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Imani Lewis April 17, 2013

The Other N-Word: The History and Signification of Black Women's Hair in the United States

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Abstract

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Hair for women is a visual signifier for wealth, respectability, and ancestry—all of which are linked to the core signification of power. Signification is a hegemonic tool used to apply qualifiers, meanings, and narratives to people's characteristics or traits. Black women in particular contend with the significations which stem from their hair because these significations have been used to place value on them since the beginnings of slavery. To understand the politicization of hair in the African-American community, one must understand the history of black hair, the transmission of hair culture, and how hair's significations of power manifested themselves in the major eras of African American history. This project will offer a synchronic historical analysis of hair in the late periods of chattel slavery in America, the early 20th century up until the Great Depression, the period of the Civil Rights Movement to the late 1970s, and an analysis of the past seven years. This research examines primary source materials from the defined eras and scholarly and popular secondary source material. This study puts black hair in conversation with power and examines how it has changed in response to changing racial environments.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate my research and this thesis to my mother, Vicki McCormick Lewis. She has not only encouraged me to be a strong and ambitious woman, she has also informed and influenced many of the decisions I have made about my own hair—negative and positive. She recently started to embrace her natural texture after several decades of relaxers and processers. I must also acknowledge my sister, Nia, who has gone natural for a second time! Thank you to my adviser and professor, Dr. Leslie Harris, for stepping up when this project seemed to be falling apart, encouraging me to take it "bird by bird," and remaining patient throughout the research process. Thank you to Dr. Regine Jackson for being such an engaging reader and committee member from afar whilst on leave. Thank you to Dr. Nagueyalti Warren for willingly joining my committee at the last minute and making significant contributions to my work. Thank you to Dr. Michael Harris for his early contributions. Last, and certainly not least, thank you to all black women and the lovers and stylers of black women's hair who are brave with hairstyling choices, ardent lovers of our varying textures, and ingenious inventers that keep the mainstream society (and even ourselves) constantly guessing.

For Payton Lindsay McCormick:

“Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.”

--Dr. Suess

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Introduction: Beautiful Suffering

"Hot Comb"

Halfway through an afternoon
of coca cola bottles sweating rings
on veneered tabletops and the steel drone
of window fans above the silence
in each darkened room, I open a stiff drawer
and find the old hot combs, black
with grease, the teeth still pungent
as burning hair. One is small, fine toothed
as if for a child. Holding it,
I think of my mother's slender wrist,
the curve of her neck as she leaned over
the stove, her eyes shut as she pulled
the wooden handle and laid flat the wisps
at her temples. The heat in our kitchen
made her glow that morning I watched her
wincing, the hot comb singeing her brow,
sweat glistening above her lips,

her face made strangely beautiful

as only suffering can do.[1]

-- Natasha Trethewey

Most black women are keenly familiar with the struggle Natasha Trethewey's mother faced when straightening her hair. Trethewey accurately acknowledges the acute pain, danger, time, and detail that is involved in the process of black hairstyling. That eerie familiarity, that "strangely beautiful" suffering is one of the primary reasons that I decided to enter into research on black American women's hair. I still shudder at hot combs when I see them, having been "kissed" on the ears by their "fresh-off-the-stove" heat several times when my mom styled my hair between relaxers. This was before the advent of the affordable, popular, and safe electric flat iron.

My own hair journey, like that of most women, has been less than perfect. I have had several inches of my hair burned out by relaxers. [2] I have had my scalp bleed from tight braids. I have walked around with chunks of white gunk (the nefarious combination of a silicon-based moisturizer and gel) in my hair all day because I did not understand how to mix my own products. I have cut my hair two inches long. I have pulled my father's t-shirts to the edges of my scalp and pretended that it is the long and flowing locks I will never naturally possess. I have

[1] Natasha Trethewey, "Hot Comb," *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 357–357.
[2] Many black women refer to the major events surrounding hair during their lifetimes as "hair journeys."This is a very significant title as it connotes passage and change.

hated my hair. I have loved my hair. My own experiences as a black woman, in combination with my major in African American Studies have fueled my research interests.

In each of my African American Studies classes I learn something different and new; I have discovered just how rich and multi-faceted this field of study is. However, one aspect of African American Studies that has come up in every single course I have taken is the politics of physical difference and how signifiers of blackness have been used, distorted, lied about, and conflated to dominate people of the African Diaspora. It was easy to find examples of skin as a racial signifier or even body shape but hair was rarely, if ever, discussed. Hair is one of the most obvious racial signifiers on the black body, second to skin tone, yet the scholarly research on it is quite limited. Seeing room for more scholarship on hair and difference, I decided to take on the topic of hair for my thesis to round out my studies on the African Diaspora and to perhaps learn a little bit more about myself.

I am focusing my argument on women because black women face issues with their hair that differ from those experienced by black men; in addition to confronting issue of race with their hair, they must also address expectations about beauty and femininity. Black women are more often expected to embrace and embody European standards of beauty than their male counterparts. Black women constantly receive pressure about their appearance from white, dominant society. Some black men have also imposed these standards on black women. This means that black women are being critiqued from every direction including from within themselves. Their hair is an inescapable link to their blackness and to their womanhood.

Hair for women is a visual signifier for wealth, respectability, and ancestry—all of which are linked to the core signification of power. Black women in particular contend with the significations which stem from their hair because these significations have been used to place value on them since the beginnings of slavery—they also face the signification of race. To understand the politicization of hair in the African-American community, one must understand the history of black hair, the transmission of hair culture, and how hair's significations of power manifested themselves in the major eras of African American history.

The modern, often hyper-politicized, perceptions of black women's hair stem from the socio-cultural norms about hair, womanhood, and power from *all* parts of the African American experience. However, in this research, I will offer a synchronic historical analysis of hair in the late periods of chattel slavery in America, the early 20th century up until the Great Depression, the period of the Civil Rights Movement to the late 1970s, and the past seven years.

I decided to title this study, "The Other N-Word," because I believe that *nigger* is not the only N-word that the black community has a complicated and contentious relationship with. Just like *nigger*, *nappy* was first used in a degrading and negative way by white and then was picked up by blacks to insult and belittle one another. Similarly, *nigger* and *nappy* have adherents that have tried to reclaim the word and make it less political. Nonetheless, opponents exist and are very vocal about the death of both words. This paper does not choose a side. Instead it explores the meaning of titles and ascribed characteristics within the black community and how they mpact identity formation.

My goals are to uncover the reasons why and how black women have grappled with wealth, respect, and ultimately power in the United States using hair as a medium of expression, protest, accommodation, and signification. Additionally, I would like to explore how black American women have used hair both to assimilate to mainstream white American culture and (even simultaneously!) to distinguish themselves and maintain "blackness." Finally, I hope to use this research to come to my own conclusions around the cause of the new "natural hair movement" that is currently sweeping the United States. [3]

[3] Natural hair movement has been termed to define the current state of black women's hair in the United States. It reflects the current embrace of "natural" hair or hair that is worn and styled without chemical relaxer processes.

Michelle Healy, "Natural Hair Is Making Waves Among Black Women," *USATODAY.COM*, N.p., 26 Dec. 2011, 15 Feb. 2013.

Chapter One: Picking Through Hair's Femininity, Beauty, and Power

Hair is a "key aspect of appearance" for all people—one that is always open to spectatorship, critique or praise. Even covered, shaved away, or lost to disease or aging, the absence of hair can be meaningful. Hair is also personal, as it grows from one's own head.[4] Due to the public and personal nature of hair, humans across all cultures possess a desire to coif, style, and beautify their hair.[5] This process of hair styling is so crucial to cultural structures because it can either be used as a means of assimilation or a way of ignoring the status quo.[6] Therefore, hair styling can be characterized as a cultural activity.

Human hair growth is an organic, naturally occurring process. However because hair is always manipulated in some way, hair is also a socialized medium for people who bear culture and have something to express. In his article "Black Hair/Style Politics," Kobena Mercer argues that hair's socialization process makes statements about the particular societies that work on the hair—ranging from religious groups in China to hair stylists that cater natural black hair in Brooklyn. For all cultures, hair is "raw material" that is molded and worked to reflect the needs and desires of the culture bearer.[7]

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[4] Rose Weitz. "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation,"*Gender and Society* 15.5 (2001): 667–686.
[5] Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2006.
[6] Ingrid Banks, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, (New York: New York UP, 2000), 147.
[7] Kobena Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," *new formations* 3 (1987): 33–54.

Hair has served as a means of expression for black women, but according to African American folk culture, it also has "metaphysical potentials." African American folk tales have suggested a link between a person's essence and their hair. Often, women were warned to keep up with their shed hairs so that a bird would not take them away to make a nest and cause her madness. In barbershops, men's hair clippings were swept up and burned in order to prevent evil spells from being done on a man.[8]

In African American literary culture, hair is sometimes one of the most integral parts of a character's visage or a story's plot. In Zora Neale Hurston's, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," Janie's hair is one of the most powerful symbols. Janie's hair is an embodiment of her strength, her beauty, her rebelliousness, and even her closeness to whiteness—all because of her straight long locks. Her hair remains a source of admiration, vilification, and conversation throughout the entire novel.[9]

Mercer is right, in fact: black women's hair says a variety of things about the black community. Hair for black women during slavery was a source of pride that had to be covered, only to be revealed on Sundays. In the early twentieth century it became a means of obtaining respectability via accommodation. Hair became a tool of protest during the Black Power Movement. In the midst of today's "natural hair" boom black women's hair has become a symbol for the indefinable nature of black beauty.

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[8] Michael D. Harris *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 2006, 1-12.

[9] Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Novel*, Reissue, (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006.

Power Dynamics

For this study I will subscribe to Rose Weitz's definition of power from her 2001 study, "Women and Their Hair":

> Power refers to the ability to obtain desired goals through controlling or influencing others. Power is embedded in relationships, waxing and waning as relationships evolve. Similarly, power is not absolute but is relative to a given relationship and situation. … As this suggests, power comes from multiple sources, including both ascribed and achieved characteristics, and takes many forms, some of which are more effective, long-lasting, and broad reaching than others.[10]

Based on upon this definition and the behaviors, hair styles, and beauty ideals embraced by black American women in the four periods of this study, I will show that power is the primary, and arguably, most prevalent aspect of social identity being communicated through African American women's hair throughout history.

From Weitz's detailed definition, it is important to determine what characteristics this particular historical analysis will look for. In searching for patterns of power via hair in this historical analysis, three characteristics of power were examined and three questions were be asked. Are the hairstyles in question being used to reach goals? Are the hairstyle choices contingent upon relationships with others? Are there multiple incarnations, sources, and

[10] Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation," 668.

characteristics of the hairstyle or practice? This study will combine these questions with an analysis of what the hairstyles in question produced to determine if there was a genuine negotiation of power occurring.

Hair and Femininity

In addition to using Weitz's definition of power, this study will also utilize Weitz's definition of femininity. Although Wietz was studying women of all backgrounds in her research, her definition of femininity fits the American standard. The American standard of femininity is defined by socially and economically dominant middle-class and upper-class white Americans. [11] Because they are in power they seek to define beauty for everyone, even non-white Americans and they have been successful at doing so. Wietz's study does acknowledge that definitions of beauty have and do change—even for mainstream white society. However, the definition provided is applicable to the majority of, if not all, time periods discussed in my study.

> First, to be most feminine and hence most attractive, women's hair should be long, curly or wavy, and preferably blonde (Clayson and Maughan 1986; Rich and Cash 1993). It should most definitely be not gray (Kenner Furman 1997) or kinky (suggesting either African or Jewish heritage). Second, women's hair should look intentionally styled…. Similarly, there is a widespread agreement that women should spend time, effort, and

[11] Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation, 672.

money on making their hair attractive (Synott 1987). Finally, women's hair should look different from men's hair (Synott 1987).[12]

I borrow the term, "conventional attractiveness," throughout the rest of the study to describe the characteristics of dominant feminine hair beauty in America. As was done with Weitz's definition of power, it is important to outline what tenets of "conventional attractiveness" this study will be looking for when evaluating black women's attempts at maintaining femininity through hair and hence garnering power.

The following questions will be asked. Is the hairstyle long, emphasizing curls and waves? Does it involve a change in natural hair color? Does the hairstyle aim to suppress the natural kinkiness of African American hair, if present? Doses the hairstyle look intentionally styled or "put together"? Has time, money, or effort been used to create and maintain the style? Does the style look different from the styles men are wearing at the time? These questions, along with a comparative analysis of black hair styling behavior and white responses to hair styling behavior will help answer whether the hairstyles in question were seeking to embrace femininity.

Beauty and Power

Weitz's study, along with several others, suggests that her definition of conventional attractiveness is a "realistic route" to the capture of power.[13] I agree with this statement as black American women have historically used their hair to empower themselves in the face of

[12] Ibid
[13] Weitz "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation," 673.

constant oppression. Wietz studies this "conventional attractiveness" from the perspective of the contemporary woman and the contemporary woman's relationships and careers. Although I am using Weitz's studies on how beauty impacts power and how hair impacts beauty, this study will examine hair as a route to power and signifier for power by examining black women's relationships to whites and to each other throughout history.

Signification is a hegemonic tool used to apply qualifiers, meanings, and narratives to people's characteristics or traits.[14] Signification allowed Europeans to assign "names, signs, and stereotypes" to people who they deemed inferior. Signification has its beginnings in the Enlightenment movement which emphasized the reform of society using reason, the scientific method, and challenging faith. As noted by Richard Brent Turner, many Enlightenment thinkers were ironically opposed to assaults against humanity but had no qualms about assigning derogatory realities to the non-whites that were being taken advantage of for economic and political gain.[15]

Blackness has, for centuries, been a signifier of inferiority, doom, and death among other negatives. Not surprisingly, visual signifiers of blackness have negative connotations as well. These signifiers which have been defined as racial include: dark skin tones, kinky or wooly hair, full lips, and wide noses. [16]Whites have used these signifiers of blackness as "proof" of the black person's inferiority in comparison to whites. Many of the abuses that black people have

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[14] Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006)1-12.
[15] Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 3.
[16] Harris, Colored *Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 12.

undergone have been justified by these differences and the significations that they have been assigned. Nevertheless, signifying is not always negative. Signified groups often reclaim or reshape an identity that has been impressed upon them in order to instill pride in their group and gain political and economic opportunities.[17] Blacks have undergone and are continuing to shape the significations of hair.

I theorize that in moments of greater power struggle, where black females might feel less empowered and more restricted by de jure racism and prejudices, black American women will embrace "conventional attractiveness" in order to gain more power. As such, during the times that black American women are feeling more empowered and less restricted by prejudices, they do not embrace "conventional attractiveness" as much, if at all. In fact, during these times of mounting black power, it seems logical that women would embrace styles that highlight black hair texture and racial significations to a greater extent.

Hair and Blackness

In spite of the fact that most black women do not possess the traits outlined for "conventional attractiveness," according to the prevailing definitions of white culture in the United States, they are often evaluated based upon white beauty ideals. Unsurprisingly, they feel the need to meet these hegemonic ideals; they receive pressure from others within the black community to meet these standards as well.

[17] Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience, Second Edition*, 3.

In "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair," Tracey Owens Patton notes that black women's beauty has been erased and what beauty remains has been made subject to cruel and racist stereotypes[18]. Black women have been considered beautiful only when their features met white beauty ideals—hair included. The most beautiful hair on a black woman is as close to straight as possible and long—most similar to a white woman's hair and most different from the predominant textures represented in the African American community. While contemporary depictions of black beauty have been more diverse than in the past, most black women still feel hindered by the historical archetypes including: the mammy figure, the Tragic Mulatto, and the Jezebel. If a black woman is too heavy she fears being identified as a Mammy figure, and so on.

The Jezebel archetype is hyper-sexualized, opposite of the chaste Victorian ideal of the mid-nineteenth century. The Jezebel was not concerned with domestic matters and instead indulged her sexual urges whenever possible. This particular archetype stems from early encounters that European slave tradesmen had with African cultures. They mistook many specific cultural traditions and markers like dress, polygamy, and tribal dances as proof the African's supposedly innate sexuality.[19] The history of the Hottentot Venus, Sara Baartman, might also contribute to this archetype. Baartman left her native South Africa on the promise of wealth and fame, only to be put on display in Europe for her voluptuous figure. This only added

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[18] Tracey Owens Patton,"Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair," *NWSA Journal* 18.2 (2006): 26.
[19] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman ?* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 27-61.

to stereotypes about a black woman's body and sexuality.[20] The Jezebel archetype fueled much of the sexual abuse that slave masters inflicted upon African American women and the jealousy and distrust that white women had for these women as well.[21]

The inverse of the Jezebel archetype is the idea of the Mammy. Both archetypes exist in response to one another. The Mammy was the dutiful black female domestic who cared only about the needs of the white family she served and was completely asexual. The notion of the Mammy helped assuage the fears of the Jezebel due to her asexuality and commitment to her master's home. Being in close quarters with one's master and family is the nature of domestic work. Rather than instilling fear or insecurity about her impact on the household, the Mammy stereotype ratified her role in the household and the services she provided.

The Tragic Mulatto emerged as yet another archetypal response to the fears and concerns of slave holders. The Tragic Mulatto was first introduced as a literary character in 1842.[22] The character of the Tragic Mulatto that emerged from these early incarnations was primarily used to reconcile prohibitions about miscegenation. This archetype can be neither black nor white and is a victim of society and racial boundaries. Instead, the Tragic Mulatto is miserable and only finds solace in death. Not surprisingly, these archetypes, among many

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[20] Clifton C. Crais and Pamela Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), Print.
[21] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman ?* , 27-61.
[22] Lydia Maria Child is credited with creating the character that has come to be known as the Tragic Mulatto in her short stories "The Quadroons" (1842) and "Slavery's Pleasant Homes" (1843). The Tragic Mulatto in these stories was the child of a white slaveholder and his black female slave. The Tragic Mulatto longed for freedom but her "negro blood" kept her in slavery wherein she died alone. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* offers a similar portrayl of the Tragic Mulatto.

David Pilgrim, "The Tragic Mulatto Myth." *The Tragic Mulatto Myth*, Ferris State University.

others, have endured; many black women still contend with these ingrained ideas and fight them on a daily basis.

Some scholars say that in order to assimilate and avoid archetypes and stereotypes, black women chase white beauty ideals by purchasing bleaching creams, getting plastic surgery procedures for more European features, and straightening their hair. Scholars who support this view assert that those who assimilate support the inferiority of black beauty. This phenomenon is called "The Lily Complex." Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden in their book *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* argue that this is the process of "altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive."[23] They note that when women change their hair and other features to meet unattainable standards of beauty they grow to hate themselves.

Other scholars see changes to typically black features as a challenge to the dominant beauty culture that black women operate around. Scholars like Michelle Wallace contend that these choices are more of a negotiation and that women do not see their race being inextricably linked to their hair. Instead, these scholars believe that black women are so creative with the variety of hair textures they possess because they recognize the need to be flexible in a world where they are not dominant—not because they intrinsically hate themselves.[24] This school of thought is more convincing, especially given the great variety of

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[23] Charisse Jonesand Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: The Double Lives of Black Women in America* (New York City: Harper Perennial, 2004), 177.
[24] Owens,"Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?," 24-51.

hairstyles that have emerged from the black community to insure and obtain power over the last two centuries.

Femininity and Blackness: When Two Worlds Collide

Black women's hair comes in a variety of textures. In a state unaltered by chemicals, commonly referred to as "natural hair," these women have differing curl patterns, varying levels of strand porosity, density, width, and length. Every woman's hair texture is different, almost like a follicular fingerprint.[25] Due to the diversity of black hair texture, it is impossible to create or even imagine a definition of "conventional black hair beauty." White beauty has been defined by dominant culture but black beauty has not. Some would argue that black beauty is non-existent because it is constantly at odds with the dominant expectations of white beauty. Marcus Garvey argued that "beauty within a race is not arrived at by comparison with another race" to discourage comparisons altogether.[26] This study is most sympathetic to the notion that black American hair beauty is too diverse to capture in one definition—especially given the transitions that it has made over the past 400 years.

However, in order to demonstrate the differences in white and black beauty *ideals*, all hairstyles or hair practices introduced in the four periods covered in this study will be compared to what style was the status quo for African Americans prior to that time period. Then the new style that emerged in response to white beauty dominance will be compared to the styles worn by whites at the same time.

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[25]"Texture Typing℠." *Curly Hair Tips, Styles & Products*.
[26] Jacob S. Dorman, "Skin Bleach And Civilization: The Racial Formation Of Blackness In 1920s Harlem," Journal Of Pan African Studies 4.4 (2011): 63..

For some American women, it is wise to play *down* their femininity in order to assert and obtain power. However, African American women are much less likely to play down their femininity with their hairstyling choices. Instead, African American women often look for styles that are deemed professional while maintaining some sort of femininity. This is because African American womanhood has historically been under attack. African American women have historically tried to preserve and enhance their femininity by using hair relaxers and wigs; wearing more conservative hairstyles that do not openly display hair kinkiness when natural (buns, French rolls, etc.), and avoiding radical and overly elaborate coiffures. [27]

By avoiding hairstyles that call attention to their race and supposed lack of femininity, African American women sought to increase their social acceptability, avoid stereotyping, and establish power for themselves. [28] Aside from the afros donned during the Civil Rights Movement, when relations between blacks and whites in the United States were more strained, this political approach to hairstyling was a must. Women did not want to rock the proverbial boat but they also wanted to be upwardly mobile in a society that doubted their beauty and therefore their competence and their worth. The issues of power and hair are underscored for African American women. Ignoring markers for blackness and femininity has been a luxury that black women could not afford.

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[27] Weitz, "Women and Their Hair: Seeking Power Through Resistance and Accommodation," 678.
[28] Ibid, 682.

Chapter Two: Hell Hath No Fury Like A Slave Shorn (1700-1860)

Before being brought to the Americas via the Transatlantic Slave Trade, peoples of West Africa wore their hair in myriad styles. Hair was never purely cosmetic for West Africans. From as early as the 15th century, hairstyles in West Africa conveyed messages about a person's ethnic identity, wealth, religion, age, and even marital status.

According to Ayanna Byrd and Lori Tharps, for young girls in the Wolof tribe of Senegal, unavailability for marriage was shown by partially shaving the head.[29] Similarly, a recently widowed woman in the Ethiopian Shawan ethnic group who was also unready for courting again would stop styling her hair altogether to dissuade possible suitors and signify her mourning process.[30] For women in certain Nigerian tribes, partially styled or un-styled hair could also indicate madness or questionable morals.[31]

Leaders in these African communities wore the most ornate and complicated hairstyles, many of which took hours or sometimes days to complete.[32] In addition to communicating secular status levels, hair was used for religious purposes. Adherents of Yoruba religions would keep their hair braided in specific hairstyles. Because the hair is the highest point on a person's body, it was "closest to the divine" and used as a communication tool with gods and goddesses as well. Even curses were transferred through hair by plucking away the strands of enemies.

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[29] Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. (New York City: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002), 15-20.
[30] Ima Ebong and A'Lelia Perry Bundles, *Black Hair : Art, Style, and Culture*, (New York City: Universe, 2001), 40-41.
[31] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*,1-13.
[32] Ibid.

Upon arrival in West Africa during the fifteenth century, European explorers were astounded by the complexity or African hair. In addition to that they were in awe of the multiplicity of textures and styles which varied from community to community.

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://www.archivalplatform.org/blog/entry/good_hair/[33]

Figure 1: Women's and Men's Heads in Benyn (Benin) 1602 by Pieter de Marees

In 1602 Pieter de Marees, a Dutch explorer created a plate depicting sixteen different hairstyles that he had observed on the men and women of Benin (Figure 1).

It was clear to these explorers that the styles served a cultural purpose and were very pertinent to the African cultures that they encountered; every style choice was based in identity. Slave captors and tradesmen shaved the heads of the Africans that were to be sold to counter this pride that hair instilled in Africans. The shaving of an African's head was a very high offense given the importance of hair in these communities; the process essentially removed an undesirable aspect of their African identity. Shaved heads also made it very easy to identify new cargo and was thought to be more sanitary by the white captors. Complete removal of hair was especially important because it indicated that the slaves were prisoners of war. If a slave's capture came into question, slave captors would say that all the slaves captured were fairly

[33] Women's heads in Benyn and Men's heads in Benyn - Soldiers; Captains; the Viador). Plate taken from Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea by Pieter de Marees. (originally published, 1602. From White & White 1995).

Shane White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," *The Journal of Southern History* 61.1 (1995): 45–76.

traded prisoners of war although some were not.[34] Some believe that this shaving was the first way explorers tried to control or limit African culture before the slaves' arrival in the New World.

Throughout the 200 years that slavery was present in the United States, the hairstyling practices of slaves varied. We can glean from runaway slave advertisements, WPA narratives and statements from slaveholders that once in the colonies, slaves were allowed to style their hair as they wished. [35] However, slaves did very strenuous work for endless hours in extreme temperatures; hairstyling, for vanity or communication, was not a major priority for many slaves—especially in the early years of slavery in America. [36]

During the 15th and 16th centuries, scalp diseases like lice and ringworm were common. The conditions of slave quarters were dirty and cleaning supplies like soaps were not supplied to slaves. Tools like African styling combs did not exist either. Instead, slaves had to improvise. It was with this improvisation and creativity with the supplies that were available to them that slaves began styling their hair more often.[37] Slaves were also given more time to improvise and take control of their hair starting in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Owners encouraged slaves to attend church on Sunday, and they were given the "Lord's Day" to prepare for and attend

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[34] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 12..
[35] "Runaway Slave Ads." *Baltimore County, Maryland Runaway Slave Ads*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2013.
In an ad in the Baltimore Sun 1853 for a slave named Basil White, it reads:"has a full suite of hair, wears it sometime plaited and at other times combed out."
[36] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 18.
[37] Ibid, 10

services and rest while observing the Sabbath. [38] Enslaved people took this time to learn more about their hair and engage in communal hairstyling practices.

James Williams, a 72 year old ex slave, revealed to a WPA interviewer that the "onlies time the slaves had to comb their hair was on Sunday. They would comb and roll each other's hair and the men cut each other's hair. That all the time they got. They would roll the children's hair or keep it cut short one [sic]." [39] Charlie Hudson, an 80 year old former slave, gave a similar account of his Sunday hair experiences. "Sundays… de old folks stayed homes and look one another's haids over for nits and lice. Whenever dey found anything, dey mashed it twist dey finger and thumb and went ahead searchin'. Den de womans wropt each other's hair de way it was to stay fixed 'til next Sunday. [40]

Like European slave captors, whites in the New World were also aware of the importance of hair to slaves. Sketches, engravings, paintings, and accounts of slave hair rituals were not uncommon. Benjamin Henry Latrobe's watercolor painting, "Preparations for the Enjoyment of a Fine Sunday Evening," depicts four black slaves styling one another's hair on a Sunday morning (Figure 2). Latrobe, a British architect and designer of the United States Capitol, produced the work in 1797. It shows one slave sitting on a barrel getting his hair braided by another slave. Two other slaves can be observed to the right of the hair braiding couple, one shaving another's face—presumably for church and the coming week of work.

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[38] White and White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,"68.
[39] WPA Slave Narratives." N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Mar. 2013.
[40] Ibid.

When observing slaves styling hair on a Sunday in Natchez, Mississippi in 1830, American author, Joseph H. Ingraham, called it an "interesting scene. He noted that "in every cabin the men are shaving and dressing—the women, arrayed in their gray muslins, are arranging their frizzy hair, in which they take no little pride, or investigating the condition of their children's heads—the old people neatly clothed are quietly conversing or smoking about their doors.[41]

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://www.mdhs.org/digitalimage/preparations-enjoyment-fine-sunday-evening [42]

Figure 2: "Preparations for the Enjoyment of A Fine Sunday Evening" by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, 1797.

It seems then, that men and women generally their hair kept under a scarf during the work week but on Sundays they would wear it out with great pride. This ingenious technique kept hair out of the way, especially if the slave worked in the field where it could be cumbersome. Therefore, Sundays were not only a day of spiritual renewal and rest—they were also used to create community by styling one another's hair and trading hair styling tips and techniques.[43]Gus Fester, a former slave, noted that the women woud roll up their hair with pieces of cotton to create a "natural, curly" look for Sundays. Bits of string , twine, and other materials were also used to wrap up and partially straighten or loosen slave women's curls

[41] White and White,"Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *,"* 68.
[42] Latrobe, Benjamin H. *Preparations for the Enjoyment of a Fine Sunday Evening*. 1797. Maryland Historical Society. *Http://www.mdhs.org/digitalimage/preparations-enjoyment-fine-sunday-evening*.
[43] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 18.

during the week before being unwrapped for the Sabbath or other special occasions.[44] Literary sources like *Mama* Day by Gloria Naylor also speak to the tying techniques that slaves employed in styling their hair. Naylor writes of the plantation of Willow Springs in 1823, where the little girls wore their "all braided up with colored twine."[45] Color twine may have served a double purpose in deocrating the hair and curling for Sundays or special occasions.

In order to achieve these specific styles, slaves had to be creative and work with what resources were allotted to them. Slaves began repurposing common household and plantation items to create hair products and tools.[46] As demonstrated by Gus Fester's coment about rolling hair with cotton, slaves were unafraid to be adventurous and use whatever was at their disposal to maintain some sense of pride and identity while living as chattel.

Often a sheep's fleece "carding tool" was used to comb through and untangle hair. Apprarently, the carding tools acutually worked better for their hair because they had wooden handles and strong wire teeth. The kitchen staples, bacon grease and occasionallly butter were used to condition the hair and make it more managable and shiny for straightening. Kerosene and cornmeal were makeshift shampoos—adept at lifting dirt from the scalp—and slave women often used coffee as hair dye. [47]

The styles that the slaves created with these tools were also of great importance and were indicative of the slave's position in relation to whites. The hairstyles slaves wore were

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[44] Stephanie Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South 1830-1861," *The Journal of Southern History* 68.3 (2002): 564-565.
[45] Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*, (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 4.
[46] White and White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," 68.
[47] Owens, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair," 24–51.

especially important to slave women as they sought to maintain their dignity in the face of sexual and physical abuse from their masters, their masters' wives, and their own husbands. The styles that slaves wore were often determined by the type of work they did, their position in the hierarchy of the plantation, and their skin color and hair texture.[48]

Slaves who worked outside would wear their hair covered with straw hats or rags to protect their scalps from the sun and keep their hair out of the sun throughout the work week. Under the rags, slaves styled their hair in coiffures appropriate for church. Slaves who performed housekeeping duties and had more direct contact with the white heads of household would mimic white hairstyles. Male slaves would shape their hair into styles that looked like the wigs that were so popular amongst men during the 1700s or used wigs themselves if they could acquire them.[49]

Women kept their hair neat and tidy by braiding it in patterned plaits that were likely modeled after the styles created in some West African communities. Other women straightened their hair by combing it out with fleecing cards and then wrapping and covering it to make it more manageable and easy to mimic white women's hair styles. Not only did hair need to be neat when interacting with whites as a sign of respect but slave women, probably carrying some African traditions with them into the late days of slavery in the United States, associated loose hair with loose morals or insanity. This idea was popular in several Africa countries but in the Mende culture of Sierra Leone especially. Slave women probably carried

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[48] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story,* 18.
[49] Patton, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?," 24–51.

these expectations about what their masters would like best and also subconsciously brought their cultural expectations into their hairstyling too. [50]

In the 1800s there were also observations and accounts of slave women adorning their hair with colorful scarves. Some scholars like Stephanie Camp believe that scarves were worn to "accentuate [a slave woman's] originality; these women would often wear their head wraps to the outlaw parties that they ran away to attend and other special occasions.[51] Sometimes scarves would serve as a finishing touch to a Sunday outfit.[52] Likewise, scarves also served for protection from dust and debris.[53] Certain states also made hair coverings a requirement for slave women. South Carolina's Negro Act of 1735 forbade "females of color" from displaying their hair and required "their hair [be] bound in a handkerchief." New Orleans had a similar ordinance. During the nineteenth century the New Orleans dress code required enslaved and "free" black women to wear head wraps. These head covering laws were most likely created out of sexual competition between black women and white women and to maintain control over black bodies during slavery.[54]

While female slaves may have worn scarves for ornamentation, protection, or by law, the donning of scarves may have also been used to cover up the newly shorn heads of slave

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[50] White and Graham White, "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,"50. *JSTOR*.
[51] Camp, "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South 1830-1861," 564-565.
[52] White, *Ar'n't I a Woman ?* , 143
[53] Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 1-12.
[54] Helen B Griebel,"The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols," Cornell Art Design and Visual Thinking, n.d.

women. Head shaving became a form of punishment toward the end of slavery—especially for male and female runaways. However, head shaving and hair cropping was also used on female slaves to reduce sexual competition between mistresses and the slaves. Feeling threatened by slave women with long, straight hair, mistresses would purposefully keep the slave women's hair short to dissuade sexual encounters between slaves and their masters and to "offset [their] likeness to one another.[55] These white women were usually jealous of how similar a slave's hair was to her own and saw her as sexual competition. This fear was only aggravated by the illicit relationships that male slave owners forced their female slaves into. By shaving a slave woman's hair, white women were able to maintain some sense of order and power, attempt to discourage infidelity, and "humble" the slaves.[56] These actions only served to further complicate the hair and skin hierarchies that were emerging amongst slaves and free blacks. White and White contend that, just as it was used to strip slaves of their identity coming into the new world, head shaving was used to strip slaves of their pride and identity.[57] Wearing scarves was a response to these attempts at control.

In spite of the cruel punishment's doled out by jealous mistresses, the lack of proper styling tools, and the skin and hair hierarchies that always made them question their worth, African American slaves, females especially, found ways to exhibit their beauty, express their femininity and therefore exhibit power. When their hair was sheared in an attempt to remove their identities upon their arrival in America, they found new ways express their identities and

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[55] White, Deborah Gray. *Ar'n't I a Woman ?* New York: W.W. Norton, 1999. 42. Print.
[56] Ibid
[57] White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *The Journal of Southern History* 61.1 (1995): 68. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Mar. 2013.

showcase pride in their features. They sought control over their hair by repurposing common tools found in houses and on plantations and farms to make hair care products. Women in particular continued this cultural transmission of hair care by adopting Sundays as a day to style one another's hair.

Not only did this renewed pride in hair empower the slaves, it seemed to challenge the power of white mistresses, who attempted to suppress this delight. Nevertheless, female slaves exhibited power once again by covering their short hair with colorful scarves that were tied and styled in beautiful and attractive ways. This careful styling embodied power and it embodied femininity and beauty as well. Hair was grown long when permitted. It was intentionally styled, with hours dedicated to styling practices. African American slave women's hair was distinctly different from men's. Slaves mimicked white styles: slave women made early attempts at straightening their hair, suppressing their hair's natural kinkiness, or coloring. Nonetheless, we can conclude that this accommodation to white beauty standards was a bid at power, not a sign of self hatred.

Slaves made great progress with their hair given the limited time they had to dedicate to styling and the rudimentary tools and dangerous concoctions that they used during such a desperate era. Male and female slaves wore their hair long but women, contending with white power and masculine power, truly made the styling process their own. They styled their hair to exhibit their power and beauty. When their hair was stripped away, female slaves styled scarves instead. This tenacious commitment to gaining respect, freedom, and identity would

stick with African American women as the Civil War came and went, slaves were emancipated, and the age of the New Negro began.

Chapter Three: The New Negro; Nappy Need Not Apply (1895-1929)

As America was transitioning from the 19th to the 20th century, African Americans were making an even more significant shift. Some thirty years after the end of the Civil War and their emancipation from slavery, African Americans were stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Although finally free, most blacks were still dependent on whites for resources and opportunities. African Americans lacked a political and economic voice because whites detested their presence in society. Many whites did all they could to keep blacks dependent upon their power. With few advocates among whit government officials, merchants, scholars, and business men, African Americans became more determined to push their way into society and claim their equal freedom; with this the New Negro was born. [58]

Due to high levels of "miscegenation" during slavery, some blacks were actually able to make a transition into white society. Light skinned "mulattoes" with European features and straighter hair passed into whiteness and abandoned blackness forever as demonstrated in the novel *Passing* (1929) by Nella Larsen or films like John M. Stahl's *Imitation of Life*. However, passing was not a viable alternative for most. The New Negro movement emerged as a means

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[58] The term "New Negro" was popularized by the title of Alain Locke's book *The New Negro* (1925). As such, some believe the New Negro movement hit its peak after World War I and during the Harlem Renaissance. However, Booker T. Washington published a book in 1901 titled *A New Negro for A New Century: An Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race.* Given the fact that the term New Negro existed as early as 1901 and rhetoric had its start in the very late 1890s and early 20th century, I believe it is helpful for this study to focus on the earliest days of the New Negro movement and the perceptions of hair that emerged during that time.

Booker T. Washington, Fannie B. Williams, and Norman W. Barton, *A New Negro for a New Centruy: An Accurate and Up-to-Date Record of the Upward Struggles of the Negro Race*, (Chicago: American House, 1900), *A New Negro For A New Century*, University of Connecticut Libraries.

Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 27-28.

of maintaining racial pride, fully participating in American society, and gaining access to power and opportunities. Ayanna Byrd calls the New Negro a "hybrid of retaliation and pride—retaliation against the negative black images and caricatures put forth by white society about blacks [and] pride in achievements and respectability that so many members of the race were attaining, despite tremendous odds."[59]

Alain Locke's, *The New Negro*, was the manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement. The anthology of works, published in 1925, helped define and characterize the social and artistic goals of the New Negro Movement. In the first full essay of the anthology, titled "The New Negro," Locke contrasts the Old Negro with the New Negro or the "Negro of to-day" and characterizes the New Negro as a vibrant and resilient response to the years of slavery and subordination that American blacks had to endure. He says that the notion of the Old "Negro" has become increasingly less appealing to modern "Negroes." Instead, he observes more self-pride and independence in the group, with people shaking off the idea that blacks must be dependent on whites. Blacks, he says, are less "touchy" and more open to scientific inquiry, objective, and free to help others. Finally, he notes that because there is more racial pride among blacks, they no longer feel as though they have a "social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution." Instead they contemporary "Negro" wants to be whom he is, fully—good and bad alike. Locke concludes that there is no longer a blind trust of "freedom, education, and money" to improve social circumstances. No, the New Negro seemed

[59] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story,* 38.

galvanized to enter society by making a name for the black race and shaking off old idealisms that, Lock asserts, were ultimately holding the New Negro back.[60]

In the search for solutions to the Negro problem, the New Negro seeks to become a collaborator and active participant in American society. Locke heralds in this "spiritual Coming of Age" by urging the Negro to take his place in the American democratic process and embark on the development of the race through engagement with American society, arts, and letters.[61]

The early hopes of the movement were that the New Negro would be able to assimilate with such grace that white society would have no choice but to accept blacks. This was an attempt to make whites comfortable enough with blacks so that black American might rise through the ranks and eventually achieve equal status. Blacks did everything in their power to emulate and embrace European and white American standards of appearance and behavior. Byrd, in *Hair Story*, goes so far as to describe the New Negro as a "survival tactic."[62] The New Negro movement was fueled by the black elite who had the most to lose were they to fail in becoming assimilated with white society. These elites pushed that the black race could be uplifted by assimilation, constructing "public images" of New Negroes, and encouraging non-elite blacks to assimilate in order to change their status as well.[63]

Not surprisingly, one of the New Negro movment's main means of assimilating was through hair and the black woman became the figurehead for this endeavor. Practices like physiognomy have historically perpetuated the belief that within beauty was morality, that

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[60] Alain Locke, "The New Negro," in *The New Negro,* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 10-13.
[61] Ibid
[62] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story,*38.
[63] Noliwe M. Rooks, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, (Princeton: Rutgers University Press, 1996). 80.

beauty often connoted inner worth. Maxine Leeds Craig argues that this type of judgement was the most pronounced at the turn of the century, when "demonstrating the beauty of the race was tantamount to establishing the inner worth of the race."[64] The black women who possessed Wietz's definitition of conventional attractiveness would be the perfect person to represent how respectable blackness could be.

Elite women took their newfound responsibility very seriously. In 1896 the National Association of Colored Women was formed to counter false ideas about black women's sexuality and fight lynching with protest. However, these women's clubs swiftly afopted appearance and beauty as a platform and focus; they hoped that emphasizing self pride and grooming would fight stereotypes. Members presented themselves with the utmost pride and encouraged non-members to do so as well. "Having their hair straightened and styled to motionless perfection [was a way] of displaying dignity. Grooming was used to convey personal and racial pride."[65] As these socially-focused women went out to serve their communities, they carried these ideals with them.

The New Negro woman embraced "good" grooming and Eurocentric beauty ideals so much because she realized that many whites judged the entire black population based on the behavior of a few. These club women believed that if they could ensure that most black women were presenting themselves respectably, the respect for the black race amongst whites would increase. The lightening of skin was possible due to skin lightening creams that made their way

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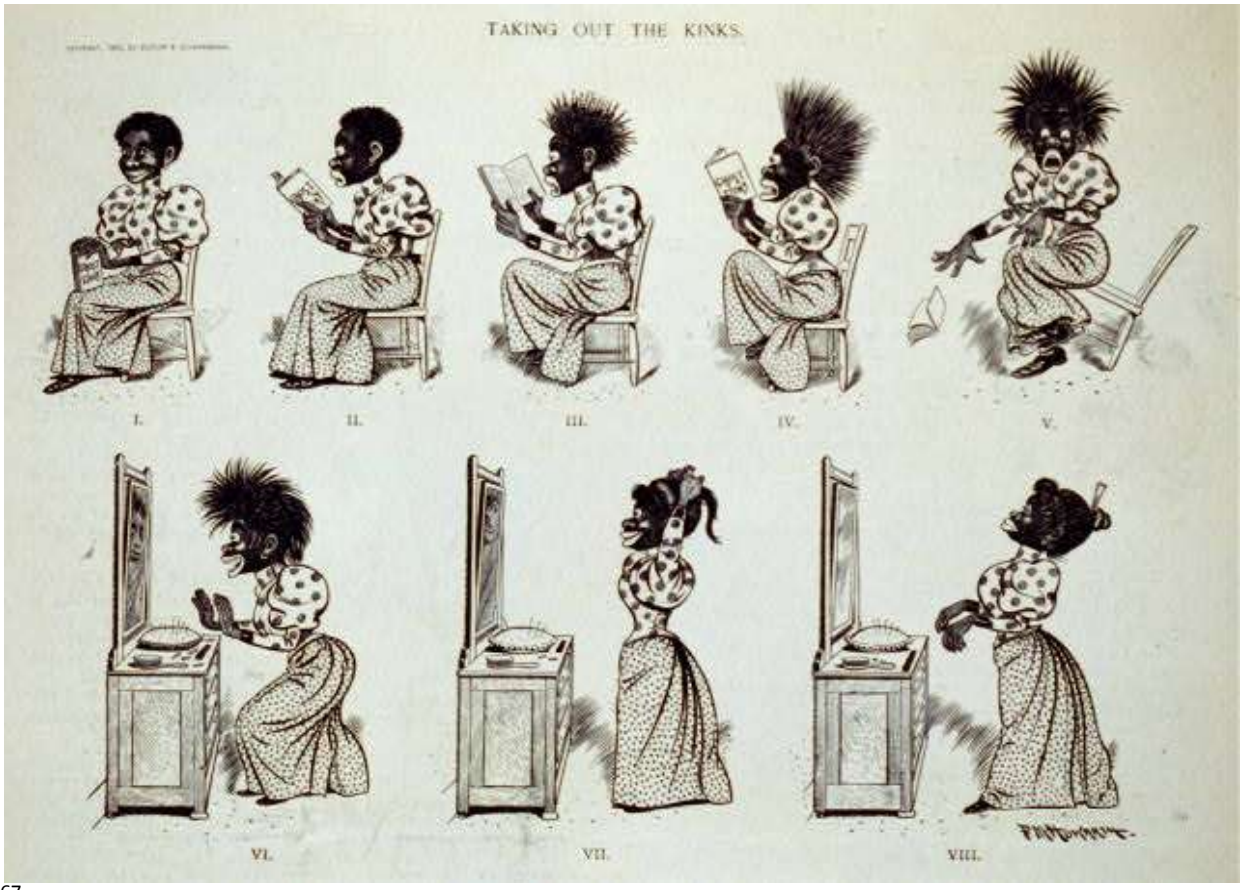
[64] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen*, 49.
[65] Ibid, 34

onto the market during this time. Nevertheless, they were not miracle workers and could not make a black woman white. What could bring a black woman one step closer to whiteness, to social mobility, to education, to respect, and to power (or so they believed) was the straightening of hair.[66] As such, the African American hair care business was born out of recognition of the the need for group respectability and the high demand for products that would make conventially attractive straight hair accessible to all.

With illustrations in the mainstream press like "Taking Out the Kinks" (Figure 3), from an 1895 issue of *Puck* magazine by F.M. Howarth, it comes as no surprise that black women would be clamoring for opportunities to straighten their hair and potentially improve their lifestyles. Although the engraving is supposed to be a humorous portrayal of a woman after reading a "hair raising" ghost story, it has the feel of a chart illustrating the evolution of man. A seated black woman with a short, kinky hair style is scarred straight—taking on a new look, new posture, and perhaps a new level of respectability. White readers may have seen it as a lighthearted joke at the expense of the spooked "Negress" but black readers may have seen this as further encouragement to move away from kinky, natural styles.

66 Ibid. 26.



[67] **Figure 3: F.M. Howarth, "Taking Out the Kinks," *Puck* magazine July 3 p. 307, 1895. Library of Congress**

Occassions like comb parties and paper bag parties also encouraged hair straightening and skin lightening. These events, held by fair-skinned elites were highly selective, humiliating, and demeaning to those who could not gain entry. One's skin had to be lighter than a paper

[67] "Taking out the Kinks" 1895 engraving from *Puck* magazine

Howarth, F. M. "Taking Out the Kinks." Cartoon. *Taking Out The Kinks*. Library of Congress, 1895. Web.

bag and one's hair had to be straight enough to allow a fine-toothed comb to pass through it in order to gain entry.[68]

The women and men who chose to capitalize on the new trend of straight hair via business were black as well. They often experimented on their own hair and maintained a commitment to their communities and philanthropy long after becoming successful—demonstrating the New Negro idealism of uplifting the race and fighting the nappiness that they thought was holding them back. One of the first successful African American hair chemists was Annie Minerva Turnbo Malone, head of the Poro company. Malone developed a "miracle cure" aimed at short and stubborn hair in 1900 and began selling her wares door-to-door. After much success as a door-to-door sales woman she decided to expand her business and open up opportunites to other women with entrepreneurial spirits by training them to be door-to-door saleswomen as well. When the 1941 pamplet, *Poro College School of Beauty Culture, Hair, and Toilet Preparations* was published there were over eighteen Poro college and training branches in existance from Atlantic City to Los Angeles.[69]

Poro College hoped that its graduates would contribute to the economic betterment of "race women," use their training to elevate and enhance their lives, become more self-suficient and skillful, and gain a better understanding of business. Poro hoped to awaken some thing

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[68] Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 165.
In his claim about comb partteis and paper bag parties, Harris is citing Willard B. Gatewood.

Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 14.

[69] "Poro College, School of Beauty Culture, Hair and Toilet Preparations" 1941.

within the women by inspring to be successful and embody beauty at the same time. Graduates were helt to a very high standard in that they always were expected to exemplify "self respect, physical and mental cleanliness" so that they could not only help themselves, but also help humanity and other "race women" in particular.[70] The college succeeded in enabling their students to meat those goals. Poro saleswomen were paid well, were offered incentives for their work, and even had continuing education opportunities with the chance to earn degrees and certificates with the college and other training facilities. In fact, according to a Poro College produced pamplet, Poro College of Beauty Culture pioneered the graduation for beauty schools. For the first time, women graduating from a beauty school were allowed to wear the elaborate robes and hats reserved for academic commencement ceremonies. Malone also made it a point to emphasize the graduation robes' connection to Africa as a "symbol of our Ethiopian heritage—exemplified by Haile Selassie I."[71]

Making such a point to Americanize, instill pride in racial progress, and still identify with Africa is very characteristics of New Negro ideals. Women who worked for Poro were given the opportunity to study and train in "immaculate facilities," represent an extensive line of products, engage in their community and spiritual development (the main college campus held religious services before classes), and ultimately elevate their position in society. Working for Poro was one of the first ways that black women could make a "viable" salary without being a domestic.[72] With this, the women's pride swelled, black communities were strengthened, and

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[70] "Poro Hair & Beauty Culture,"1922, Poro College.
[71]" Poro College, School of Beauty Culture, Hair and Toilet Preparations," 1941.
[72] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, 36.

this New Negro identity was made accessible to more people. These schools and businesses created an aura of racial pride that was contagious. [73]

Madame C.J. Walker worked for Poro before establishing her own eponymous hair care and cosmetics company. She found that Poro products wer not solving her hair growth issues. Walker claimed that in 1905 she had a dream in which God revealed the ingredients of a hair growth product to her. After running a very successful door-to-door business from Denver, Colorado, she expanded to mail orders and moved the headquarters of Madame C. J. Walker Cosmetics to Pittsburgh. Walker's product line included shampoos, specialized products for the temples and dandruff, pomades, and facial cosmetics. However, Walker found the most success with the "Walker system" which spearheaded the "shampoo-press-and-curl" method of hairstyling. This system included a hot comb. Although Madame Walker did not invent the hot comb, her system was responsible for introducing it to much of black America.

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image in:
Ebong, Ima, and A'Lelia Perry Bundles. *Black Hair : Art, Style, and Culture*. Universe, 2001. 34. Print [74]

Figure 4: Madame C.J. Walker Cosmetics Advertisement, c. 1960

As evidenced by advertisements from her cosmetics company (Figure 4), Madame C.J. Walker not only had a vertitable hair and cosmetics empire with a wide variety of products, she also promoted New Negro idealism with her marketing campaigns. Her advertisements

[73] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?, 34-35*

[74] Madame C.J. Walker Cosmetics. Advertisement, *Walker/Bundles Family Collection*, c. 1960.: 34.

featured predominately light complected black women with straight hair, delicate noses, and small lips. Their hair is perfectly coiffed in elegant, straightened waves. The women in some of her other advertisements could have even passed for white.

In addition to the visual examples of the New Negro woman smiling and promting straight hair and respectability, there is also the rhetoric of respectability in the advertisements. The word choice is worth noting because it affirms and reifies the beauty of the models that emody the New Negro ideal (and therefore conventional attractiveness) while also countering critics of the New Negro Movement. Critics like Marcus Garvey, who has been credited with saying, "do not remove the kinks from your hair, remove them from your brain," loathed the notion of black women changing themselves to assimilate to white beauty ideas. [75]

Walker responded to these claims of assimilation while expressing positivity toward hair straightening and grooming practices by saying "bring out your own NATURAL beauty" in her advertisements. One part of an advertisement (Figure 4) that was probably produced in 1960 reads "some women go on vainly hoping they can 'become beautiful' by imitating other women… by 'covering themselves up' with plain, ordinary, cosmetics."[76] These statements are a direct objection to the idea that black women are assimilating or imitating by hairstyling. Instead, Madame Walker insists that they are only enhancing their beauty. Even her great-great-granddaughter proudly lauds the fact that Madame C.J. Walker never used the word "straight" in her advertisements—saying that her primary focus was instilling pride in her

[75] "Marcus Garvey: Keep the Kinks Quote," *NaturallyCurlycom Marcus Garvey Keep the Kinks Quote*.
[76] Madame C.J. Walker Cosmetics. Advertisement, *Walker/Bundles Family Collection* n.d.: n. pag.

customers.[77] Her argument might have been stronger had her models been more diverse in terms of skin color and facial features and therefore reflected the true diversity of the black population. Nevertheless, her critics and the flaws in her marketing did not stop women from voraciously embracing this New Negro style and the cosmetics that created it.

Garrett Morgan is another entrepreneur who emerged around the same time as Madame C.J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone and should be credited with truly promoting hair straightening techniques. Best known for inventing the hooded gas mask and automatic traffic signals, Garrett Augustus Morgan aslo invented the early hair relaxer. The story goes that Morgan was working on inventing a lubricant for fast-moving sewing machines that often became overheated due to friction. After several hours of experimentation he decided to wipe his hands on a fur cleaning cloth and retire for the day. However, upon his return he discovered that the hairs on the fur cloth had been straightened out . He proceeded to test the lubricant on the hair of his neighbor's dog, reportedly a curly-haired Airedale breed, and himself. [78]With the confirmation that the concoction did succcessfully straighten hair, he began marketing it in 1909 as "G.A. Morgan Hair Refining Cream."[79]

As evidenced by the Morgan's advertisements (Figure 5), the company blatantly promoted hair straightenting rather than eluding the issue and using sly marketing techniques like Walker's cosmetics company. Thanks to his revolutionary early hair relaxer Morgan's hair business thrived. He also sold other products, aimed at the New Negro ideal, including but not

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[77] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story, 36.*
[78] Giulia Heiman,"Hair Relaxer: Where Did It Come From and How Does It Work?" *About.com Beauty Supply*.
[79] "Garrett A. Morgan," *Garrett A. Morgan*, IEEE Global History Network.

limited to Morgan's Hair Grower, Morgan's Hair-Lay-Fine Pomade, Morgan's Pressing Gloss, hot combs, and his own line of skin bleach which he called Bleecheen Ointment. The packaging on his products, especially his hair growth and straightening mixtures, depicted presumably light-skinned black women with full, thick , straight hair cascading down their backs – proving once again that New Negro beauty ideals were on the rise (Figure 6).

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/morgan.html [80]

Figure 5: G.A. Morgan's Hair Refining Company Advertisement c.1910

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://www.ric.edu/faculty/rpotter/morgan/morganhair.html [81]

Figure 6: G.A. Morgan's Hair Refining Company Hair Grower label, c. 1900

Perhaps the orginal goal was to approximate white standards of beauty but New Negro women's hair styling slowly morphed into a practice of reclaimnig power overy black imagery and black hair culture. The success of black beauty products and advertising techniques demonstrate the commitment of these black hair care businesses had to black communities, New Negro ideals, and defying perceceptions about the possiblity of black, physical beauty. [82] This is what Shane White and Graham White suggest in *Stylin'.* They argue "mimicking" hair to white standards of beauty was not new nor do they believe that it was an expression of inferiority. Instead, "straightening the hair may be seen as a sign of a defective black

[80] "Garett Augustus Morgan," *Garett Augustus Morgan*, Rhode Island College, n.d.
[81] "Garett Augustus Morgan," *Garett Augustus Morgan*, Rhode Island College, n.d.
[82] Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*, 243.

conciousness but is an integral part of a time-honored creative process."[83] According to White and White, claiming that blacks are simply copying whites denies that hairstyling is a cultural transmission. Today, proponents of this beauty idealism see the straightening comb and relaxer as a paint brush, adding on to a canvas, rather than an earaser, taking away.

No matter the position one takes on hair straigtening during the birth of the New Negro, it is clear that every step of the process was done to secure power and assert femininity. In some ways, these attempts at redefining black hair and blackness were successful. Entrepreneurs like Madame C. J. Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone presented an empowering alternative to housework for hundreds of black women. Their efforts, along with those of many others, led to the uplift of many black communities. Both women could also be considered models of respetable negro women that the Negro Model promoted.

The effectiveness of the hot comb also helped secure conventional attractiveness for the women who used it on their hair, as did Garrett Morgan's invention of the early hair relaxer. The meticulously curled, intentionally styled, ultra-feminine, hairstyles produced by these products meet almost every tenet of conventional hair attractiveness. While the New Negro woman's beauty might not have had such earth-shattering effects on the white community as it's early proponents had hoped, it did empower the black community.

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[83] Shane and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture, from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999),172.

This empowerment, this renewed sense of self following the degrading experience of over three-hundred years of chattel slavery and thirty years of post-bellum apathy from white superiors, must have been refreshing for blacks. African Americans were finally free to make money for themselves, participate in business, and style their hair to fit the latest conventionally attractive trends. Perhaps this positive growth had an impact on their commitment to equality, even following World War II as they secured freedom abroad while being denied it in the United States. With tightening de jure racism restrictions, disgust with the government's lack of support for freedom, and fear for the future fueling their actions, black retired the New Negro and entered the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.

Chapter Four: Kinky Halos (1950-1979)

The afro as an intentionally styled hairdo actually entered the minds of black women in the early 1950s—not the 1960s as is the primary line of thought. Women of the black, bourgeois high-fashion circles adopted the afro with the intent of obtaining healthier hair while also showing solidarity with many African nations that had just gained their independence. Consultant and stylist, Lois Liberty Jones, claims that she broke new ground with the Afro as early as 1952. While most black American women were still wearing their hair in straightened styles during the 1960s, artists like Odetta and Nina Simone were known for their embrace of the natural afro look. This chapter actually borrows its title from a quote by Andrea Benton Rushing about Odetta. Upon seeing her at the Village Gate before the popularization or politicization of the afro had skyrocketed, Rushing said, "I was mesmerized by her stunning frame in [sic] short kinky halo; she had a regal poise that I had never seen in a 'Negro.'"[84]

Around this same time, the Nation of Islam was also preaching the beauty of embracing "dark skin and tightly coiled hair." Maxine Leeds Craig claims that the Nation of Islam actually dedicated a chapter of "one of their standard texts" to the care and keeping of "Kinky Hair." While the Nation of Islam never truly gained mainstream success among African Americans, many of whom would not abandon Christianity for it, the black Muslims' prominent presence in black urban centers still extended an alternative lens of beauty that inspired racial pride amongst many blacks. Between artists such as Miriam Makeba and Abbey Lincoln adopting the afro early on and the Nation of Islam advocating for a full embrace of black beauty, African

[84] Robin D. G Kelley, (1997) "Nap-Time," *Fashion Theory* 1(4), 341.

Americans had the inspiration they needed to take the afro from "curiosity," as Craig terms its presence in 1960, to movement, to trend.[85]

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at: http://books.google.com/books?id=ZDoDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA65&lpg=PA65&dq=should+negro+women+straighten+their+hair&source=bl&ots=dmtbCKdaIU&sig=wQG3fJ0gELqzBNBFTT58JB6wgV0&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Y8htUa7PFpLa9ASWjoHwCg&ved=0CDAQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=should%20negro%20women%20straighten%20their%20hair&f=false [86]

Figure 7: First page of "Negro Digest" 1963 Article, "Should Negro Women Straighten Their Hair?"

"Should Negro Women Straighten Their Hair?," from the August 1963 issue of *Negro Digest*, points to the curiosity and contention surrounding early incarnations of the afro hairstyle. Two women, Helen Hayes King (an American) and Theresa Ogunbiyi (a Nigerian), both contributed to the article and offer very different perspectives on the meaning of the afro. Ogunbiyi saw the afro as a step backward. She noted that she is "all for nationalism" but saw the afro as unnecessarily difficult and time consuming. Ogunbiyi struck down the idea that straightened hair and European dress is assimilationist. Instead, she believed that this inferiority complex carries national pride too far. She envisioned the afro as a means to an end—asserting that it is professional and aids in social progress.[87]

King, like most early afro-wearers, saw the style as an obvious solution to obtaining greater hair health. After trying myriad styles, King happily embraced her natural texture in hopes of growing a long and healthy head of hair. She fascinatingly comments on the large

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[85] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 78.
[86] Helen Hayes King and Theresa Ogunbiyi, "Should Negro Women Straighten Their Hair," *Black World/Negro Digest* 1963 : 65.
[87] Hayes and Ogunbiyi, "Should Negro Women Straighten Their Hair," 65-71.

amount of positive feedback she got from her afro style. However, she notes that most of the compliments came from whites and not from blacks. Her black neighbors and friends viewed her style as shameful and ridiculous.[88] The article even includes a brief statement from a psychiatrist regarding natural hair. Dr. Kermit T. Mehlinger said, "We live in a society where the standards of beauty are white standards. Negro women generally put a high premium on this standard but the genes just won't go along with it. The net result is that a great number of Negro women are bent on achieving impossible standards of beauty."[89]

The acceptance of the afro into mainstream black society was gradual but powerful—quickly progressing from movement to trend. Following jazz artists and early admirers of the afro like Helen Hayes King, college students were the next group to adopt the afro hairstyle. However, rather than picking up the style for aesthetic reasons, their embrace of the afro was highly political and tied to the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist activism that was blossoming on college campuses across the United States.[90] African Americans began referring to themselves as black instead of Negro between 1964 and 1966. Blackness was no longer a scourge; rather it was a source of pride that identified with the afro hairstyle and celebrated kinkiness.[91]

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://books.google.com/books?id=jpdqmtO2IycC&pg=PA51&lpg=PA51&dq=peter+l.+gould+angela+davis+coretta+scott+king&source=bl&ots=XiHV-

[88] Ibid
[89] Ibid
[90] Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen?,* 84.
[91] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story,* 51.

N7xdQ&sig=Eojd3KAfYAgrmIlWIg6ofaKa6dE&hl=en&sa=X&ei=B8ltUYpslMz2BKn4gZgN&ved=0CDMQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=peter%20l.%20gould%20angela%20davis%20coretta%20scott%20king&f=false [92]

Figure 8: Angela Davis (L) and Coretta Scott King (R) in conversation. Photo courtesy Peter L. Gould, c. 1960.

Not every black American welcomed the afro. Even at the height of its popularity during the late 1960s, relaxer sales were on the rise. Many women still wore straightened and arguably less militant styles (Figure 8). Nevertheless, for the grassroots activists of the Civil Rights movement and young people that embraced it, the afro was loud enough, bold enough, and black enough to embody the "I'm black and I'm proud" and "black is beautiful "rhetoric of the day. Devotees of the afro saw the hairstyle as a way of reaching enlightenment, showing racial pride, and differentiating themselves from whites. [93]

The original afro was particularly unique as an historical black hairstyle because it was not always styled to differentiate a woman's hair from a man's. Often, a black woman's afro would be just as round, and wide as her male counterpart's. All that was required to wear these early incarnations of the afro was a pick, to lift the hair from the roots and maintain its shape, and pride in oneself. Kathleen Cleaver, speaking on behalf of the Black Panthers, noted in a 1968 interview that the afro symbolized "a new awareness among black people that their own

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[92] Coretta Scott King, Civil Rights activist wearing a straightened hairstyle and Angela Davis, a Black Power activist wearing an afro. This photo demonstrates the difference in ideals of hair styling among activists. Photo courtesy of Peter L. Gould, c. 1960.

Byrd andTharps, *Hair Story,* 51.

[93] Ibid, 56-63

natural appearance, their physical appearance is pleasing to them."[94] The afro proved to be exactly that—a source of pride. In fact, many activists who did not chose the afro for themselves were criticized and told they were not "black enough."[95]

However, movement quickly progressed to trend and the original meaning of the afro began getting lost in commercialization with the trendiness, hair products, and hair styles, white appropriation and disinterest in black power and civil rights. The money to be made from black hair care was one of the first things that stuck a knife in the afro. As the afro became more common, beauty manufacturers began subverting the original claims and characteristics of the hairstyle. It was supposed to be simple and carefree—a style that did not need the assistance of a slew of products or constant visits to the salon to create. Still, black hair companies began manufacturing glycerin products, like Johnson's Afro Sheen, that would soften the natural texture of the afro.[96] Some brands even sold blowout kits which included a mild relaxer that would allow stylist to maximize the volume of a person's afro. Many people began using blow dryers to create the afro styles. All of this, says hair historian Lloyd Boston, was a "sad contradiction of the style's original intentions." It seemed that afro hair could only be improved by continuing to straighten it.[97]

Styling distinctions that were not previously present also came into the equation. Women wanted to set their afros apart from men's afros; this gender differentiation was also

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[94] *Kathleen Cleaver Explains Why Natural Hair Is Beautiful 1968*, 2011,Film.
[95] Rooks, *Hair Raising.*
[96] *Afro Sheen Commercial 1973*, 2012,Film.

[97] Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story,* 69.

not a part of the original style. Some women took to shaping their afros into a heart in a style called the "Heart and Soul."[98] The "Freedom Burst" was also a popular look for women with afros. It was created by creating two cornrow braids going from the temples to the back of the neck to separate the hair into three bouffant sections.[99] Afro puffs were also popular among black women. The maintenance of many of these style required great amounts of manipulation and agitation to the hair and scalp—possibly compromising the hair's health (Figure 9).

Manuals written about the care of the afro also became popular. These books democratized the afro so that any barber or beautician could aptly style an afro for their customers. They also helped explain the purpose and beauty of the afro to outside observers. *Curly Hair & Black Skin*, written by Willie Morrow in 1973, explained the semantics of styling and good beauty habits for afro wearers. The manual includes chapters on sanitation, "The Rewards of Proper Hair Care," how to style children's hair, and more. There is even a section titled "Ways to Speak to a Black Person about His Hair."[100]

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image in: Kelley, Robin D.G. "Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 1.4 (1997): 348. *JSTOR.* Web.[101]

Figure 9: The "Freedom Burst," A trendy afro style during the 1960s and 1970s

With the advent of hair products that commercialized the afro, claiming that it would make you look younger or like a queen, people of all walks of life began embracing the style all

[98]Kelley, "Nap-Time," *Fashion Theory*,345.
[99] Ibid, 348
[100] Willie Morrow, "Curly Hair and Black Skin," 1973.
[101] Kelley, "Nap Time," *Fashion Theory,* 348.

the while forgetting its ideological roots. [102] Even whites began buying afro wigs, as expressed by Kathleen Cleaver in her interview on the afro, to copy the style. In fact, Ayanna Byrd argues that as white American comfort with the afro grew, the Black Power Movement was losing its fuel. Government sabotage and spying, arrests, and accusations of terrorism killed the cause. With the death of the Black Power Movement the afro became a fad. Once synonymous with black empowerment, even characters in Blaxpoitation films wore the afro all the while perpetuating stereotypes about the negativity that comes from black communities; wearing an afro and acting in a film about pimping or drug dealing completely nullified any remaining meaning that the afro had.[103]

In spite of the afros gradual ascension and devastating fall, the style did have meaning and it certainly embodied power even when it became a trend. The pre-fad afro was created out of a purposeful reclamation of the black aesthetic. It made no apologies for its bold look as adherents of the style sought to embrace black beauty and spread the message of black attractiveness without manipulation to everyone around them. The style was born from a negative relationship with whites and dominant white beauty culture. In the time that the afro remained true to its original ideals it represented difference and an escape from societal norms.

Although the afro did become a trend that crossed racial boundaries and sometimes was associated with negative activities, it can be argued that the style remained steeped in

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[102] *Afro Sheen Commercial 1973*, 2012, Film.

[103] Byrd and Tharps. *Hair Story,* 68-70.

power. The new afro trend sought to make the embrace of natural hair available to everyone. Even whites that donned afro wigs must have seen something positive in the style because they also wore afros with great enthusiasm. Finally being able to embrace extremely curly hair had to have been empowering for white ethnics with hair textures more similar to diasporic Africans. The Jewfro, Jewish afro, and the Itro, Italian afro, were probably at their height at these times. Perhaps critics ought to remember the old adage that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Indeed, some of the meaning was lost, the original style was distorted by styling tools and unnecessary hair products, it was appropriated by whites, and it was used in Blaxploitation films. Nevertheless, it was a style that was nothing like the long flowing locks and feathered shags that were popular among whites at the time. The afro was, in movement and trend, completely different and new.

At the end of the 1970s, the afro and the liberalism of the times were being replaced with straightened flowing hair and the rise of Conservatism. The community empowerment feel of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements was replaced with a "me" mentality. Collective beauty and recognition were becoming less significant as the emphasis on individual attractiveness and success gained imporatance. Black magazines were lauding the professionalism of the straighter, more conservative bobs and fringes and, looking to stay afloat, relaxer sales rose to unforeseen levels during the 1980s. The 1990s brought attempts to "get back to our roots" and popularized braids extensions but even that trend was no match for the strength of the relaxer. It was only in the 2000s that the natural style was able to have its curtain call.

Chapter Five: Say It Loud, Pt. 2 (2006-Present)

African American women's recent embrace of natural hair has not been studied in-depth on a scholarly level. However, op-ed articles, blogs, news segments, YouTube videos, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and documentary films dedicated to the black woman's pursuit of natural hair have exploded onto the horizon during the past 8 years. Women began embracing natural hair, following the rise and fall of the afro in the 1970s, long before 2006. However, for the purposes of this paper 2006 will be a starting date. 2006 was chosen because it is the year before relaxer sales in the United States began to plummet—as statistic that undoubtedly points to the rise of natural hair.[104]

Between 2006 and 2011 sales of hair straightening kits have dropped by 17 percent. Even the number of black women who report wearing their hair natural has increased from 26 percent in 2010 to 36 percent in 2011.[105] Black hair salons are starting to offer natural hair services to keep their doors open and many entrepreneurial women like Karen Tappin of Karen's Body Beautiful, Lisa Price of Carol's Daughter, and Miko and Titi Branch of Miss Jessie's have created a new natural hair care niche in black beauty manufacturing. It is clear that natural hair is on the rise but there are more questions to be answered. This final chapter will seek to determine whether this upsurge of natural hair is trend or movement or something else, and examine how hair, even in this erroneously labeled "post-racial" time continues to signify power and beauty.

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[104] Healy,"Natural Hair Is Making Waves Among Black Women."
[105] Ibid

"Yeah, this isn't a trend," said Zina Saro-Wiwa in her short film "Transition," as she touched her newly cropped "teeny-weeny-afro" in awe. Saro-Wiwa made the original decision to cut off all her hair to a short Caesar style for a video installation; before her "big chop" she was critical of natural hair-- thinking it was only a trend, was ugly, and would make her feel and become less attractive. It was supposed to be a temporary fix and she had full intentions of returning to her favorite hairstyle of shoulder-length braided extensions as soon as she had the chance. However, as she waited for her hair to grow something happened. She fell in love with her natural texture, left her hair natural, and decided to create the short film "Transition" to briefly explore her own relationship with hair and speak with other women about their relationship with their hair.

Saro-Wiwa makes the bold, and often controversial, statement that the sudden embrace of natural hair is not a trend. [106]Instead, she believes that the embrace of one's natural hair is highly personal and capable of changing one's "relationship with the entire body." When she asked some of the women in her film why they chose to wear natural hair again (if they had not been natural all their lives) their responses were all rooted in choice. It was not a question of being black enough or trying to make a militant statement. On the contrary, the reasons stated were highly political and reflected many of the reasons that the earliest afro-wearers of the 1950s had—they wanted to ensure hair heath, they wanted to be

[106] Saro-wiwa, Zina, "OP-DOCS; Black Women's Transitions to Natural Hair," *The New York Times*.

freed from dominant ideals about conventional attractiveness, and they wanted to experience hairstyling that worked for them and not against them.[107]

Some cultural critics like Kobena Mercer are careful about using the word "natural" because even in its natural state hair is "always shaped or reshaped by social convention and symbolic intervention."[108] This leads many to question the staying power of natural hair. If it is a trend it could be here today and gone tomorrow. Trends have a rather short lifespan, are quickly adopted, and, normally, fizzle just as fast. Many people, even those with natural hair, believe this warm embrace of kinky textures it is just a trend, influenced by the various celebrities that have stepped forward to profess their love of natural hair such as Viola Davis who, at the Oscars in 2012, arrived on the red carpet with a "Teeny Weeny Afro" after only being seen in straight wigs and with straight hair.[109] Other cultural events also lead some people to characterize natural hair as a trend. Music is another example, in his music video for his R&B single, "I Invented Sex/Say Ah," Trey Songz seduces a woman kinky natural hair.[110] Natural hair has even found its way onto the runways with many models during Fall 2012's fashion week wearing afro wigs and natural afros as well[111].

Nevertheless, labeling the natural hair boom as a trend is an understatement. If we consider the fact that relaxer sales have been dropping since 2006—this "trend" is going eight

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[107] Ibid
[108] Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," *new formations*, 38.
[109] Oliver, Dana. "Viola Davis Wears Her Natural Hair At The 2012 Oscars (PHOTO, POLL)." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com.
[110] "Trey Songz - I Invented Sex/Say Ah [OFFICIAL VIDEO]," *YouTube*.
[111] Vogue Italia, noted that many models on the Fall 2012 runways were wearing their hair natural. Carlos, Marjon,"Natural Hair Trend," *Vogue.it*,Conde Nast Enterprises.

years strong. Another consideration is the fact that many women are creating vast social networks, organizing meet-ups, publishing blogs, creating petition, and making music among other things all in the name of natural hair. Natural hair has risen to popularity fairly quickly but the boom has also created considerable cultural shifts. Due to these cultural shifts, the other side of the argument claims the natural hair boom is a movement.

In labeling the natural hair boom as a movement, one must consider the definition of a movement. Movements are defined by their efforts to dramatically change the direction of society. Social movements utilize collective activities to impede or promote progress in a society.[112] Betty Garman Robinson, a member of SNCC and current union organizer, believes that social movements are true movements when they meet the following criteria:

> Belief that what they have can be better
>
> Belief that change is possible
>
> Fear that not acting to change things will mean things get worse
>
> Courage in the face of sanctions for violation of rules
>
> Inability to meet their own needs and aspirations within existing power relations
>
> Belief that existing power relations are corrupt, bad, etc and must be changed for the better
>
> When the dominant group or (like religion or nation) doesn't represent them[113]

The natural hair boom, in fact, embodies many of the characteristics outlined by Robinson, in addition to fitting the classical sociological definition for a movement. The natural hair boom embodies a little bit of trend and a little bit of movement. Still, the reasons for

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[112] Johnathan Christiansen,"Four Stages of Social Movements," *EBSCOHost*, EBSCO Research Starters, 2009.
[113] Betty G. Robinson, "Why People Do Challenge Their Systems."

adopting natural hair are varied, everyone who has natural hair is not involved in the movement or a "slave" to the trend, and much of the activism around natural hair is done individually and not as a group. Therefore, the natural hair boom is a collective experience. It is highly political and still rooted in choice and power but the boom is neither a movement nor a trend.

Collective experiences are an alternative to the group identity politics that were characteristics of most movements that arose after 1960. These causes (civil rights, women's rights, immigrant rights) were fueled by common goals. Now, new and emerging collective experience still maintain group identity and common goals but there are also myriad goals fueling the organizing as well. There are few guidelines for these new collective experiences, instead the varying approaches to collective experiences allow them to have a broad reach—although some are critical of how impactful a broad reach can be on other women and especially society as a whole. Personalized collective experiences arise not only from the growing "me" mentality of society with the conservative backlash and decline of group loyalties but also social media.[114]

Women in this collective experience are utilizing social media, hair meet-ups, books, and word-of-mouth to work toward the objective of embracing a texture that has been called militant, ugly, and unprofessional for several hundred years while also accomplishing personal

[114] W. Lance Bennett, "The Personalization of Politics Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 644.1 (2012): 20– 39. *ann.sagepub.com.proxy.library.emory.edu*.

goals for their hair. The natural hair boom is working is in response to cultural moments like the offensive cover of *The New Yorker* which depicts Michelle Obama looking very militant with an afro and an assault weapon strapped to her back (Figure 9).[115] The boom strikes back at the editor of *Glamour* who, in her slideshow "The Do's and Don'ts of Corporate Fashion," decided it would be appropriate to show a woman wearing an afro as a "don't" and then proceed to discuss the unprofessional look of dreadlocks.[116] The boom also seeks to address the fact that more and more studies are finding that relaxers have negative effects on women's health. One recent study found that chemical relaxer use is linked to uterine fibroids and early puberty. [117] [118] Whether or not its adherents protest *all* the things listed above, it can be concluded that the collective movement of the natural hair boom is about the women who possess the hair and not the dominant norms that have tried to control it.[119]

IMAGE REDACTED DUE TO COPYRIGHT. View image at:
http://www.npr.org/blogs/newsandviews/2008/07/satirical_or_offensive_you_dec.html[120]

Figure 9: "The Politics of Fear" by Barry Blitt, July 21, 2008 *The New Yorker* cover

The natural hair boom has great intentions but it has its flaws as well because it shows some signs of embracing conventional attractiveness. One way that some members of the natural hair movement are embracing conventional attractiveness is with curl typing and curl

[115] Geoffrey Bennett, "Satirical or Offensive? You Decide," *NPR*.
[116] Moe, "'Glamour' Editor To Lady Lawyers: Being Black Is Kinda A Corporate "Don't"," *Jezebel*, Gawker Media, n.d.
[117] "Childhood Hair Product Use and Earlier Age at Menarche in a Racially Diverse Study Population: A Pilot Study," *National Center for Biotechnology Information*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 21 June 2011.
[118] Madame Noire, "In the News| Uterine Fibroids and Early Puberty Linked to Chemical Relaxers," *Confessions of A Blog Vixen*.
[119] Saro-wiwa, "OP-DOCS; Black Women's Transitions to Natural Hair." *The New York Times*.
[120] Bennett, "Satirical or Offensive? You Decide." *NPR*.

hierarchies. In the blog, Beyond Black and White, Jamila Akil notes her early obsession with bringing out a curl pattern when she first went natural.[121] Andre Walker developed his curl typing system in 1997 by taking the standard hairdresser texture classes and expanding them to fit in curly and kinky textures as well. Walker's system includes four hair types: straight or type 1, wavy or type 2, curly or type 3, and kinky or type 4.[122] His system is problematic because it associates straight hair with the number 1, a common symbol of top rank (i.e. 1st place), and kinkier hair with a lower status. This could be due to cultural constructions of beauty and the current hair typing system. Women that do not possess a natural curl pattern are categorized as 4b's and 4c's, while those with looser wavy to curly textures are anywhere from a 2a to a 4a.

Black women are also likely to hearken back to older ideals that curlier hair might mean that one had a more diverse lineage that might include more Native American or White ancestry. Curly hair, looser curls, and more defined curls are considered more beautiful than hair that lacks a curl pattern altogether or has a very minimal natural curl patter. This avoidance of kinkiness and emphasis of curls and waves is in direct alignment with what Wietz suggests is conventional female attractiveness.

In addition to an obsession with curls, many women, including the author of this study, refuse to wear their hair in a truly natural state—natural being straight out of the shower, air dried, without product and manipulation. It is accepted that for women with kinkier texture these "wash n' go" styles" can be damaging and result in more hair loss than growth. Still, many

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[121] Jamila Akil, ""Your Curls Ain't Like Mine": Natural's and the Curly Hair Wars."
[122] Susan Walker, "Decoding Hair Texture: Hair Typing Systems 101 | Curly Nikki | Natural Hair Styles and Natural Hair Care."

women of all levels of texture will not wear their hair without slathering it in product that tames curls, twisting it for a more defined look, or wrapping scarves around their temples to encourage their "edges" or temple hair to lie flat against their heads.[123] This intentional styling is another tenet of conventional attractiveness.

This obsession with rank and status is not prevalent among all women with natural hair but these concerns are noted in many blog posts and YouTube videos. Curl ranking could be seen as the unavoidable intersection between culture and hair. Intentional styling might be a source of relaxation, a hobby, a conversation starter, or even a means of expressing creativity. Therefore, the actions of curl ranking and intentional styling should not discredit the natural hair boom. Instead, perhaps critics of these practices can view them as empowering. By intentionally styling their hair in beautiful and unique ways, black women answer the critiques that natural hair is unruly and ugly. Although hair ranking can be demeaning it has also developed into a means of women unifying themselves with others that share their hair type, finding products that work for their hair type, and even getting hairstyling tips. Some other non-hierarchical hair typing systems have also developed in response to Walker's system.[124]

In spite of the issues regarding beauty ideals that women still tussle with, natural hair *is* a movement of power, like many of the other hair movements that have preceded it. Because of the personal level of this movement one of the main things that adherents seek is

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[123] Cassidy Blackwell, "The Naked Curl ROUND UP!" *Natural Selection*.
[124] The L.O.I.S. system is based on the shapes of the letters LOIS. L categorizes the bend of the hair, O categorizes the curl, I categorizes the straightness of the hair and S characterizes the wave. If a person has curly ringlets, they would be a "daughter of O" according to the LOIS hair typing system.

understanding of their own hair and how it grows without chemical or heat manipulation. They also seek to embrace their own form of beauty that is somewhat different than the standard of straight blonde or brunette hair. Natural hair is also contingent upon relationships because, like all major black hair movements, it depends on community, protesting or accommodating to relationships with whites, and the transmission of knowledge. Finally, there are a plethora of different styles, techniques, and incarnations of natural hair that exist right now. Whether straightened, twisted-out, picked-out, loc'd, or braided, all these styles come together to make a statement about black beauty and the power to overcome stereotypes, social pressure, and be ones true self without need for apology.

Conclusion: Such Great Lengths; Such Great Heights

Hair signifies power for black women, no matter how it is styled. Whether embracing blackness like the activists of the Black Power Movement did when they wore their large round afros or playing up femininity with the chic and shiny marcel curls created by Madam C.J. Walker's cosmetics, black women have used their precarious social standing as a launching pad for creating inventive styles of accommodation and styles of protest.

The trends that black women embrace during these major moments in black history also reflect the times. Hair trends changed with the race relations and power struggles that black women had with the white dominant powers around them. From the beginnings of the 1800s to the Civil War, slaves were beginning to experiment with hairstyles what would make it easy for them to assimilate into society with emancipation on the horizon; female slaves, especially domestic slaves, had also learned to make use of the limited resources afforded to them—using kerosene to cleanse their scalps and lard as a hair moisturizer. By the late 1890s to the Great Depression, the politics of respectability and the New Negro had become a common way to counter negative perspectives of blackness from white society. As such, women began wearing their hair in neat, carefully crafted styles using hair products produced especially for them by entrepreneurs and hairstylists that had the uplift of the black community at heart.

The beginning of the Civil Rights Movement marked a major change in hair. As black people across the United States became less concerned with white standards of beauty, they started embracing their own unique tresses. With the waning power of white dominance, black women showcased their radical afros. Not only did the style highlight their minority status, as it

did nothing to hide kinks or curls (bigger was better), the early afro also was a style that black women shared with men. Stylized afros with puff and braids were not unusual but many opted for the same, simple round halo as their male counterparts not to only reject whiteness but also to challenge the idea that black women's femininity is inextricably linked to their hair.

Now, in the present day, after a very eager embrace of straight hairstyles following the fall of the Black Power Movement and the rise of conservatism in America, black women are again embracing their natural textures. In one of the more relaxed racial climates that America has ever experienced (although "post-racial" is an overstatement) black women are feeling more confident than ever about their hair. With the rise of blogs and social media for sharing hair ideas, the relative low cost of natural hair compared to relaxers, and the emerging research about the dangers of chemically straightened hair, black women of all ages, skin tones, and socioeconomic levels are eager to go natural.

As white power waxed and waned throughout history white standards of beauty did as well. During the times that white supremacy and de jure racism was at its height, black women picked their hair styles very carefully. Trends emerged amongst the styles that guaranteed the most upward mobility, respect, and power for the wearers. These style choices humanized all black people, women especially, after being stripped of their hair culture amongst other aspects of their diverse African cultures upon arriving in America. These styles also allowed blacks to exhibit some agency over their lives which were controlled by white masters during slavery and white dominant society post-bellum. Black women were being cautious and aware of white standards of beauty, copying the hair styles of their masters and broader white society

after the war. Nevertheless black women were asserting their power as well—reclaiming a part of their identity and reinvigorating a lost facet of their culture.

As white supremacy crumbles, black women's hair styling choices have become bolder and more empowered. With little concern about hair impeding upward mobility, access to housing, or resources due to the end of de jure racism and the Civil Rights Movement, blacks were able to embrace a style that almost screamed, James Brown's pride-filled lyric: "Say it loud! I'm black and I'm Proud!"[125] There was no hiding the afro style, nor is there any hiding the natural styles that are on the rise right now. A black woman's power over her identity has almost come full circle. While it was not uncommon for a black woman to be fired over braids or other hairstyles that signified apparent ethnic pride twenty years ago, today acts like that are unheard of and when they do occur they are incidents of unrest among black women and their advocates. Black women are no longer afraid to take risks and stand up for their hair when they feel they have been discriminated against because of it—that is power.

Black women have always approached hair with a distinct balance of accommodation and resistance. Throughout history, most have been willing to make sacrifices to obtain power while maintaining some sense of self. This journey of self-acceptance and racial pride has been a long and difficult one for black women, especially when it comes to the contentious subject of

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[125] "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," is a song written and recorded by James Brown in 1968 during the height of the Black Consciousness movement

"Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," *YouTube*.

hair. However, I believe that as their love and acceptance of their hair has grown so has society's acceptance of black beauty for what it is.

Just as the problem of racism is far from solved, the most racist parts of society will continue to use black women's hair, along with other ethnic signifiers, against them. Still, there is power in numbers and the mere fact that these hair trends and movements assert so much power speaks volumes about the potential for black women to overthrow the white standards of beauty that weigh heavily upon them. Perhaps African American women will soon be able to define black beauty for what it is rather than defining in contrast of the whiteness that black beauty is not and will never be.

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