white counterparts. The 2015 book *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique Morris also attends to these issues.

My own work on Black women, standards of beauty, and articulations of natural hair has revealed to me the relevance of Black girlhood in how women understand their hair, their bodies, and beauty today. When Beyoncé Knowles-Carter sings, "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils," the moment is not only a nod to and subversion of Black women's specific experiencing of Eurocentric standards of beauty, but it is also a direct "clapback" at critics who lambasted Beyoncé for the appearance of her four-year-old daughter, Blue Ivy's hair.

In a completely different context, across the globe in 2016, conflicts around dress codes, racism, and Black girls' hair came to a head at Pretoria High School for Girls. The school was founded in 1902, while South Africa was under European colonial rule, and from 1948 to 1990, apartheid previously only allowed white students to enroll in the school. Since 1990, the school has been open to all races. The dress code in the school's code of conduct banned cornrows,

braids, and locs that are more than a centimeter in diameter. Afros were required to be pushed back and tied up. Many students recall being told that they need to "fix" their hair.[7]

During fall 2016, over 100 girls at Pretoria High for Girls began protesting the restrictions placed on their natural hair. The protests spread throughout the country. An online petition against the hair policies garnered over 10,000 signatures,[8] and the hashtag #StopRacismatPretoriaGirlsHigh began trending, calling international attention. On August 30, 2016, the Gauteng Department of Education, which oversees the Pretoria High School for Girls, put out agreeing (among other things) to review the code of conduct, and "the mocking of learners' hairstyles must cease."[9] The situation at Pretoria High School for Girls reminded us all of the global implications of anti-Black racism and colonialism, as well as the diasporic connections we can potentially forge worldwide. For these girls, the protests were about so much more than hair—but about carving out space to exist in a school, a country, and a system that rarely values them or their bodies.

But behind the headlines and mainstream narratives, what does it look like for Black girls to internalize, negotiate, critique, and resist normative beauty standards? Where does their learning around these constructions occur, and how do they think through them? These kinds of questions demonstrate the potentiality at the intersection of Black feminism, beauty studies, and Black girls' studies. Surely some Black girls love their springy, thick curls. Of course, other Black girls look in the mirror and wish to have totally different hair. Still others—perhaps most—may oscillate through these two extremes from day to day, moment to moment. And still others are often completely ambivalent, and they do not care about their hair at all. Exploring the diversity and multiplicity of young Black girls' experiences may very well reveal the future(s) of Black womanhood and beauty.

[1] Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, edited by Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 338-57. New York, NY: New Press, 1995.

[2] Ibid., 340

[3] Robin M. Boylorn, *Sweetwater: Black Women and Narratives of Resilience*, (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2013)

[4] Kelly Wallace, "Kids as Young as 5 Concerned about Body Image," CNN. February 13, 2015. Accessed January 13, 2017. https://www.cnn.com/2015/02/13/living/feat-body-image-kids-younger-ages/index.html.

[5] Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721-37. doi:10.1086/668843.

[6] Kristie Dotson, "Between Rocks and Hard Places," *Black Scholar* 46, no. 2 (2016): 46–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2016.1147992., 49

[7] Krista Mahr, "Protests over Black Girls' Hair Rekindle Debate about Racism in South Africa," *The Washington Post*, September 3, 2016. Accessed February 20, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/protests-over-black-girls-hair-rekindle-debate-about-racism-in-south-africa/2016/09/02/27f445da-6ef4-11e6-993f-73c693a89820_story.html?utm_term=.b33f4bd541ec.

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