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NO HAIR! DON'T CARE!

RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT OF BALD AND LOW SHAVED BLACK WOMEN

by

MONICA RIVERS

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2021

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

No Hair! Don't Care!
Resistance and Empowerment of Bald and Low Shaved Black Women

by

Monica Rivers

Advisor: Karen Miller

No Hair! Don't Care! Resistance and Empowerment of Bald and Low Shaved Black Women is an invitation to discuss the experiences of Black women who choose to wear bald and low shaved haircuts. The project examines standards of beauty, femininity, sexuality, sexual harassment, self- acceptance, and self-expression through the voices of Black women: Because sometimes the biggest statement you can make with your hair is by having none.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

No Hair! Don't Care! Resistance and Empowerment of Bald and Low Shaved Black Women is an invitation to discuss the experiences of Black women who choose to wear bald and low-shaved haircuts. The project examines standards of beauty, femininity, sexuality, sexual harassment, self-acceptance, and self-expression through the voices of Black women: Because sometimes the biggest statement you can make with your hair is by having none.

This project uses Black Feminist Theory to interpret the experiences of bald and low shaved Black women. Using the principles of Black feminism, I analyze the sensibilities of these women, focusing on their resistance to beauty standards and on their use of the language of self-empowerment. Serie McDougal writes, “Hill-Collins (2009) and Gentry, Elifson, and Sterk (2005) identify five key themes that Black feminist theory offers for interpreting the lives of Black Women: (1) Self-definition and self-validation ; (2) the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality; (3) viewing the experiences of black women as unique-both common and diverse; (4) controlling images constructed for African American women; and (5) structure and agency as a platform for social change” (McDougal, 60). Through interviews, Documentaries, YouTube videos and content created by and about bald and low-shaved Black Women this work seeks to examine how they are viewed in dominant culture and the black community.

Short natural hairstyles are not new for Black women. African American actress Cicely Tyson wore a short natural on the popular *East Side West Side* television series in 1963, but not without controversy. Her haircut, what today's millennials call the “teeny weeny Afro,” or TWA, is considered pivotal in starting the natural hair movement in the 1960's. However, many African Americans at the time expressed disdain for her choices.

In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Tyson discussed the negative reaction that her short natural received, she said that it was “primarily blacks who actually crucified me for doing that. I was told I was in a position to uplift the image of the black woman and I was absolutely destroying it by wearing my hair in a natural” (Winfrey 29:03-29:24). When Oprah questioned Tyson about whether she felt the need to respond to the negative criticism she said “That wasn’t my problem. It was theirs and I wasn’t going to make it mine” (Winfrey 32:38-32:42). Tyson picked her roles carefully and was conscious about how she represented Black women, but she was also loyal to her roles. If short natural hair is necessary to make her characters authentic, she was willing to transform herself even if she knew that her hair would not, please everyone.

Tyson explained that everything she did had to do with a character she was playing. She had chosen to cut her hair for a television film, *Between Yesterday and Today*. It was about an African couple who moved to the western world. The wife wanted to keep her homeland traditions, but the husband was interested in assimilating to their new country. Tyson knew her straightened hair was not authentic to the role she was portraying. Many African women wore their hair natural at the time. Oprah points out, *Ebony Magazine* who gave Tyson credit for being one of the pioneers of the natural hair movement in the 1960’s. Hairstylists wrote her angry letters claiming that she was ruining their business because their clients no longer wanted to straighten their hair. Instead, they wanted to look like Tyson. Oprah asked Tyson, “Did you feel like a trailblazer?” (Winfrey 32:47-32:48) She responded, “No, no, no, absolutely not. It was all in the process of my developing as a human being and making my characters real and true to their being” (Winfrey 32:50-33:04). Tyson’s physical transformations were a part of her evolution as well as giving authenticity to her characters and representations of Black women. She opened a space for Black women to be themselves by bringing a character to life who

desired to do the same. Simultaneously, she was defining and validating herself as an artist and a person who dared to defy the status quo of who a Black woman should be. Tyson created an individual and collective identity between Black women through her art and hairstyling. This study demonstrates how bald and low shaved Black women create individual and collective identities. They work to define themselves and validate their choices using hair as their platforms to assert their agency and struggle for social change. Bald and low shaved Black women empower themselves and each other by creating communities on social media focused on their hair. YouTube is a wide-reaching platform that these women have used to influence, educate, and invite conversations that specifically address Black hair. These various discussions can range from sharing information about the latest haircare products, styling tutorials, hair discrimination and personal narratives about their journey.

One may ask, what messages are black women sending with their choice of hairstyle? Hair culture for Black women encompasses identity, beauty, traditions, values, politics, and a system of representation, which all intersect with race, gender, class, and sexuality. These intersections effect the messages that Black women intend to convey through hairstyling as well as others' perceptions. Tyson made it very clear that she deeply cared about representing Black women on the screen with pride. She said, "I made the decision that when I read a script, either my skin tingled, or my stomach churned" (Winfrey 33:26-32:34). She told Oprah "... I could not live with myself having done certain things that I found were demeaning to me as a woman first and to the race of people" (Winfrey 33:52-34:02). Tyson indicated that she viewed herself and work through the intersections of gender and race. Her message was to depict Black women as genuine, multidimensional beings, unlike the negative stereotypes created about them for centuries (Collins, 72). She made whatever physical changes she thought were necessary to do

so.

Black people who believed that Tyson's short natural hair was "destroying the image of the black woman" had absorbed abhorrent and racist messages about "short nappy hair." Until the Black Freedom Movement of the 1960s, short kinky hair was uniformly considered unkempt, ugly, and masculine among African Americans (Craig, 122). This natural look did not fit into white beauty standards, which celebrated long, straight blond hair, fair skin, Eurocentric features, and thinness (Cottom, 43). This is the yardstick against which all women in the West are measured (Cottom, 43). Black women could never attain what purposefully excludes them, yet they are coerced into aspiring for it by the dominant white culture (Cottom, 60). Many African Americans embraced these ideals despite their racist undertones because of their desire to assimilate. Ironically, many embraced these ideals to combat stereotypes of Black inferiority. I will develop my discussion of these dynamics later in this thesis. Uplifting the image of the black woman was important because African American women had been degraded in the U.S. by controlling images for centuries. The negative labels of Black women as mammies, Jezebels, sapphires, and all the variations existed to perpetuate and justify their oppression. Tyson rises to stardom during a time when African American celebrities on film and television were rare. The lack of opportunity and representation for Black people can also contribute to a collective identity. The notion exists that what one Black person does can reflect either poorly or favorably on Black people as a group. Tyson's celebrity and class status gives her a unique opportunity to represent Black women. When Tyson stepped too far outside of the box of white beauty standards perhaps the Black people who complained about her short-textured hair were fearful that she would prove that African American women are indeed unattractive and unfeminine.

Unfortunately, as feminist scholars have shown, much of the burden to elevate the race of

Black people has been placed on the Black female body. For example, Craig points out how Black leaders have continuously tried to bring clarity to the definition of Blackness in America by using Black women as symbols (Craig, 129). She writes, “For turn-of -the-century Negro clubwomen, for middle-class leadership of the Baptist Women’s Convention, and for the convention’s mainly working-class membership, the black woman was the chaste pillar of society. For race men of the 1890’s, for Marcus Garvey in the 1920’s, and for black nationalist in the 1960’s she was a queen whose beauty was evidence of the glory of the race. When leaders sought an object of blame for black failures, she could epitomize the race’s problems” (Craig,130). Black leadership of the past required Black women to control their bodies to suit their agenda. African American women needed to be morally pristine or physically attractive according to the ideals of an organization. When they failed to live up to these standards, they could easily become scapegoats for all the ills of Black society. Even today Black women feel this pressure. This study analyzes how controlling images, and the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality effect how others interpret messages in their hairstyling. Black women with bald and low shaved natural haircuts use their hairstyling to challenge white feminine norms by rejecting long straight hair.

I will also discuss sexism towards Black women in Black barbershops. This project examines sexual harassment, discrimination, and other problematic behaviors towards Black women in these predominantly male spaces. I focus on Black barbershops because they often serve as the main places in which Black women can go to for alternative hairstyling. Black hair salons often do not offer services that cater to closely shaven hair therefore many Black women find themselves in uncharted and sometimes unwelcoming territories of male barbershops. Race, gender, and sexuality effect the way that Black women are treated in these situations. Bald and

low shaved Black women empower one another through online and off-line support groups where they share their experiences about sexual harassment. They also use their platforms to defend one another from ridicule and shame from others about their hair.

Why study bald and low shaved Black women? I chose to focus on Black women with this hairstyling because they are often an ignored group when discussing Black hair culture. Even in the natural hair community being bald headed or low shaved is talked about mainly as just the Big Chop - the act of cutting off chemically straightened hair to wear one's natural hair texture. Once the hair is cut there is an expectation that these women will want to grow their hair back long and healthier than ever before. Not every naturalista desires to do so. Instead, many of these women embrace shaved and bald haircuts for various reasons that often go unnoticed because of stigmatization. Because their hairstyling is considered traditionally masculine, women with short hair tend to be labeled as unfeminine, lesbians or sexually deviant. When women are bald, they are often assumed to be suffering from an illness or mental instability. Bald and low shaved Black women are using their platforms on social media to push back against stigma and tell their own stories. While these women use their narratives and hairstyling as a form of resistance to the stigma produced by white beauty standards, this stance does not drown out the dominant discourse, even in the media they produce. Although these women are empowering themselves it is difficult for them to separate themselves completely from white beauty standards and gender norms. Why is that? In Tressie McMillan Cottom's *Thick: And Other Essays*, she discusses Black women's attempts to create alternative beauty standards. She writes, "our so-called counter narratives about beauty and what they demand of us cannot be divorced from the fact that beauty is contingent upon capitalism. Even our resistance becomes a means to commodify, and what is commodified is always, always stratified" (Cottom, 58). Black

women's alternatives to white beauty standards requires them to purchase the correct accoutrements to perform them successfully. Many bald and low shaved Black women believe that they must wear the right makeup, clothing, and accessories to appear more attractive. These acts of consumerism are indicative of the sociocultural pressures to perform femininity. As many black feminist scholars have shown, the interconnected relationship between white beauty standards and capitalism places limitations on Black women's counter narratives about beauty.

Chapter 2: A Hair Story

I believe that every Black woman has a hair story and here is mine...

The first time I felt truly beautiful as a young woman is when I cut my hair off for the first time. For months I let my hair transition from relaxed to natural with no intention of cutting it short. Transitioning is a term used to describe letting a chemical relaxer “grow out” by no longer applying the chemical straightening substance to hair, thus allowing the natural texture to grow. Once a person achieves the desired length of new growth the remaining parts of the relaxed hair is cut off. Chemical relaxers used to straighten curly hair are also called perms, and I will be using these terms interchangeably.

After an accident, my hair made other plans. One night, I washed my hair. I do not recall if it was laziness or fatigue that allowed me to fall asleep without combing my wet tangled hair, but I remember waking up with a huge dreadlock on the side of my head. Now, I was guilty of lusting over Lauryn Hill’s lovely locs, but I did not imagine this is how I would get them. Lauryn Hill is a R&B vocalist and rapper who rose to superstardom in the 1990’s in the rap trio, The Fugees and in her solo career with the release of her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. She was known for her dreadlocks and Hip-Hop fashion style. I looked less like the gorgeous songstress and more like Busta Rhymes, a Jamaican-American rapper, who gained popularity in the 1990’s and was known for his dreadlocks and rambunctious style. If you are familiar with the cover of the rapper’s 1997 *When Disaster Strikes* album, then you will have a good picture of what I looked like in that moment. I was frantic. I attempted to comb my hair out for hours. The battle between my knotted coils and straight strands left a matted mess in the aftermath. The locs won the war. I made an emergency appointment with a natural hair salon and even the patient hairstylist could not comb the locs out. For months prior, I wanted to start dreadlocks, but I just

could not let go of my hair. I was waiting for it to grow to the right length because I was afraid of what I would look like with short hair. Obviously, though, my hair was ready. I was not certain that I was ready. Finally, I surrendered. I heard myself saying out loud, “Cut them off. I’m ready to start my locs”. After the stylist finished, she spun my chair towards the mirror. I saw myself for the first time. I saw my face, every freckle and feature because a mass of hair no longer covered it. The comb twists that adorned my crown felt regal. Comb twists are a hairstyle created with styling products such as gel and the end of a rat tail comb. They can be worn as a hairstyle or be used to start dreadlocks. The woman in my reflection was confident. More importantly I finally felt like there was nothing wrong with me or my hair.

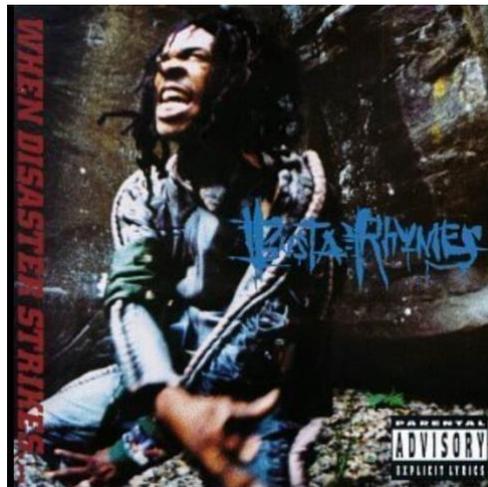


Fig. 1 Busta Rhymes When Disaster Strikes album cover 1997
Source: Wikipedia contributors. “When Disaster Strikes...” Wikipedia, 31 Jan. 2021, en.m.Wikipedia.org/wiki/When_Disaster_Strikes...

My natural hair journey started around 1999 when the Big Chop was not as popular. A natural hair journey is a term often used by black women who transition from a relaxer to their natural hair texture usually in adulthood, this can also include a process of self-discovery as one

rediscovers their curls. The Big Chop is a term that has roots in the natural hair movement during the 1960's and 1970's, but was popularized by millennials in the 2000's. It refers mostly to African-descended people who choose to cut off hair that has been chemically relaxed or permed to wear their natural hair texture, which is usually curly, coiled or tightly textured. At the time, I saw a few black folks with teeny weeny afros and flowing dreadlocks. I adored musical artists such as India Arie, Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, and of course Lauryn Hill who offered an alternative look to typical black woman celebrities, who at that time wore straightened hairstyles. There was something in the air, but during that time natural hairstyles were not trendy. I felt like I was embarking on a journey alone, but that changed a year later. In the beginning of the twenty first century the natural hair movement would take off due to Black women and the power of the internet. Although I did not have a strong online community yet, I belonged to a family and local community who had an opinion about my decision, good or bad. Even outsiders weighed in because someone always has something to say about a black woman's hair, whether she asked their opinions or not. Black hair has been politicized by movements as a form of resistance to oppression, and weaponized against Black women by the white dominant society to degrade, control and coerce.

When my southern grandmother saw my new look she asked, "What the hell is wrong with you? Have you lost your damn mind?" I did not expect a good reaction from her. I knew how much she treasured my long hair however I did not expect my sanity to be questioned. She continued, "Did your boyfriend breakup with you?" Why does it always have to be about a boy? She thought that I looked like a boy and that my drastic actions had to be about one. I knew that I should have just politely answered "No" to her questions, but instead I did what no grandchild should ever do to a southern black grandma; I back talked. Perhaps, I really did lose my mind. I

accused her generation of being whitewashed. Instead of her laying down some old-fashioned corporal punishment she did something worse; she slapped me with her words, saying “We didn’t want to be white! We wanted jobs!”. I did not realize how much she had put me in my place. I did not understand how ignorant I was until years later.

My grandmother who was born in 1935 in Montgomery, Alabama after the Great Depression and during the Jim Crow era. She will tell anyone that she walked with Dr. Martin Luther King in her Sunday’s best during the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. She knew what it meant to look “respectable” whether protesting for her civil rights or working in a white woman’s kitchen to survive. African American women of her generation went out into the world carrying themselves with dignity and respect although the world did not respect them. She took great pride in herself, but like many other Black women she had been indoctrinated with gendered and racial ideals of beauty.

In *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham first coined the term “politics of respectability”. She wrote, “The politics of respectability emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (Higginbotham, 187). There was an emphasis on African Americans adopting the manners and morals of the dominant white culture as a strategy to gain respect and equality. Although it has assimilationist leanings, its intent was to fight against negative and harmful stereotypes against black people, particularly black women. It has roots in the black Baptist women’s movement between 1900-1920, but these ideals are prevalent during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950’s-1960’s as well.

Beyond the adaptation of manners and morals, Civil Rights protesters gave great attention to their appearance. Photographs of Civil Rights protesters show many of the men wearing suits while the women wore dresses, some with pearls. Black women also wore their hair in neat press ‘n’ curls. These choices are not just fashionable, they are strategic. Those brave protesters wanted to show the world that black people were everyday Americans worthy of equality. They were willing to have dogs gnaw at their flesh and water hoses drawn on them in their Sunday’s best for freedom.



Fig. 2 (Left Photograph) Civil Rights March, Washington DC USA, Warren K Leffler, August 28, 1963.

Source: Images, Education. “Civil Rights March, Washington DC USA, Warren K Leffler, August 28,... Nieuwsfoto’s.” *Getty Images*, 28 Aug. 1963, www.gettyimages.nl/detail/nieuwsfoto%27s/civil-rights-march-washington-dc-usa-warren-k-lefflernieuwsfotos/1164927011?adppopup=true.

Fig. 3 (Right Photograph) In this May 3, 1963, photo, a 17-year-old civil rights demonstrator, defying an anti-parade ordinance of Birmingham, Ala., is attacked by a police dog.

Source: Waxman, Olivia. “Photography’s Power in the Civil Rights Movement Had a Tragic Side.” *Time*, 3 Nov. 2017, time.com/4957382/civil-rights-photography-high-museum.

My grandmother grew up during a time when African American women had to comply with white beauty standards and norms to survive. In the south labor opportunities for black women were limited. They were usually relegated to either teachers or maids and the latter was the most common. My grandmother could not even scrub her white employer’s floor without

neatly pressed hair and a starched uniform; This is what she meant with her stinging words. For centuries black women were stereotyped as unattractive, unintelligent, and unworthy of respect. White women on the other hand were put on a pedestal as the embodiment of beauty and womanhood. African American women fought to counter these sexist and racist narratives. For some black women straightening their hair and presenting themselves “appropriately” was a quiet act of protest. They were fighting against stereotypes of being nappy headed, ill-mannered, and uncouth.

My grandmother’s reaction to my hair is informed by her beliefs about race and gender. She believed that women’s hair should be long and that black hair-that is curly, coiled or tightly textured, should be straightened. In her opinion my short locs were not attractive, feminine, or becoming for a black woman. She lived under the violence of white beauty standards like generations of African American women before and after. These standards include white skin, straight hair, blondness, blue eyes, and Eurocentric facial features. Some African American women rebelled against these beauty standards in the 1960’s and 1970’s, by adopting their own which embraced their natural hair. Not all black women, including my grandmother, followed this trend. She clung to her press ‘n’ curl. It would be erroneous to believe her actions were simply white mimicry, but she did adopt an attitude that femininity and attractiveness included having long straight hair.

I adore and respect my grandmother, but I decided that I did not care about her or anyone’s else’s opinions or approval about how I looked, or did I? The truth is I was a nineteen-year-old woman with teenage insecurities. Besides worrying about my next pimple, I was a black woman who had just chopped off most of my hair. That was a big deal. I did this during a time when natural hair was mostly popular among a small group of musicians, black

intellectuals, or politically conscious rappers. It was not the norm. The glossy covers of my Essence Magazines were usually filled with glamorous black female models and celebrities with straight flowing hair. My childhood images of pretty, little black girls are informed by what I saw on “Just for Me” relaxer kit boxes. I questioned whether men would still find me attractive or what my friends might think. It also hurt back then that my grandmother did not approve, but I stood my ground. What exactly was I defending?

Chapter 3: The Afro Gone Wrong

Hair straightening had become common in the 1920's (Craig, 122). As the practice gained greater acceptance in Black communities it became a requirement for African American women in urban and rural regions who wanted to appear well groomed and dignified (Craig, 122). Within Black communities, women with "good hair", which is defined as hair that is long, wavy, or loosely curled were admired for their beauty and femininity (Craig,120). Black women were measured by this yardstick regardless of their class or region and despite their natural texture or length (Craig,121). Most Black women could not fulfill this requirement without straightening or artifice. The antithesis to this standard, short textured hair, "was considered masculine, and naturally kinky hair on women was considered shamefully unkempt" (Craig,122).

In my grandmother's opinion I had cut off my most prized possession. From her point of view my new hairstyle was not dignified or feminine. My short-coiled hair broke with dominant racial and gendered norms.

In *Ain't I a Beauty Queen: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race*, Maxine Leeds Craig demonstrates that during the early 1960's, before the popularization of the slogan "black is beautiful," young Black women began wearing short naturals, but not without ridicule. Before the "natural" morphed into the popular Afro, Black women who dared to wear textured hair faced scorn and bewilderment from African Americans. They too were criticized by conservative family members (Craig, 124). By refusing to straighten their hair they were rebelling against what Blacks at that time considered an attractive feminine look (Craig, 122). The additional insult was that they were often mistaken for men, but not always maliciously. People were not

used to seeing women with short, bushy hair. Craig explains that Black women who wore natural hair before 1966 did not see their choice as a symbol of militancy or a statement about Black beauty (Craig, 122). Many of these women were members of SNCC and other African American organizations, who were forming a Black consciousness and questioned the racism and sexism of Eurocentric beauty standards. The awareness that “Black is beautiful” helped these women form a feminine and racial identity temporarily during periods when they questioned these things within themselves. They found encouragement from other organizational members whose support shielded them against the rejection they felt outside of their inner circle (Craig, 124).

The Black Power Movement preached messages of socioeconomic and cultural power for Black people, that also included the recognition that “black is beautiful”, which honored textured hair. The alternative look became the standard in these organizations and spread to Black communities. Craig explains that women who wore short natural hair began to receive respect in their neighborhoods by 1966. That year, “the natural” came to be recognized as a symbol of pride and defiance—both generational and political (Craig, 124). Unfortunately, this newfound respect did not last. By the 1970s, Black women had returned to styles that “either flaunted or emulated longer and wavier hair” and women who did not comply with these beauty standards faced ridicule (Craig, 121).

Craig discusses how the Afro became masculinized in the late 1960’s and 1970’s. Women who adopted short, natural hair were embarking on a radical new look because they were defying white feminine norms of long straight hair. (Craig, 125). This look was already a conventionally masculine look that Black men adopted. The way to make the Afro a distinct and defiant look for men was to make it longer. The big halo shaped Afro was the popular image of black militants such as Black Panther Party leader, Huey P. Newton. The bigger the Afro the

more rebellious a Black man appeared. Craig states, “the original critique of Euro centric constructions of femininity that had been critical to radical Black women’s rejection of hair straightening was lost [and] the masculinization of the Afro ushered in the return of Eurocentric beauty standards for women” (Craig, 125). For Black women, the “natural” was a counter narrative to white beauty standards. They were challenging an exclusionary system of female presentation that they were expected to strive for but were never meant to be included in. Black men, Craig shows, were using the Afro as a symbol of toughness. The hyper-masculine posturing that was rampant in Black Power organizations ignored and perpetuated sexism against Black women. The Afro was an acceptable style for men and women, but the attention to length placed Black women back in a position to adhere to gender norms; long hair even when natural was in again. When Black women were unable to grow a large Afro, some turned to wigs. If this was exposed, they were once again humiliated and accused of not putting on an authentic Black feminine performance. Ultimately, Craig’s work demonstrates how the natural hair movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s failed Black women partly because the interconnectedness of race and gender were not given sufficient attention in Black Power organizations when challenging Eurocentric standards.

Many black women in western societies understand that wearing their hair short and natural is an act of defiance even if it is unintentional. Doing so goes against white beauty standards developed by a white patriarchal system. When I argued with my grandmother, initially I thought I was just defending my choice of hairstyle. In hindsight I was fighting for the right to break gender and racial norms that she had accepted. I did not intend to rebel. After all, my natural hair journey began sort of accidentally. That altercation gave me a glimpse into how I may be perceived by others simply because of my short natural hair.

Chapter 4: Black Ugliness and Controlling Images

In *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*, authors Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, describe the early 2000's as the "divided decade" for the school of thought on black hair. They write "what distinguishes the first years of the new millennium is that it was a time of extreme difference in philosophies in Black hair culture: an era of great pride in natural hair textures, an explosion in the number of women wearing weaves (and claiming it with no hint of shame or secrecy), and bitter angry Hair Policing over what was considered "respectable" and "appropriate." It is easy to see why the beginning of the twenty-first century will be remembered as the divided decade, a time of contrasting views and philosophies on what was right and wrong about Black hair" (Byrd & Tharps, 178). Millennial black women may be the freest generation when it comes to hair choices, but with limitations. They may still face hair discrimination in the workplace and in schools. Natural hair is still not welcomed in many spaces. Black women no matter what their hairstyling have been subjected to the negative perceptions of others surrounding their attractiveness, but what is the root of this derogation?

I believe that the greatest way you can dehumanize a person is to make them a figment of your imagination. Many historians mark the arrival of "20 and odd" captive Africans to England's new colony in Virginia in 1619 as the beginning of the 400-year plus story of Blacks in America, but who began this narrative? Certainly, it was not those first enslaved Africans, neither was it the following generations of Blacks born into bondage, who by law were not permitted to be literate. No, the stories of the captives were written for the most part by the captors. It had to be that way for something as evil as slavery to exist in the "land of the free".

Thomas Jefferson who is arguably one of America's most progressive forefathers helped to write the story of blacks that labeled them inferior to whites. He was not the first or last to claim African descended people as subhuman, but his words had power to justify their oppression. In Jefferson's, *Notes on Virginia* (1788), he states, "the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Richardson). He upholds white supremacy making a clear distinction between the races, declaring that Blacks are inherently and permanently inferior to whites. Jefferson compares the skin color and features of white and black women to make his arguments of white supremacy. The following is from his Notes on Virginia, taken from *Thomas Jefferson's Racism, 1788, The American Yawp Reader*:

And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race? Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favor of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the orangutan for the black women over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man? (Richardson 447-466)

In Jefferson's discourse, he suggested that the bodies of White women are beautiful, and the bodies of Black women are ugly. A White woman's ability to blush makes her superior, he argues, and a Black woman is inferior because her melanin does not allow for that ostensible expression of modesty. Jefferson also gave White women credit for their "flowing hair." As Cottom suggests, what is considered beautiful in the United States has always included whiteness and excluded blackness, she argues, "beauty isn't actually what you look like; beauty is the

preferences that reproduce the existing social order” (Cottom, 43). Jefferson was protecting the existing social order of slavery and White supremacy. Under that system Black people could never be beautiful, intelligent, or competent in the endowments of the body and mind. At best they could be classified as a subhuman species closer to animals and nature which Whites separated themselves from. These ideologies helped justify their bondage. For Cottom, “It would stand to reason that beauty’s ultimate function is to exclude blackness” (Cottom, 43).

Jefferson’s assumption that Black women prefer White women’s “flowing hair” was an effort to mask the violence of the institution of slavery. These preferences were mostly an act of survival and the results of psychological abuse. It is comprehensible that women subjected to the racist notions of being the mates of orangutans would want even meager recognitions of humanity. Living an existence of blackness (inferior, exclusion), and property (object), Black people had to grasp onto whatever benefits they could. Slaves with some proximity to whiteness received marginal privileges, but they could never be white. White men’s preferences for light skin and long, straight hair had value because they were the people who had access to capital and power. They got to determine whiteness as superior. White people allowed Black people to only reside in the figments of their imaginations. This allowed them to create the stories and controlling images necessary to oppress Black people and maintain the value of Whiteness. One controlling image of Black women that originated under slavery was the Jezebel- a hyper-sexual woman. This stereotype was used to justify the epidemic of rapes inflicted on Black women by White men (Collins, 81). The children produced from these heinous acts, followed their mother’s slave status, furthering the economic exploitation in this vicious system (Collins, 81). The image of the Jezebel has remained useful to oppress Black women as it has morphed into new stereotypes. Patricia Hill-Collins discusses the hoochie image prevalent in explicit rap

music in the late 1980's and early 1990's. She describes the hoochie as a contemporary image of the Jezebel (Collins, 81), who is portrayed as a hyper-sexual woman willing to exchange sexual favors for some sort of monetary gain (Collins, 82). In Hip Hop videos the images of scantily clad Black women, or hoochies, alongside hyper-masculine black men is pervasive. By depicting Black women as sexually deviant their bodies could be controlled (Collins). Under bondage the Jezebel's body could be used for labor, sexual pleasure, and the continuation of the slave system. In Hip-Hop the hoochie's body is used for male consumption, and the rap artists and White executives' profit from these images that are seen globally. Meanwhile Black women continue to be hurt by these negative stereotypes.

Alongside the controlling image of the hoochie is her cousin the freak. *In Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill-Collins does not place the freak as a separate controlling image, she discusses freakishness in terms of behavior. The Jezebel or hoochie who sleeps with other women and men is considered a freak because her sexuality is outside of the bounds of heteronormativity (Hill-Collins, 83). Hill-Collins explains how these Jezebel labels masculinize Black women. She writes "ironically, Jezebel's excessive sexual appetite masculinizes her because she desires sex just as a man does. Moreover, Jezebel can also be masculinized and once again deemed 'freaky' if she desires sex with other women" (Collins, 83). Women who can strike a balance between submissiveness and appropriate flirtation with men are considered feminine, women whose sexual appetites are like men are stigmatized (Collins, 83). The stigma of "freak" assigned to hoochies who sleep with women involves homophobia. The same ways that Jefferson is discussing white/black and beauty/ugly in binary and oppositional ways, heterosexuality/homosexuality is also being pinned

against the other. This behavior is freaky or abnormal because homosexuality is considered inferior to heterosexuality in the dominant culture (Collins, 83). In the West, whether real or imagined, behavior associated with Black women that is considered masculine becomes stigmatized.

Chapter 5: Stigma: Are you a lesbian, a freak, or just crazy?

Poet, producer, and visual artist Ruth Sutoyé created a project called “Bald Black Girl(s)” that centers on the narratives of bald and low shaved Black women. The multi-disciplinary project explores the “perceptions of masculinity, femininity, androgyny alongside sexuality, gender identity, and barbershop dynamics” (Benedict). April 10, 2019, the artist held an event that included a panel featuring several bald and low shaved Black women who discussed their experiences. One issue that was talked about was stigma around short hair and sexuality. The host asked the women if they noticed a change in other people’s attitudes in the workplace after they shaved their heads. A woman named Raven recalls starting a job where no one spoke to her for the first week. She figured that perhaps people were standoffish because she was a new employee, but later she was told by another co-worker that people in the office were curious about her sexuality. Her male co-workers wanted to know if she was into BDSM-bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism. These sexual practices are often stigmatized as deviant and associated with psychopathology (McGreal). Raven answered their uncomfortable questions although she thought they were ridiculous. While her intention was to enjoy a simple and practical haircut, others had very different perceptions about the messages she was sending with her hair.

The men’s curiosity about Raven’s sexual practices connect to the images of Black women as Jezebels or freaks. Freaks are women associated with so called inappropriate masculine behavior, especially of a sexual nature. Raven’s bald head is a traditionally male hairstyle, but her ability to still attract the sexual attention of men makes her exotic, therefore she is stigmatized as a freak. These co-workers may associate her with the taboo practices of BDSM

because they also view her as sexually deviant. Raven's race and shaved head places her outside of white femininity and gendered norms. Raven describes feeling fetishized and intruded upon in that space.

Another woman on the panel explained to the audience that her co-workers had never asked her about her sexuality, but when she mentioned men in conversations about romance, they responded with an arousing "oh", as if they were surprised that she was interested in men. She told the audience about an incident with a patient while working in a women's psychiatric facility. One day she had to access a woman with severe psychopathology. The patient asked her constantly for an hour "Are you a lesbian?" She did not become visibly upset with the patient. She understood that the mentally ill woman lacked a social filter, unlike her co-workers who only questioned her sexuality quietly, however she was annoyed. She was perplexed by why the disturbed woman's question bothered her.

The patient's assumption about her sexuality made her question the superficial traits that defined femininity such as long, luscious locks. What about Black women who did not possess those qualities? Where does that leave Black women with shaved heads who stand even further outside the box of white beauty standards? "It means that you're a man. It means that you might be a lesbian. It means so much and it's so loaded...I think that the situation really made me think about all the assumptions and associations that come with being low shaved", said the panelist (Benedict, 1:00:56-1:04:38). As Black women attempt to create their own beauty identities they are subjected to the gendered norms of the dominant system. Breaking these rules has the consequences of stigmatization that can go beyond assumptions about sexual preferences.

On July 7, 2020 comedic actress, Tiffany Haddish shaved her hair off during an Instagram Live video. She discusses how she has wanted to cut her locks for a long time, but

others discouraged her from doing so. Haddish decides that she will no longer listen to naysayers and will do what makes her happy. She claims to have over one hundred moles all over her body, however she does not know the amount that she may have on her head. This curiosity is part of her desire to shave it all off. Haddish claims that she knows every part of her body except her head. During the video she is in the company of friends who are not supportive. One female friend questioned Haddish about whether she consulted with her boyfriend, famous Hip-Hop Artist, Common, before making this decision. The comedian makes it clear that she does not need his input in making decisions about her body. Haddish's friend implies that she needs to get permission from a man before making a "drastic" decision. Ironically, this sexist inquiry is from a woman. In a patriarchal system some women are complicit in upholding male power by policing other women, even if they may do so unconsciously. When Haddish is adamant about her actions, she still receives a stern warning from her friend. The actress continues to cut off her faux locks with scissors and seems unbothered by her friend's concerns.

Some of Haddish's fans worried about her mental state. Many of them inquire in the comment section of the video about whether she is going through a depression, a breakup, pregnancy, or health issues although she seems joyful and clear about her decision. Commenters claim that she is having a "Brittany" moment, referring to the pop star Brittany Spears, who years ago shaved her head bald after claiming mental distress. Others believe that she is pulling a Hollywood stunt or preparing for a movie role. Haddish addresses the concerns of her fans in a follow up video assuring them that she is not mental unstable. She challenges their opinions, stating "Why when a woman decides, hey I'm gonna cut this hair off because I wanna see my scalp, she gotta have a mental problem? Nothing is wrong with my brain guys." (Haddish, 0:300:38) Haddish's desires to explore every part of her body during her journey of self-

discovery, including her scalp, still some of her fans cannot let go of their prejudices about women who shave their heads.

On the YouTube Channel Vlad TV, fellow African American comedian Luenell interviews Tiffany Haddish shortly after she shaved her head. Luenell, asked Haddish about the experience. Haddish expressed that she felt less stress in her life after the haircut. Luenell who has low-cut hair related to that feeling of liberation. Both women discussed how free they feel not allowing their hair to hold them back from simple everyday life. Haddish describes the joy of feeling raindrops on her scalp for the first time. “It felt like God was giving me a million little kisses all over my head. It felt like I was being blessed or baptized again” (Vlad TV, 52:5953:06). The comedian enjoys the practical and spiritual aspects of having a bald head. Seeing her scalp for the first time as an adult allowed her to recall events in her life, such as the time when she needed stitches or received a bruise. She does not give details about these events, but when she points to the scars on her scalp, she is emotional. Haddish is connecting with herself in intimate ways by simply letting her hair go. She holds back tears when she remembers her mother’s battle with mental illness. Haddish seems disheartened by those who would equate a haircut to such a serious issue. She explains how her mother was thrown into jails, and hospitals before being placed into mental institutions faraway from loved ones. Haddish diligently attends to her mental health and wellbeing to avoid these oppressive systems. This engaging conversation helps to lift the stigma about mental illness and about being a bald woman.

The comedian is tackling the stigmas attached to bald women and of mental illness. When commenters accuse Haddish of being crazy it is because her behavior is outside of the gendered norms of western society. It is not because she is displaying any signs of mental illness.

Her actions make other people uncomfortable. She is breaking the unwritten rules. Those who choose to follow the status quo want to keep her in line. They attempt to control her with insults, and by accusing her of being crazy. She disarms them by controlling her narrative on social media. During the interview she is competent in her ability to articulate how shaving her head is a part of her personal development. She puts a spotlight on the injustices that happen to US Black women who suffer from psychopathology. Therapy and mental illness are stigmatized subjects in the African American community. Some black people see seeking the help of a psychiatrist as a weakness (Thomas). By admitting that she sees a therapist she may encourage other Black women to do the same. Haddish's openness about her hair and mental health empowers other Black women to step outside the box of gendered and racial norms.

Chapter 6: Harmful Acts of Power in the Barbershop

Sutoye` describes the problematic relationship that she had with her first male barber who consistently sexually harassed her while servicing her. She states, “It was a really uncomfortable relationship and me constantly rejecting him and being in a position where you have someone with really sharp utensils on your head. It’s really hard how you even navigate rejection” (BBC Stories 0:04-0:015). She discusses the feelings of intimidation having to reject her barber’s sexual advances. Sutoye` is uncertain about how to even respond to this unwanted attention while she is in a vulnerable position of having sharp tools being used closely to her scalp. The buzzing sounds of clippers alone can be jarring to anyone experiencing their first close shaved haircut. The barber’s unwanted sexual advances add another element of stress.

Sexual harassment is about power. In this scenario between Sutoye` and her barber, the barber is in control. She is vulnerable as he is making unwanted sexual advances towards her with intimidating tools such as scissors, razors, and clippers near her head. He eventually used these as weapons. She states, “he started messing up my haircuts as an act of revenge or showing his disapproval” (BBC Stories 0:23-0:27). A bad haircut may not be physically harmful, but it can be traumatic and violent to one’s self-esteem. Unfortunately, when many women stand up against sexual harassment their perpetrators often attack. Sutoye` went several weeks without getting a haircut because she did not know what to do next.

These experiences led Sutoye` to seek support from other Black women. After a particularly hard day with her barber, Sutoye` went on the social media site Twitter to discuss her experiences of sexual harassment. Her tweets started a conversation among black women who were having similar experiences. The responses were astounding. The artist decided to take

the discussion offline and bring it into physical manifestation creating the Bald Black Girl(s) exhibition to provide a space for black women to share their experiences through art and conversations on their own terms. Sutoye` transforms a disempowering moment into an empowering one for herself and other Black women who have suffered through similar situations.

Other women attending the Bald Black Girl(s) celebration discuss their experiences at the barbershop. One woman describes an incident when her barber asked for her phone number by suggesting that she can give him private English lessons. The tone and inflection she used to explain this exchange alludes to the barber having a sexual ulterior motive with his request. Her annoyance with his behavior is clear, but like Sutoye` she is careful about how to handle the situation because of her vulnerability to assault. She explains, “And you know when someone’s got a blade to your head, you’re not trying to talk wicked so I’m just like, ’ok, thank you sir.’ Just facing forward and it was just the most uncomfortable exchange, and he wanted to take my number after. And I’m like bro leave it alone. Let me just go” (BBC Stories 1:56-2:10). The inability to speak up because of the possible threat of physical or emotional attack keeps her quiet in the moment. Silence is a way that many Black women cope with sexual harassment. It is often used as a form of self-protection. She simply wants the barber’s unbecoming behavior to stop. She wants to escape the situation without any further attacks. The event is further complicated because the barber’s son is a few seats away and possibly witnessing his father’s actions. Unfortunately, this toxic behavior may pass onto another male generation. A second woman talks about the way her barber would whisper his request for her phone number in her ear when the barbershop was crowded. The act of whispering requires close contact that adds to anxiety of the unwanted sexual attention. Whispering also allows this barber to harass his client

in plain sight. It is as if they are sharing a dirty secret that he enjoys and that she obviously is not taking pleasure in. She refers to herself as being “stupid” (BBC Stories 2:25) for giving him her personal information with the understanding that he would be using it to book appointments on social media apps such as WhatsApp. After she received harassing calls and messages from him, she decides to change her barber. Often many women blame themselves even if they are the victims of violations. The woman in this scenario believes that she did something “stupid” by giving this barber her phone number although she did so without desiring a romantic relationship. Even if mutual romantic intentions initially existed between both harassment through excessive phone calls and messages is unacceptable.

In both situations the barbers should be held accountable as professionals. Although the Black barbershop functions mainly as a casual space, barbering itself is a profession that requires those who hold the position to treat all clients in a respectful manner. It is unprofessional for barbers to create an uncomfortable environment for the women they are servicing, through unwanted sexual advances, unnecessary communication outside of the barbershop, and by creating a hostile space through language and conversation that can be offensive. Barbers have the power to create warm, inviting spaces for women if they carry themselves in a professional manner and see them as clients and not as sexual objects.

Clients within the barbershop can also create a hostile environment for women. Mary, another woman I interviewed about her experiences wearing a low-cut natural, described being privy to conversations between clients in the barbershop that were “hostile” towards women. When the Lifetime channel aired the series, *Surviving R. Kelly*, many people had opinions about the allegations of sexual assault and abuses made by the women interviewed. Black men had a

lot to say about the women who spoke out against the African American male R&B star, Robert Kelly. Mary describes their conversation as “violent” and “sexist” towards women (Phillips). The misogynistic exchange made Mary feel uncomfortable. She felt like she could only display her disdain with facial expressions. Mary was not interested in speaking out in this moment out of fear of a contentious debate between herself and these men. This is an example of why male barbers should carry themselves with professionalism because they set the tone of the environment in the barbershop. They may not be able to control what clients say, but they can establish a decorum letting their clients know what is inappropriate in the shop.

The Black barbershop is thought of as the black man’s country club. Historically, black men have been kept out of many public and private spaces due to racism and discrimination, but the black barbershop has been the one consistent safe space for black men. Many black men feel like it is the one place where they can be authentic. It is a space for unfiltered conversation about politics, sports, women and whatever is on their minds. It is a place where many men come for more than a haircut, but also to get away from their problems. The barbershop can be therapeutic. Some people feel that women do not belong in Black barbershops because they are sacred places for men. Other women view barbershops as unwelcoming to women and therefore refuse to step into these spaces. Deidre, one of the women I interviewed about her low-cut natural hair will only go to a hair salon. She describes the barbershop as spaces being “full of masculinity” (Flowers). The perception that the barbershop is a toxic male space towards women, makes getting a haircut there unappealing to Deidre. Sutoye` explained that Black women told her that the sexual harassment that she experienced from her barber was her fault because she should not have stepped into the barbershop in the first place (Francis).

The idea that black women deserve sexual harassment because they have stepped into male space gives men the license to inflict violence on them. Perhaps the reasons why these men felt free to behave this way is because they had the attitude that women were stepping into their territory. When women buy into the idea that they deserve violence they become complicit with their oppression. If men agree to service you and accept compensation for services provided, then they must also accept the responsibility of behaving like a professional. Sutoyé and the women of the Bald Black Girl(s) project are empowering themselves and other black women by creating spaces and conversations to validate their experiences. The women at the event shared stories about their hair that were unique-both common and diverse, and like all women they are susceptible to sexual harassment.

Along with the panel discussion Sutoyé` created a visual poem, *Reign*, an Afro futurism film that allows bald Black women to imagine a world where only they exist. This fantasy allows them to picture what their lives might look like without the white and male gaze. It is about exploring a free world without gendered norms and constructed white beauty standards. Sutoyé` says “I want to create what I`m not seeing” (Benedict), when she was questioned about the stories that she wanted to tell with the visual film of *Reign*. She expressed that there was a lack of representation of bald Black women in the UK. When Sutoyé` needed support, she got it from other bald Black women on the internet. Her project in turn supports other Black women helping them to find their power and is widely available online. Perhaps the internet is becoming one of the greatest tools for helping black women to stand in their power.

Chapter 7: Texturism and Hair Policing in the Natural Hair Community

Tiffany Haddish is not the only black female celebrity to face public ridicule for cutting her hair. In 2009, singer, Solange Knowles came under fire when she exchanged her long weave for a low shaved haircut. Fans also accuse her of doing a “Brittany”, claiming that a mental breakdown must be the reason for the drastic change in her hairstyle. The natural hair community swiftly came to Knowles defense and chastised critics who bashed her low shaved haircut. Her defenders continued to publicly admire the singer’s TWA, braids, twists, and natural textured wigs, raising her to iconic style status (Byrd & Tharp, 187). Knowles, however, is very capable of speaking up for herself. She responds to attacks from critics on her Twitter page with the following:

“I just wanted to be free from the bondage that black women sometimes put on themselves with hair”. (Alexis)

Months after the musician’s big chop she sat down for an interview with Oprah Winfrey, revealing that she has spent between \$40,000 to \$50,000 on hair weaves (Byrd, Tharp 188). The singer explains that she did not like the energy surrounding her hair. She admits to feeling insecure about her looks without a weave before her haircut, although this was not her first Big Chop. During her appearance she told Oprah “This phase of my life I want to spend the time and energy and the money on something else and not in the salon” (Alexis). Like Haddish, Knowles focuses on the conveniences of wearing a short haircut, which allows her to have more freedom, time, and resources.

Knowles describes a self-inflicted slavery that she and other black women place on themselves with their hair, however, these compulsions are not innate. They come from outside pressures to adhere to white beauty standards. Cottom argues that there is an interdependent relationship between beauty and capitalism. She describes the beauty industry- or Big Beauty as a coercive actor that works conjointly with a white, capitalist power structure to reproduce an existing order (Cottom, 66). It is a hierarchal structure of Whites at the top and Blacks on the bottom. In this white supremacist system, the beautiful people have access to the opportunities such as wealth, education, and property available in a free nation.

The beautiful people are White (Cottom, 45). The people deemed ugly fill US prisons, get killed by the police, lack quality healthcare and fight for basic rights. The ugly people are Black, yet they are told that they too can be beautiful if they earn it. Big Beauty offers cosmetics, fashion, services, and procedures to help black women aspire to it although they can never join the club. Cottom writes “if I believe I can become beautiful, I become an economic subject. My desire becomes a market. And my faith becomes a salve for white women who want to have the right politics while keeping the privilege of never having to live them. White women need me to believe I can earn beauty, because when I want what I cannot have, what they have becomes all the more valuable. I refuse them” (Cottom, 65). This is the bondage that Knowles is alluding to. She is pointing to is the capitalistic nature of beauty and what it does to black women. Spending \$50,000 on weaves may seem excessive to the average person. However, the musician is using the resources that she can afford to aspire to white beauty norms. Knowles’s aspiration is an economic subject. Her desire was long, straight hair and therefore she generously contributed to a global hair wigs and extension market. According to Black Pepper Magazine, this market is forecasted to reach revenues of \$10 billion from 2018-2023. Globally women of African descent

are among the major consumers in this market. The growth of hair loss among this group is contributing to extension and wigs sale, but the desire to mimic celebrities and follow fashion trends is also a huge influence. North America consumers dominate in this market, with the highest sales in the United States. These trends reflect Cottom's point; When black women want what they cannot have, it makes a white woman's hair worth \$10 billion.

Even the natural hair movement has become a space with texture hierarchies. The term "texturism" has been spoken about in the natural hair community. It is the idea that looser, longer curls are more favorable than tight curls. There is even a scale for describing different hair textures. Oprah Winfrey's hair stylist, Andre Walker helped to popularize this idea in his book, *Andre Talks Hair*, in which he categorized four hair types based on texture (Byrd & Tharp, 190). The website Naturallycurly.com specified Walker's scale down into more detailed variations of textured hair from wavy to tight coils (Byrd & Tharp, 190). The current version is a numerical and alphabetical system from one through four, with variations of A, B, and C (Byrd & Tharp, 190). Straighter hair textures have lower letters and numbers, tight textures are the opposite. For example, the straightest hair would be a 1A and the tightest coils is considered a 4C. Black women usually lie between 3B and 4C (Byrd & Tharp, 190). Some naturalistas may find this chart helpful when trying to understand their hair texture. It may make purchasing haircare products and choosing styles easier, but others see it as a reassertion of white beauty standards. Author, Yaba Blay believes that this categorization of hair is contentious. "This vocabulary, the 4A and 4B thing, is interesting and problematic," says, Blay. "It is no different than talking about 'grades' of hair. when we talk about the politics of beauty, it is aligned with and reflective of White power and White Supremacy. And this exists in the natural hair community" (Byrd & Tharp, 190).

Knowles experienced this bias firsthand when her Afro was criticized by women in the natural hair community. In an article on [Curlynikki.com](#), commenters described the musician's hair as "unkempt", "dry", "unstyled" and "homeless" ([Curlynikki](#)). One of the anonymous critics wrote, "If she is to be a representative of this movement, ..., then she needs to REPRESENT. That's all I'm saying. Comb it please." Another anonymous person states, "she really needs to put some work into STYLING her hair. This is why people think natural hair looks bad" ([curlynikki.com](#), 2012). Others suggest that she should wear her hair in a twist out or braid out style. The community that once defended the star became her biggest critics. The website [Thirsty Roots](#) reports on Knowles' response on her Twitter page, "I've never painted myself as a team natural vice president" ([Roots](#) ®). She also rejects their suggestions of a twist out, "I hate the way they look on me. So, I end up always picking them/steaming them out" ([Roots](#) ®). The singer continues, "Look, all I'm saying is. My hair is not very important to me...so I don't encourage it to be important to you" ([Roots](#) ®). Finally, she concludes, "Just having a moment to express my disdain for the Natural Hair police of the world" ([Roots](#) ®).

These naturalistas are engaging in texturism because they are suggesting that Knowles' 4C hair must be manipulated for it to look presentable. Twist outs and braid outs are natural hairstyles that give tight textures a curly or wavy appearance. Thick, tight coils like Knowles' usually lack curl definition. These are not the curls that some naturalistas prefer to "represent" them. A good twist out with the right curling cream could easily make Knowles' 4C look like a 3B. Today there are plenty of natural haircare products on the market that make that promise to Black women.

According to [Mintel.com](#) the "sales of styling products have increased 26.8 percent from 2013 to estimated 2015, reaching \$946 million, now comprising 35 percent of Black haircare

sales” (Mintel News). Meanwhile relaxer sales have fallen 18.6 percent from 2013-2015 (Mintel News). These numbers are an indication of how the natural hair movement is affecting the black haircare market. Black women are switching from chemical treatments to styling products that can help them maintain their curls and coils. Mintel’s research indicates that Black women gain a sense of positive identity, freedom, uniqueness, confidence, and pride wearing their natural hair (Mintel News). Mintel’s Multicultural Analyst, Tonya Roberts said “The prominence of the market reflects the high price tag of many natural haircare products, but consumers appear willing to pay the price for a natural look” (Mintel News). What exactly is a natural look? The lines are blurred. These miracles in a jar often promise to stretch, elongate, and define curls. Some even claim to prevent shrinkage, a very common trait of tightly textured hair. If Black women feel truly liberated wearing natural hair, why are they spending millions of dollars on haircare products that promise to manipulate their texture?

The natural hair movement has become a commodified and stratified space because even our counter narratives are in the grip of capitalism. The coercive beauty industry teaches Black women that their beauty must be earned through spending. Even when they are “natural” edges must be laid, and curls must pop. The haircare companies push these messages about what it means to wear natural hair appropriately. In 2011 Knowles was an advocate for the haircare company, Carol’s Daughter, until she cut ties with the brand over conflicts about the company’s messaging about natural hair. In an interview with Lurve Magazine (2012) the singer says, “The message that the way we wear our hair is a personal choice, there’s no right way or wrong way; one way doesn’t make us more intelligent, or more superficial, and everyone makes that choice for very different reasons” (Luxe Radar Media). There are consequences to not adhering to this standard, such as being accused of looking “homeless”. It takes time and resources to

successfully put on this performance. Black women must do/purchase something to present themselves differently because they have been told for centuries that the way they exist is not enough. The desire to be enough created a \$946 million market.

Chapter 8: The Investment of Black Hair

In my interview with Mary, she discussed how her hair became too much of a financial, personal, and psychological investment, therefore she decided to cut it off. Mary describes getting her hair done like clockwork. Every two months she went to an African braiding shop in Harlem to get Senegalese twists. She loved the “long” and “fabulous” braids (Phillips). They made her feel feminine, attractive, and in touch with her African ancestry. That sense of identity and self-esteem came with a hefty price tag over \$200 bi-monthly. In addition, she purchased haircare products to keep the style fresh and to maintain her hair when it was not in braids. The costs of living in an expensive city, paying high rent, and up keeping pricey hairstyles was stressful. “I am done with this investment that we have been socialized as Black women to have with our hair.” she said (Phillips). Mary decided that the twists had to go. A barbershop haircut for a fraction of the price of braids seemed more practical.

When Mary cuts her hair, she is not just making a pragmatic decision. She was also letting go of trauma. She has worn her natural hair texture for most of her life even when doing so was not popular. Relaxers caused severe breakage to her hair, so to save it she had to give up the chemicals. Her hair was restored to health, but she still paid a price. Mary was teased and bullied about her hair from childhood to adulthood. When her braided extensions were left in too long classmates referred to her as Busta Rhymes. It was not a compliment. Even in graduate school officers of her multicultural program told her that her Afro was not well groomed. She explains that these events were embarrassing and hurtful. Mary was meticulousness about her twists and for a long time she was willing to pay a high price for them. This behavior is indicative of the pressures that black women feel for their hair to be perfect. For Mary, cutting

her hair also symbolizes letting go of the personal and psychological investment she associated with it.

Today image appears to be very important to Black people. These attitudes are reflected in Black consumer's beauty and grooming purchases which they believe help them to look their best (Mintel News). Mintel's research showed that "half (49%) of Black consumers agree it's important to always look their best, regardless of the circumstances. Another 38 percent agree that they do whatever they can to look as attractive as possible" (Mintel News). Placing significance on looking attractive regardless of one's situation may prompt Black women to invest in haircare products and services even if it is a financial burden. The pressure to keep up with appearances hinders Black women from giving themselves permission to be imperfect.

Chapter 9: “That Bald Head Changed My Life” – Issa Rae

Comedic actress, writer, and producer Issa Rae explains how shaving her head transformed her life, in an interview on Essence Live. She discusses how she was inspired by the bald haircut sported by Natalie “The Floacist”, of the former duo Floetry. Rae was also frustrated with her job and was struggling to get her YouTube show *Awkward Black Girl*, off the ground. One day Rae tweeted a message mentioning that she wished someone would breakup with her so she could have an excuse to shave her head. Her friends dared her for to do it for laughs. After the huge and humorous response Rae thought that this would be a funny plot line for a show. She decided to shave her head and created a trailer where she would feature her haircut on *Awkward Black Girl*. People who were curious about her new look would also be introduced to her show. It was a successful move that garnered three thousand views of her new show in one day. The actress said “I had a bald head and a fresh start. That bald head changed my life” (Essence, 2:19-2:22).

Issa Rae’s genius move was born out of the need to give herself permission to be bald. It was something that she wanted to do on her own, but she knew she had to find a way for it to be acceptable to others. She jokes about desiring to blame her decision on a bad breakup because she understands that people associate women and baldness with emotional distress. Connecting her haircut to her art made it more sensible to others, who would admire her for being dedicated to her craft. Rae also needed to connect her haircut to comedy because bald headed women are stereotyped as funny, tragic, or masculine. In this case the joke is on the audience. Rae got two things that she wanted from her bald head: Freedom and opportunity. If she had shaved her head

for an unworthy reason the response from her friends would have been negative, just like their initial reactions to her tweet.

In the interview Rae also discussed some interesting reactions to her bald head from men. Men who found her haircut appealing made assumptions about her. They thought she was Afrocentric, and a lover of poetry and cocoa butter. Shaniqua, a woman I interviewed discussed a similar response to her low-cut natural hair from men. She says, “I feel like the low haircut attracts like the ‘woke’ man. You know like the man that’s for the people” (Jackson). The term “woke” has gained popularity with millennials. It refers to person who is current on issues surrounding race and social justice (Merriam-Webster). Shaniqua is indicating that men who are attracted to her assume that her hairstyle represents her politics. Black hair remains political even when it is not intentional.

Rae recalls how men would approach her delicately and say things like “I appreciate you wearing your hair like that” (Essence 0:54-0:58). She responds with awkwardness and sarcasm, “thank you for your approval” (Essence 0:59-1:00). Although her admirers may have good intentions the idea that these men are giving Rae an unsolicited stamp of approval is problematic. Sutoye` also experiences this but in an opposing way. Men react to her hair cut asking her “did you lose a bet to your brother?”, or “does your husband know about this?” Sutoye` believes these inquiries imply that she needs a man’s permission to cut her hair. Her interpretation may be accurate.

Chapter 10: The Male Gaze:

The idea that men should have control over women's bodies is not new. In Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the fiercely independent Janie Crawford tells her story of self-evolution through three marriages, poverty, grief and finding self-purpose. Janie struggles with her abusive husband, Joe (Jody), who attempts to control her, especially about her appearance in public. He is particularly demanding about Janie wearing a head scarf while she works in their store. Janie's aggravation and Joe's true reasons for his demand is revealed in the following:

THIS BUSINESS OF THE HEADRAG IRKED HER ENDLESSLY. BUT JODY WAS SET ON IT. HER HAIR WAS NOT GOING TO SHOW IN THE STORE. IT DIDN'T SEEM SENSIBLE AT ALL. THAT WAS BECAUSE JOE NEVER TOLD JANIE HOW JEALOUS HE WAS. HE NEVER TOLD HER HOW OFTEN HE HAD SEEN THE OTHER MEN FIGURATIVELY WALLOWING IN IT AS SHE WENT ABOUT THINGS IN THE STORE. AND ONE NIGHT HE HAD CAUGHT WALTER STANDING BEHIND JANIE AND BRUSHING THE BACK OF HIS HAND BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE LOOSE END OF HER BRAID EVER SO LIGHTLY SO AS TO ENJOY THE FEEL OF IT WITHOUT JANIE KNOWING WHAT HE WAS DOING. JOE WAS AT THE BACK OF THE STORE AND WALTER DIDN'T SEE HIM. HE FELT LIKE RUSHING FORTH WITH THE MEAT KNIFE AND CHOPPING OFF THE OFFENDING HAND. THAT NIGHT HE ORDERED JANIE TO TIE UP HER HAIR AROUND THE STORE. THAT WAS ALL. SHE WAS THERE IN THE STORE FOR HIM TO LOOK AT, NOT THOSE OTHERS (HURSTON, 65)

In this passage Hurston is demonstrating how men attempt to have ownership of women. Joe treats Janie's hair as his property for his pleasure. When Joe witnesses Walter touching Janie's hair the threat that another man may take or tamper with his goods fills him with angry jealousy. Instead of confronting Walter or "chopping off the offending hand", he turns his violence onto Janie by means of control, demanding that she wear a head rag in the store to

protect his property. Janie's hair also represents beauty and sexual desire which Joe also attempts to possess. Joe forcing Janie to cover her hair is also his attempt to control the male gaze on her.

He believes by covering her hair she is less desirable for Walter and other men.

The men who question Sutoyè about what man she consulted in her life before cutting her hair indicate that they believe women's hair represents beauty and sexual desirability that belongs to men. The deeper inquiry is why would a woman cut off something that men enjoy. If she lost a bet to her brother, they would be able to understand how chopping her tresses is a punishment from a man of which she has no sexual connection. If she got permission from her husband, that may be acceptable because that is a part of her beauty that he is willing to lose. According to these patriarchal ideas either way a woman's hair is the property of men who can only allow her to make such drastic decisions.

There are times however when women do seek the approval of men particularly in romantic heterosexual relationships. Bald and low shaved Black women may feel a sense of freedom with their hair, but some question if men find them attractive. In a YouTube video, *Bald Headed and Dating*, Cherele Moire is nervous about showing up on her date with a low shaved haircut. She believes her suitor will reject her when he sees her low shaved haircut for the first time. She considers wearing a long, straight wig which she playfully named Sarah. "Sarah makes me feel like I'm safe and I'm in disguise and I look like the rest of America" (Moire, 2:17-2:22). She contemplates if she should go on her date as Sarah or herself. The wig represents a white beauty standard and a gender norm. Wearing it allows her to look ideally feminine helping her to fit in with the dominant culture. The artifice serves as a security blanket and hides a part of her Black identity. Moire uses meditation to help herself relieve stress and to make a clear decision.

Once she puts on her make up her confidence appears lifted. She decides to choose herself and leaves Sarah behind. To her surprise her date compliments her haircut and is open to the new look. Moire choses to own her insecurities instead of reaching for what felt safe.

Some bald and low shaved women are concerned about maintaining their femininity. There are quite a few videos on YouTube to help women tackle this issue. Most instruct women on how to use cosmetics, clothing, and accessories to create a softer appearance. Emphasis is placed on using lots of makeup to accentuate facial features. It was also suggested that women should get services such as manicures, pedicures, and eye lash extensions. Because of the lack of hair women seem to overcompensate in other areas to look feminine. These suggestions connect black women back to Big beauty and the capitalist economy. Many Black women chose to cut their hair because it was more affordable. Playing on their insecurities drives them back to consumerism. Bald and low shaved Black women are being encouraged to focus their attention on cosmetics since they do not need many haircare products. Similarly, naturalistas with longer hair are persuaded to shift their dollars from relaxers to styling products. These behaviors are influenced by the desire to adhere to a feminine ideal of the dominant culture.

The women that I interviewed and observed on YouTube all agreed that the pros of a bald or low shaved haircut is affordability, confidence and the reduction of time and maintenance spent on their hair. Women who previously wore their hair natural felt relieved from “wash day.” The process of shampooing, conditioning, detangling, and styling textured hair can take many hours. Some women said the process felt like an entire day. Having a short haircut allowed them to reclaim that time and energy. The price of barbershop haircuts is significantly cheaper than services at salons. Being able to save money on products and services is a definite pro. These women also expressed a higher level of confidence with their short hair. Some women

appreciated their facial features a lot more once hair was no longer a distraction. Spending time and money on makeup, fashion, and services can be counterproductive to the desire to save money and time. Creating a dependency on these things can also erodes one's confidence.

Chapter 11: Hair Loss

For some Black women being bald is not a choice. Many lose their hair due to alopecia. There are three specific types that Black women are prone to: central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia (CCCA); traction alopecia; and breakage (Carson). CCCA is caused by hair practices that can be damaging over time. Repeated and long-term use of braids, weaves, chemical relaxers, and excessive heat styling with hot combs can cause inflammation of follicles, leading to permanent hair loss (Carson). Traction alopecia can be caused by hair styles that are worn too tightly. These can include dreadlocks, weaves, cornrows, and twist that when pulled tightly at the hair root causes inflammation, which over a prolonged period causing scarring and permanent hair loss (Carson). Breakage is damage to the hair shaft that has been weakened by excessive heat styling and chemical hair dyes and relaxers (Carson). The fragility of natural curly and coiled hair makes it prone to damage. It must be treated with care.

Over a year ago, Representative Ayanna Pressley shared her Black hair story about alopecia which she says is “both personal and political” (The Root, 0:19-0:22). In an interview with *The Root*, she publicly revealed her bald head for the first time. The representative wanted to be free from the shame and secret of having no hair. Previously Pressley wore waist long Senegalese twist that started as a transitional hairstyle. The braids helped her develop a strong sense of identity. She became very intentional about wearing the hairstyle showing her own sense of beauty. The Representative understood that others might interpret her look in political ways. She was unafraid of being seen as militant or angry. Others would already place those stereotypes on her because she is a Black woman.

To Pressley’s surprise there was an acceptance and community around her hair choice.

When she walked into rooms little Black girls wore T-shirts that read “My Congresswoman Wears Braids.” This affirmation was also felt from Black women who wrote her numerous letters in appreciation of her style. Seeing an African American woman in a political position wearing braids, gave them the freedom and permission to be themselves. Pressley’s famous twists became a part of her personal and political identity.

Years later the congresswoman was diagnosed with alopecia that caused rapid hair loss. She desperately tried to hold on to her hair in secret. The last strands of her hair fell out right before she was set to vote to impeach President Donald Trump. The monumental decision did not allow Pressley the time to mourn her loss. Instead, she cried in shame in a bathroom stall as soon as she left the floor of the House of Representatives. The moment left her feeling vulnerable and embarrassed. She said, “It was a moment of transformation without my choosing” (The Root, 4:01-4:03). Pressley cast her vote in a wig, but she felt like she was committing an act of “cultural betrayal” (The Root, 4:39-4:43). She thought of all the little girls who looked up to her and their t-shirts that read, “#twistnation”. The representative felt that she owed them an explanation of why she was no longer wearing the braids that they adored.

Pressley’s public reveal was about freedom. She was able to liberate herself from the secret and the shame of being bald. Her transformation was not just for herself, but for other Black women and girls. In the website article, “Survey: Almost Half of African-American Women Have Experienced Hair Loss”, Dr. Yolanda Lenzy, and The Black Women’s Health Study at Boston University’s Epidemiology Center reported that 47.6% of 5,594 Black women surveyed reported hair loss (Science Daily). If this information is indicative of the US Black female population, then many Black women will experience this in their lifetime. Pressley’s honesty helps to lift the stigma of female baldness. The representative admits that she is still

making peace with her alopecia. Being open is a part of her progress. Allowing herself to be vulnerable has given her “self-agency”, “power”, and “acceptance” (The Root, 6:43-6:50).

Pressley is using her platform to help other Black women and girls to do the same.

International hair coach, Deshawn Bullard, featured her client Antavia, on her *Restoring Crowns Series*. Antavia discusses how she finally embraced her baldness after suffering many years with dermatitis psoriasis- “a condition which can cause well defined red, scaly patches on the scalp, elbows, or knees (Restoring Crowns Series)). The condition caused her hair to fall out in patches. She went through a period when she worked endlessly to cover up the damage. Antavia tried desperately to hold to the last strands of her hair to install weaves. She grew up constantly hearing that “A woman’s hair is her crown and glory”. The paraphrased biblical scripture is often recited in African American communities. This passage has caused some Black women to create a religiosity around their hair. Antavia had to unlearn those ideals and redefine glory for herself. She decided for herself that, “God is the glory that you want to have not your hair” (Restoring Crowns Series 1:19-1:22).

Antavia went through an inner transformation before embracing her baldness publicly. Even when wearing wigs, she consciously affirmed herself daily. She lived with her baldness in secret, admitting that even close relatives were unaware of her turmoil. Antavia found inner strength by coming to the realization that hair would not change who she was. She discussed how people update their phones and cars, but they are still the same. She explained that they are just interacting with things. Antavia decided that she could let go of the things, the weaves, and the wigs because they did not define her. She described her journey as one of “self-love” (Restoring Crowns Series 5:15-5:18)

When the blockbuster movie *Black Panther* hit theaters, many people asked Antavia if the film inspired her hairstyle. She politely explained that she was her own inspiration. Those questions became a conversation starter for others to learn about her journey on social media.

The movie gave her a nudge to keep going. She appreciated that representation because she said, “it was something to show me that my black is beautiful.” (Restoring Crowns Series 5:35-5:37)

Women with alopecia and other hair loss conditions do not choose to be bald, but they do have agency. Instead of continuing to silently suffer Pressley and Antavia used their platforms to liberate themselves from shame and secrecy. Through personal transformation they are promoting social change in how bald Black women are seen. There is power in representation. The little girls who proudly wore their #twistnation t-shirts are proof. These girls who were so moved by Pressley’s braids have another image of her that they can admire. Black women experiencing hair loss can also be inspired by women like Pressley and Antavia. Their courage allows other women to release the stigma and shame of their condition. Representation matters. It gives Black women tools to fight oppression. Pressley said:

I’m not here just to occupy space. I’m here to create it. (The Root, 6:11-6:14)

Chapter 12: Hair Discrimination: Fighting for Validation

Although Black women have been embracing their natural hair fiercely over the past twenty years hair discrimination persist. In 2010 Chasity Jones had a job offer taken away when she declined to cut off her dreadlocks. The Supreme Court refused to review her case in 2018 (Goff). Rhonda Lee a local meteorologist in Louisiana was fired after she respectfully defended herself from derogatory comments that viewers made about her natural hair (Byrd & Tharp). In 2018, 15-year-old twins Deanna and Mya Cook, were threatened with suspension from their Boston high school, banned from extracurricular activities and prom for wearing braided hair extensions. The hairstyle apparently violated the school's dress code that labels them "distracting" (Lattimore). Black hair is under attack in ways that go beyond preferences of attractiveness.

Fighting for the recognition to be beautiful is complicated for black women. In the west black women live under exclusionary white beauty standards. For centuries, these standards have existed to reproduce a social order of white supremacy. Capitalism is the driving force in reproducing social hierarchies. The white dominant society who has access to capital possess the power. They get to decide who is beautiful. Those who possess these qualities have access to the opportunities that a free country has to offer. Beauty placed mainly on the female body, is valuable for white women, although in a patriarchal society they do not have the power to set the qualifications (Cottom, 56, 60). Women of color are coerced into believing that they too can be beautiful. The big beauty industry works hands in glove with capitalism to encourage them to aspire to the impossible goal (Cottom, 58). How can one be beautiful under standards which elude them? Black women's counter narratives to white beauty standards have attempted to

combat notions of black inferiority. These alternatives are also complex because often they place demands on black women that reassert gendered norms and Eurocentric standards. The natural hair movements of the 1960s and 70s and the one that exist currently are not flawless. Despite its missteps today's natural hair movement is empowering black women and changing views and attitudes about their hair. Black women wearing bald and low-cut natural hairstyles are challenging gender norms, stereotypes, and stigma. They are using their experiences and platforms to release black women from shame and ridicule of having short hair or none. They are creating space for validating their experiences. They are supporting one another when the faced with sexual-harassment, stereotypes, and stigma. Bald and low-cut black women are using their transformative moments to help other black women on their journey.

Dismantling systems of oppression may be a labored and tedious task. And fighting to be recognized as beautiful under oppositional standards to what black women look like may be counterproductive. What may be more important in everyday lives of black women are to be recognized as valid. What is beautiful may never be universal especially when it is based on the random and arbitrary taste of people in power. Black women may not need anyone other than themselves to approve of their appearance. What is useful is protection under the law from employers who refuse to hire them because of their hair choices. They need their children to go to school where they will not be suspended for wearing braids. The Crown Act is a step in that direction.

Black women have used their natural hair as a space to create validation. The CROWN Act is proof that the voices of Black women are being heard when it comes to their hair. In 2019 the Dove corporation and the Crown Coalition created the act "to ensure the protection against discrimination based on race-based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture

and protective styles such as braids, locs, twist and knots in the workplace and public schools” (Crown Act). C.R.O.W.N is an acronym that stands for creating a respectful and open world for natural hair. The act has become law in ten US states. African Americans have faced hair discrimination in schools and the workplace for decades. After years of filing laws suits, many unsuccessfully, Black people are starting to receive some protection against this biased treatment.

The purpose of this project is not to promote a particular hairstyling choice to Black women. After all Black women’s creativity with hair is in its versatility and diversity. The intention of this study is also not an attempt to chastise Black women about their purchases of haircare products, cosmetics, or services as they strive to look their best. The focus is to highlight Bald and low shaved Black women. They are a subculture of the natural hair movement whose contributions often go unacknowledged. It is important to understand how they defy gender norms and Eurocentric standards. It is also significant to understand how they challenge stigma. As Black women are creating alternatives to white beauty standards it is imperative to bring awareness to how their desires have become markets. Black hair is wealth, but often not for Black people.

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