The Return: Understanding why Black Women Choose to "Go Natural"

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze and understand why some Black women in Greensboro, North Carolina have made the decision to wear their hair naturally, in its original kinky, curly, non-straightened form. I've chosen this topic because "in our society, long straight hair has generally been considered the gold standard for attractiveness" (Rosette & Dumas, 2007, p. 410) and by deviating from that gold standard, Black women are affected, personally and politically. In my perspective, it is important to understand why a woman would opt to make this choice, knowing the potential backlash she faces (i.e. losing her job, rejection in a romantic relationship, or school suspension). To facilitate this purpose, the guiding research inquiries included 10 questions about the woman's hair journey, at different stages of her life: before perming, while perming, and going natural. In speaking with 10 women from three different generations, I found that the process of going natural is at once complex and simple, is simultaneously gradual and instant, both terrifying and liberating. Ultimately, I learned that even though various factors play a part in this process, "going natural" is a decision mostly directed and determined by the woman standing in the mirror.

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General Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand why some Black women in Greensboro, North Carolina have made the decision to wear their hair naturally, in its original kinky, curly, non-straightened form. I chose this topic because our society has historically and overwhelmingly considered long, straight hair the pinnacle of female attractiveness. In choosing to wear one's hair natural, Black women are affected in many ways (personally, professionally, and politically). In my perspective, it is important to understand why a Black woman would make this choice, knowing the potential consequences that she will face. In this study, I interviewed 10 women from three different generations. Moreover, I used 10 questions about the woman's hair journey, at different stages of her life: before perming, while perming, and going natural, in order to gather information for this work. In speaking with these women, I found that this experience is both complex and simple. Overall, I learned that this liberating decision is primarily led and guided by the woman in the mirror.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the Black girls and women across the world with hair that climbs toward the sun and reaches for the moon: to the Black girls and women who know, don't know, or are getting to know how beautiful they really are, in all of their natural majesty. This thesis is dedicated to my grandmothers Ira Bell Vincent Thompson and Viola Crumpton Moore, both women who birthed nine children each and dedicated their lives to family. These women were born and became mothers in a time where women, especially Black women, didn't have much autonomy. But, they made lemonade out of lemons, regardless of that reality. This thesis is dedicated to my ancestors that paved a way for me to be here thriving today, who, through their tribulations and triumphs, reminded me that quitting, even in the difficult moments, was never an option. Finally, this thesis is dedicated to my wonderful son, Jasir. May he always know that he is enough as is, and that he does not need to bend himself to the tastes of others to be accepted or loved. May he know that he can be anything that he wants to be with the right mindset. May he know that he can go anywhere he wants to go, but that with a solid education, he can travel much further.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Details of my childhood and adolescent years go in and out, like a song playing on the car radio, just as it's on the verge of leaving the station's broadcasting range.

I can easily recall events that I wish to forget: like accidentally slamming my index finger into the unfathomably heavy door of my uncle's Volvo in 4th grade. But, sometimes I struggle to recall events that I would have loved to have stained in my memory: moments of love and grace, like the few times I had with my grandmother when she was in her "right" mind before she passed away of stroke complications. Those memories with her are blurry.

Memory can be tricky and maybe, in the end, for better or worse, we only recall what we want and/or need to remember. Whatever the case, one reoccurring and permanent fixture in my memory is my hair, and how others related to it. There was not one family function that went by without someone adoringly and enthusiastically commenting on my hair: how much of it I had, how long it was, or how pretty it was. While I don't recall being as excited and enamored with it as others were (after all, they weren't the ones that had to sit through hours of detangling, washing, combing and braiding) I do remember thinking that having a lot of "long, pretty hair" was apparently a good thing. While hair carries a level of importance and inherent meaning for all girls and women moving through the world, it serves a unique purpose in the Black community. Unlike girls and women of other ethnicities, for Black Americans (and those of African descent) the *type* of hair that one has—from its texture, to its style, to its length–can become an *automatic* reflection of the *type* of girl or woman she is, in ways that other women and girls could never truly relate to or begin to understand.

From the naysayers to those non-Black women that feel like they can empathize with Black women's hair struggle because they have unruly curls, extremely wavy textures,

bed hair, or loathe the color of their hair, please pause, listen and reflect. Understand that there are a multitude of beauty supply stores, deliberately situated in predominately Black areas, that contain isle after isle of wigs and packaged hair (better known as 'weave' or 'extensions'- both synthetic and real) that resemble those unruly ringlets, wild waves, or frazzled straight bed hair. These beauty supply storeowners (usually non-Black) know that Black women, who are their primary customers, will faithfully patronize their store, buying hair that bears no resemblance to their own natural textures. In "Black Hair," a 2006 documentary about the Black hair industry, Boston native Aron Ranen discovered that "Koreans dominate not only the beauty supply store business but the distribution companies that sell to the beauty supply stores and the wig and extension manufacturers as well. The situation can make it difficult for non-Korean store owners -- particularly fledgling ones who don't have established contacts -- to obtain products" (Jones, 2006). With the predominance of these beauty supply stores in "urban neighborhoods," it seems that these storeowners have built their business model on Black women's longstanding insecurities with their hair. *The Boston Globe* reporter who wrote the piece on this documentary also interviewed a young woman whose dollars help these Korean-owned beauty supply stores thrive, "You always hear jokes about it. I go to the Koreans and get my hair -- it's something we all hear about." says Tiffani Odige, 23, a Black woman who lives in Cambridge, who suspects she spends $2,500 to $3,000 a year on hair and hair products" (Jones, 2006). To add a point of comparison to Odige's statement, I'm 33 and I typically spend anywhere from $800 to $1,000 a year on my hair. My beautician charges $40 for a style (which includes a wash and condition) and I typically get it done once or twice a month. In between styles, when I'm doing and maintaining my own hair, I use

organic products from the grocery store (i.e. coconut or almond oil) or I'll head to establishments like Sally's or Target, specifically for shampoos or conditioners. Moreover, "key findings from a new study confirm that Black women are known to suffer more anxiety about having 'bad hair' and are twice as likely to experience social pressure to straighten their hair" (Bates, 2017). Additionally, Black women are also "twice as likely to spend more on hair products than White women" (Bates, 2017). This anxiousness about having 'bad hair' - which is fundamentally different than just having a bad hair day- could largely stem from the reality that:

> Hair matters in black communities and it matters in different ways for women and men. For black women in this society, what is considered desirable and undesirable hair is based on one's hair texture. What is deemed desirable is measured against white standards of beauty, which include long and straight (usually blonde), that is, hair that is not kinky or nappy. Consequently, black women's hair, in general, fits outside of what is considered desirable in mainstream society. (Banks, 2000, p.2).

Therefore, the struggle is not the same: and I point this out not to cause separation or to participate in "The Oppression Olympics" but to simply show that our hair journey is completely unique in its own right.

That said, I was motivated to do this research because it is a topic that will inevitably affect the majority of Black girls and women at some point in their life journey. And, even though the 2016 presidential election unearthed a multitude of racists, sexists, and xenophobes, from every single crevice of the country, it still feels like this nation is generally becoming or at least *trying* to become, more publicly accepting of people's differences. The national legalization of gay marriage, an entirely new pallet of emojis specifically for people of color, and the election of the first Black president are a

few noteworthy shifts to support my eternal optimist's perspective on the United States of America's social evolution. However, the reality is that severe discrimination still exists and persists toward those that do not embody the European-American, heterosexual standard: a standard which, to be clear, was crafted and promoted by them to benefit them, only.

Unlike women of European descent, who are able to shield the blows of sexism with their Whiteness or men of African descent that can shield the blows of racism with their maleness, Black women occupy a space that leaves them vulnerable, only protected by the shields that they create for themselves. That said, when it comes to Black womanhood, too many sociologists (White and Black) publish studies on pathology and victimization, centering Black women's horror stories of race, gender, and class oppression as the opening act, main event, and finale. Put another way, "American social scientists don't mind one bit what unfounded conclusions you draw about the American Negro, as long as they reflect degradation" (Murray, 1973, p. 100). The ways in which Black women have been dehumanized and degraded is undeniably one piece of the story, but one that should not completely define our existence. Researching, writing about, and telling the stories of pride and victory are equally important to understanding Black women's humanity as well. We must tell the stories that show what Black women do to metaphorically and strategically shield themselves from the onslaught of attacks that tell us, in so many ways, that we're not good enough, that we're not beautiful enough, that we're not worthy enough. We must endeavor to understand how have "African American women as a group found the strength to oppose our objectification as "de mule uh de world?" (Hill Collins, 2009, p. 108).

It is within these stories (lodged within literature like *Raising the Race*[1] or work like *Reflections on the Roles of Female Deities and Queens in Ancient Kemet*[2]) that we are able to gain seeds of pride, prosperity and transformation. These seeds can then be planted (via family, media, education, music, and more) inside the minds of future generations. Ultimately, the more we can unapologetically embrace ourselves (and with that, our natural hair), the more that we can pass down stories and examples of greatness, grace and resilience. The more we uplift ourselves, the less Black girls and women will feel the need to give any credence to the negative thoughts, judgments, and opinions of others. The more we support each other in unconditional love and genuine acceptance, the more it will become quite clear that the only thing that needs to be straightened out, is the critics' convoluted ways of thinking – *not* their hair.

With work like this, a thesis that falls into the long, rich history and legacy of the passel of literature preceding it, it is my hope that Black girls and women will be able to see two things very clearly: first, that there never has been and there never will be anything wrong or bad with the way God made them; and second, that whatever kind or type of natural hair they have *is* "good hair" because, as Tiffany[3], one of my interviewee puts it "it's yours."

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[1] a book by Dr. Riche Barnes that highlights the strategic work life balancing of successful *married* Black mothers

[2] a *Journal of Black Studies* article, by Miriam Ma-at –Ka-Re Monges, that explains the various revered roles that Black women occupied in family, military, religion, and government in Ancient Egypt

[3] All 10 of the study's participants/interviewees (including Tiffany) used their real names. In their disclosure agreements, all ten participants opted for their interviews to be non-confidential.

I think it's important, at this point in the introduction, to be quite clear on my position; I think perms are profoundly unnecessary and wildly destructive. Like skin-bleaching products, I believe they are yet another iteration of products that capitalize on Black women's hamster-wheel efforts to obtain a standard of beauty never intended for them to reach. Because of these deeply held beliefs, I am not approaching this topic detached or unbiased, like the traditional value-neutral sociological researchers. I am approaching this thesis using a critical paradigm—one that realizes that "the researcher is not independent from what is researched" and one that also acknowledges that "social reality is shaped by historical, social, political, cultural, and economic factors, as well as by ethnic, racial, and gendered structures, among others" (Bailey, 2007. p. 55)

Chapter 2: History — Getting to the Root of it

It's critical to understand why "going natural," a seemingly inconsequential cosmetic choice, is a significant decision for Black girls and women in the first place. In order to comprehend the importance, it's helpful to have a historical reference point.

Black people have a rich and proud hair history that starts centuries before the transatlantic slave trade. In the documentary, "400 Years Without a Comb: The Inferior Seed," historian Willie Morrow documents many of these honorable hair styling traditions and expounds on the importance of the treasured comb, which to the African,

> represented more than an implement for the grooming of his hair. Uniquely carved and beautifully fashioned, it told a story – history. The design on the comb linked him to a particular tribe and a particular culture. It also gave personal information concerning the owner, such as his status in the tribe, the wealth he possessed, and his personal history. Contrary to popular belief, grooming and the art of hair care found unique expression within African society. African women wore hairstyles that defy expression in contemporary Western cultures. The art of braiding was commonplace and played a major role in the styles that adorned the heads of men and women. An African man could frequently be found carving a comb with meticulous care for himself or to present as a gift to the woman of his heart. (Morrow, 1989)

This connection to one's tresses was literally cut off at the inception of the slave trade. To begin the process of demolishing Africans' sense of culture and identity, "the first thing that was done to slaves once they were caught was to cut their hair off' (Randle, 2015, p. 3).

As their hair grew back, there were no combs or natural oils available in the New World to properly nourish, style or manage Blacks' hair. Therefore their hair became matted and tangled—a sight that invariably contributed to the Whites unyielding disdain

for Black people's appearance. In order to make their hair more presentable, Black women used anything from butter to bacon grease to attempt to style it. But, instead of dealing with the arduous task of styling Black hair with no comb or product, many Black women settled on wearing a scarf or a rag to completely cover their hair. Ultimately:

> The decline of African hair was the result of the slave owner's denying the slaves time for proper grooming, and ignoring the need for a comb. As slavery was accepted as the way of life, the hope of recapturing African beauty they once possessed was lost to the Africans and their descendents. Furthermore, as they listened to and felt the negative reaction of the overseers, they began to lose the appreciation for their African ancestry. (Morrow, 73, p. 55)

While this thesis specifically concentrates on natural hair, it is important to note that skin tone and hair texture in the Black community are inextricably linked. Because both qualities (complexion and hair) are still seen as indicators of one's proximity to Whiteness, privileges continue to be bestowed upon and denied to those that fit and do not fit into that particular aesthetic. Put another way:

> Though today African Americans with light complexions are not necessarily biracial, they continue to receive what is considered preferential treatment in society. These outcomes are perhaps most influential in the lives of women of color. (Matthews et al, 2015, p. 4)

Tellingly, "because the logic of racism taught both blacks and whites that those who looked most white were most beautiful, black women with straighter hair (and whiter features) were often coveted as sexual prizes" (Weitz, 2004, p. 10).

Essentially, the more European features one has, the more opportunities they are afforded, in most realms of life, from the job market to the marriage market (Hughes, Hertel, 1990). Moreover, while the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in 1863,

it did not totally free Blacks from the idea that their natural selves (African features and all) were somehow inferior to White people.

By the turn of the century, well into the first half of the 1900s, a significant portion of Black Americans were quite concerned with living the American Dream—and the women in this dream were typically straight-haired. However, this pursuit of the American dream was not without its own set of psychological issues for the Black community. For example:

> Both men and women among the Black bourgeoisie have a feeling of insecurity because of their constant fear of the loss of status. Since they have no status in the larger American society, the intense struggle for status among middle-class Negros, as we have seen, is an attempt to compensate for the contempt and low esteem of the Whites. Great value is therefore, placed upon all kinds of status symbols. (Frazier, 1957, p. 219)

While Frazier elaborates on degrees of higher education and Cadillacs as status symbols, appearances, particularly during the early to mid 1900s were particularly reflective of one's status as well. It was important that Black women looked the part, if they were to attract the right mate that would help them move into the middle class. Looking the part rarely meant wearing a kinky, braided, or twisted African-originated hairstyle, especially in this era of Hollywood glamour. Plainly stated, "by the mid-1920s, straight hair had become the preferred texture to signal middle- class status" (Rooks, 1996, p. 75). By the same token, "by the early part of the 20th century, African Americans began associating hairstyles with their ability to achieve economic success in a segregated society" (Banks, 2000, p.8).

Accompanying this 19th century industrial revolution was the concomitant media boom that successfully sold the quintessential flawless, feminine, glamorized White

movie star appeal to American women. It was difficult for any woman to attain or maintain this ideal, but as a population that didn't fit that image in the first place, it was definitely a struggle for Black women.

However, thanks to entrepreneur Annie Turbo Malone, who launched her hair care business, Poro, four years before her more well-known contemporary, Madam CJ Walker, Black women were no longer burdened with the humiliating weight of using grotesque homemade fixings, such as goose fat or bacon grease, to attempt to style their hair. "Coupled with the influence of her aunt who was an herbal doctor and her knowledge of chemistry, Annie Turnbo developed a chemical which could be used to straighten hair without causing damage to the hair or scalp" (Annie Malone Children and Service Center). She not only invented this straightening solution, but she made "The Great Wonderful Hair Grower" too, a product that was famously popular among Black women that wanted to lengthen their hair. She, along with her assistants sold these products door-to-door, and amassed great success.

Walker, who was once touted as the "The Great Benefactress of Her Race" (Walker, 2007, p. 52) on the other hand, took Black hair care and styling to another level by investing in advertising. Walker's lucrative business offered a sophisticated line of products, that she called "preparations" to help Black women become the "fascinating beauty" that her ads assumed every Black woman wanted to be. Even though it was refreshing to finally see Black women in advertisements, the overriding messages in the bulk of Walker's ads were problematic. Often, the ads featured "light complexioned women with wavy hair" as the prototype of beauty, and the prevalent theme of total transformation never went amiss. For instance, one of her ads reads:

> Many persons believe that a head of naturally long and beautiful hair, a healthy scalp, and a healthy smooth complexion come from luck, but they do not. Constant care and the frequent use of preparations of proven merits are the secrets. (Walker, 2007, p. 56)

Of course there's nothing wrong with wanting a healthy scalp, but her ads' non-stop promotion of "naturally long and beautiful hair" reinforced the notion of long, presumably straight, hair being the ideal standard of beauty, for both White and Black women—something that all women should want, but can only be attained by perpetual grooming.

Even though her ads' messages weren't completely uplifting to African-American women, it's vital to note that her legacy transcended these subtly degrading ideas of beauty. For instance, "Walker's beauty empire, therefore, not only contributed to higher self-esteem among the Black community, but also created a new job industry for those who attended her beauty schools" (Patton, 2006, p. 29).

So, regardless of the sociological and/or psychological effects that her ads had on Black women's self-image, there is something to be said about liking and admiring the woman in the mirror -- especially in a time where Black women were openly shamed, tormented and overlooked for having tightly curled and kinky hair. Her variety of products, from the hair softener to the hot comb, made many Black women feel beautiful for the first time, which isn't to be taken lightly. Plus, having the ability to earn money or learn a trade (i.e. hairstyling) in a Black owned operation, outside of the confines of domestic work –in a White person's home - isn't to be taken lightly either.

During this time, "Black entrepreneurs recognized the tremendous opportunity to market and sell products to Blacks—especially women—that would similarly appeal to

the need to assimilate into White culture" (Thompson, 2008 p. 834). That said, Madam CJ Walker's business acumen was quite phenomenal, by *any* entrepreneurial standard, for her powerful ability to provide thousands of consumers with what they "needed."

Moreover, "most Black women straightened their hair occasionally, if not regularly, by the 1930s" (Walker, 2007, p. 84). Even though it would seem that they only did this to emulate White women, for some Black women, this new African-American straightened look meant "freedom, progression toward equality in America" (Annie Malone Children and Service Center), which was a far cry from the plats, scarves, and head rags that they and/or their foremothers wore in the fields. This viewpoint was so pervasive that "Black beauty culture in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s assumed that all women wanted shiny wavy hair and would not hesitate to straighten and style their hair to achieve this look" (Walker, 2007, p. 88).

However, as the racial strife and political unrest continued to unfold, it became increasingly apparent that White supremacy would not yield in the face of non-violent, church-going, finely dressed, straight-haired, upwardly mobile, respectable Black men and women. In essence, it didn't matter how civilized Blacks were (or looked), they were still discriminated against economically, socially, and personally.

While integration was the keystone and most memorable priority for the civil rights movement and some of its notable figures like Dr. Martin Luther King, other leaders felt that another goal for Black people was more useful. Leaders and activists like Malcolm X, Elaine Brown, Huey P. Newton, and Assata Shakur ushered in more of a pro-Black message that charged *Power to the People.* This simple, but profound message

reminded African-Americans “Black is Beautiful.” With the strong, community-based presence of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Blacks were encouraged to realize the importance of “Black Power” as well.

During this era of Black Power, the afro as well as other African based hairstyles emerged onto the Black American landscape. Operating in Black Power made it easier and acceptable to fully embrace one’s Blackness and African ancestry. This feeling however, was not ubiquitous. Most Black women were still wearing their hair straight, and the Afro, a style that originated in the United States as an expression of racial pride, was only “worn by a tiny minority of cosmopolitan Black women” (Walker, 2007, p. 178).

Just like the evolutionary nature of fashion, Black women’s hair choices have also changed with the times, since the 70s. From the Salt-n- Pepa[4] inspired asymmetrical haircuts of the 80s, to the long box braids of the 90s, inspired by Janet Jackson’s role in cult-classic, *Poetic Justice*[5]*,* there’s truly no limit to how a Black woman can choose to portray herself. To that point, Calana, one of this study’s participants says, “I can look like a brand new person everyday if I want to.” Fortunately, with the omnipresent aid of the Internet, the diversity of shows (featuring Black women with natural hair) on subscription-based streaming and cable services like Hulu, Netflix, HBO, OWN (Oprah Winfrey Network) and social media (people-powered digital platforms that showcase a *ton* of images, films, tutorial videos, and media clips featuring Black women with natural

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[4] Salt-n-Pepa is an internationally known, Grammy award winning, all female hip-hop trio from Queens, New York. They emerged as a force in the music industry in the 1980s.
[5] *Poetic Justice*, a 1993 film by John Singleton, is a romantic drama starring Janet Jackson and Tupac Shakur.

hair) the presence of natural haired Black women (on screen and off) continues to blossom and expand. Tellingly, "the natural hair movement is driving a dynamic rise in sales for styling products used to maintain and nourish Black hair, (i.e. setting lotions, moisturizers, curl creams) but simultaneously, there's been a significant decline in relaxer sales" (Mintel, 2013). Contrary to the "tiny minority" of women that sported afros in the 70s, today's Black girls and women can be seen not only sporting, but loving their natural textures —from the block to the boardroom. Natural hair is no longer exclusive to the cosmopolitan Black woman.

But, while the Internet's influence has been critical in transforming Black women's relationship with their natural hair, that certainly hasn't been the only change-agent. And, while it would be nearly impossible to find out what led each and every Black woman in America to go natural, speaking and listening to ten Black women from three different generations may give us a solid glimpse into what factors helped them make the choice to get back to their roots.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Insights

Because this nation isn't accommodating toward Black women (like it is toward White men, where their race and gender are habitually affirmed, making it easier and quite rewarding for them to play that *one* White guy role their entire lives) Black women learn how to juggle and play multiple roles, not only for the world, but also for themselves. Some scholars argue that this mental and emotional mask-switching acrobatics is called *shifting*, "a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 5). While that definition could apply to both Black women and men, the authors of the book focus on the myriad of ways in which shifting is more of a complex performance for African American women and how it takes a much different toll on them socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

Per the participants in this thesis, when it came time to make the decision to go natural and subsequently, *stay* natural, at times, each woman had to be their own judge, cheerleader, admirer, coach, personal consultant, hairdresser and healer. This role switching is what gives Black women an array of orientations to the world. This changing of hats—for the world, and for oneself—is what makes a Black woman's perspective in the world so unique and so necessary.

In my perspective, theoretically speaking, Gloria Anzaldua, feminist writer and scholar of Chicana cultural theory, would refer to this way of being as "mestiza consciousness," one that "provides a unique vantage point for examining individuals, institutions, culture, and society, which in turn can lead to new theories, about diversity in

the U.S." (Solorzano, 1995, p. 214). In her own words, Anzaldua eloquently states that the mestiza consciousness is:

> "a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion, that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm. The mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 79).

Other scholars, expanding on Anzaldua's theory, note that this "mestiza consciousness" allows one to perceive "multiple realities at once" (Hurtado, 1989, p. 855). And even though this shifting can be a painful experience, Anzaldua declares, "the future will belong to the mestiza, because the future belongs to the breaking down of paradigms. It depends on the straddling of two or more cultures" (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 80). I feel that Anzaldua had Latina American women in mind, but this theory can apply to African American women as well.

Audre Lorde, Black feminist, lesbian, mother, revolutionary writer, and an individual known for not mincing her words, wrote *Sister Outsider* three years prior to Anzaldua's *Borderlands: La Frontera* and it's meaningful that they (coming from two different racial backgrounds) have a very similar stance on this particular multi-view. In *Sister Outsider,* Lorde asserts, "In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers" (Lorde, 1984, p. 114). This perpetual "watching" contributes to the double mentalities, and I'd even go so far as to say double lives, of African American women, where they "become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection" (Lorde, 1984, p. 114). As the participants' narratives have revealed,

becoming “familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor” can result in a Black woman rejecting her hair, the same way slave owners use to denigrate and reject the complexions and hair texture of African people.

Eighty-one years before Ms. Lorde wrote *Sister Outsider,* the first to adequately articulate this “watching,” and/or this dichotomy of mentalities, was Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. He wrote about Black women’s strength, resilience, fortitude, and beauty in an immaculate way. DuBois, in referencing Black women, said, “I most sincerely doubt if any other race of women could have brought its fineness up through so devilish a fire” (DuBois, 1920, p. 171).

His theory of double consciousness encompassed the everyday thought processes of both Black men and women in the early 1900s. Although the theory wasn’t intersectional (i.e. he didn’t write about a “triple consciousness” theory to specifically encompass the tripartite identities of Black, American, *and* Woman) but the underlying message of having to ebb and flow between more than one role, is expressed when he writes:

> “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousnesses, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled striving; two warring ideals in one dark body” (DuBois, 1903, p.5).

And to be completely transparent, there are times where this shifting, this “twoness,” this watching, this warring, this straddling, and experiencing multiple realities at once, can feel overwhelming and exhausting. But when I reflect, this fatigue and overwhelm usually shows up when I fail to notice the beauty and value in the space that I hold as a

Black woman in the world. It develops when I start putting the needs and expectations of others before my own. It emerges when I allow myself to feel invisible in certain spaces. It materializes when I forget that this “second-sight” or triple-sight, in the case of women of color, is indeed a gift. It appears when I talk myself into thinking that silencing my opinions is better than sounding them. It shows up when I forget that my thoughts are needed in the “breaking down of paradigms.” It comes from failing to remember that my presence and my perspective has the power to shift the energy and conversation in any locale—from an undergraduate classroom filled with Black students, to a graduate classroom, where I’m the only Black woman. It appears when I forget to remember that being born a Black girl and having this unique outlook, possessing this “plural personality” is actually something special, a blessing.

Chapter 4: Methodology —The process. The formula.

One of primary ways in which I planned to gather my data centered on spending time in * True Tresses natural hair salon, owned by *Tia, my long time hairdresser turned home girl. Tia does my mother's hair and when I moved back to Greensboro in 2011, she referred me to her. My mom always commented on how her effervescent personality and humorous mannerisms were similar to my late cousin, Marcia. Upon meeting her for the first time, I realized that my mom was right.

Tia has a way of using the current content of our lives as fuel to transform almost every trip to the salon into either a comedy special or a therapy session: at times, both. When I decided on the natural hair topic for this thesis, I asked her if I could use her salon as a data-collection hub. She agreed, without hesitation.

To be completely transparent, even though her salon is geared toward natural clientele and even though Tia told me that she prefers doing natural hair, on extremely rare trips to the salon, I noticed her put in the occasional perm, usually to a woman over the age of 40. To give some context, in going to Tia for the past 5 years, I've seen her chemically straighten a woman's hair about 3 times. Overall, however, the majority of Tia's clientele are everyday women and girls with natural hair. In my time spent at True Tresses, I've witnessed a great number of women getting their hair styled. I've seen a custodian at the local university come in wanting to have her sisterlocks bobby pinned into a stylish up-do[6], a 6th grader getting her hair straightened for awards day, a lady,

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* The name of the salon and the owner were changed to maintain confidentiality

[6] Unlike traditional locks, that are "most commonly created through palm rolling (or matting) medium to large amounts of hair, using a balm or wax, sisterlocks are installed using a special tool and much smaller portions of your hair"

totally proud about being in her 60s (she wouldn't let us forget how old she was) who enthusiastically beamed about trying a new style for her 50th high school reunion. This is only a snapshot.

Even though these girls and women had different ages, backgrounds, life values, goals, and hair textures, they/we all have one thing in common: we came to Tia to get our natural hair cared for, nourished, and styled, by one of the best. Not surprisingly, Tia was natural herself. Key word: was.

One day early this year, I walked into the salon and noticed that Tia’s hair was a little bit straighter than normal, a little less alert and lively. When Tia would choose to switch it up and straighten her soft and springy curls, there was still a certain level of bounce to it: not this time.

I did not really want to have this battle in my head (i.e. the mental conversation I began having with myself, consisting of questions only she could answer like, *Did she just perm her hair? Did something happen to Tia since the last time I saw her? Why would she do that? What’s going on*??) so I dismissed it and went along with our conversation. As I arose from the shampoo bowl, and she toweled me, I picked up a magazine, and sat in my seat, like normal, even though something felt off. We began talking about what was new and old. In mid conversation, she casually said "yea girl I permed my hair this weekend" and proceeded with the recap of her weekend. She mentioned it so seamlessly that it didn't warrant any questions, objections, or further inquiry. It wasn't like she made a big

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(Hawkins, 2014). Putting one’s locks in an up-do involves twisting and pinning the locks upward in a bun or in any other style where the hair is not hanging.

deal about it, so I didn't feel it was my place to either. After all, it's *her* head, and the way a Black woman or any woman wants to wear her hair, is her choice and her business. Even though I'd known her for years, I didn't feel it my place to ask her why she permed her hair or tell her my feelings about it. With a thesis topic like this, I'm sure she already knew. She knows that I would proudly shave my head, before putting another perm in it.

Overall, I felt like no matter *what* I said or *how* I said it, it would come across as rude, judgmental, or inconsiderate. Therefore, I said nothing. However, her admission almost seemed like betrayal not just to me and her other natural clients, but to this research as well. In that instant, I could no longer picture myself in a salon, asking clients why they got off the "creamy crack[7]," when the owner had just relapsed. Considering her free spirited and open-minded nature, I don't think that she would've minded me using her place to collect data from natural participants, but I would have. In the back of my mind, I would feel like she would now be more cynical of the purpose or utility of this research, which would have prevented me from showing up authentically to each interview.

Because of this change, I realized that I had to find another way to collect info. Luckily, this was not much of an issue. Between my sociable personality (one that doesn't mind talking to strangers) and the Internet, I knew that I'd be able to get the participants needed. Within two days of posting on my Facebook and Instagram accounts, I received responses from Black women saying that they would like to participate or responses that gave me referrals. I even received responses from two Black men that sent me the names

[7] The term 'creamy crack' comes from the Chris Rock produced film, *Good Hair*. It's slang used to describe perms and relaxers. 'Creamy' refers to the consistency of the perm, while 'crack' describes the addictive nature of it: the fiend-like need for straight hair, this inescapable desire to get one's fix.

of women who they thought would be interested in participating. The interviews in this thesis come from ten women: three women who I met while out and about in Greensboro (one at my dentist's office, another at Vida Pour Tea, a quaint tea shop, and another in the body/skin care section at Earth Fare, *The Healthy Grocery store*). I already knew two women (a longtime friend of my mother's and a woman who I always see in passing at my job). The remaining five interviewees were those that responded to
my Facebook and Instagram posts.

The following sections reveal a tapestry of stories, narratives and lived experiences, all of which shed light on one of the very first steps that thousands of Black women take in order to embrace what they were born with and live comfortably and confidently in their own skin. They reveal how the process of "going natural" is at once complex and simple, is simultaneously gradual and instant, and both terrifying and liberating.

Chapter 5: Discoveries

Section 1: Taming Day

In the majority of the interviews, I continued to hear the same story, the same thread of experience: most women recalled a day of the week (usually a Saturday or Sunday) set aside to undo, wash, condition, and style their hair, for the upcoming week or weeks. In these narratives, we'll see how the distinct layers in being natural emerge. While, on one hand, the virgin texture of the hair mostly remains in tact, we'll also see that the hair needed to be strategically manipulated (via braids, twists, plats, a hot comb, thread, blow dryers, styling pomades, and a generous scoop of labor) in order for it to be presentable. *None* of these women mentioned wearing their hair freely as a child. When I say freely, I'm referring to a girl wearing her hair out, as is, with little to no alteration, a way of wearing the hair that is seen quite commonly in cultures where the hair is naturally straight. On a number of occasions, when dropping my 8-year-old son off at school, I've even seen non-Black girls come to school with their hair still wet. From my time spent in corporate America to my days spent in graduate school, I've noticed White adults enter work and school with wet hair. Wet hair typically signifies that someone has just finished showering or bathing and didn't have the time to dry their hair (or maybe just didn't feel like drying it) before coming to school or work. For ethnicities with naturally straight hair, when the hair is wet, although there is a difference in look, in terms of form, it's not *that* much different than when it's dry. For people with naturally straight hair, whether the hair is wet or dry, it still hangs. Hanging straight hair is a unanimous hallmark of the European standard of beauty. Black hair rises, even when it's wet. This option to step out

of the shower and casually scurry into school (or work) with a head full of wet hair (hair that is still acceptable even when it's damp, uncombed, un-styled, unthought-of) is a true sign of privilege. To know that you'll still be welcomed and approved of, even when your hair hasn't even received a second thought or even a first thought, is a feeling that many Black girls and women don't ever experience.

Furthermore, it's important to note that "taming" begins early for Black girls. This notion, that something, *anything,* needs to be done to this mane, in order for it to be more palatable for the public, can emerge as early as three and four years old; the age of two of my interviewees when they had their first perms. However, while we will explore how this taming plays into Black respectability in a predominately White country, this taming is not a wholehearted reflection of Black acquiescence to oppressive beauty standards. To be clear, having a day set aside to do a Black child's hair is as much about style and protection, as it is about effective time management. It goes without saying that Black hair is different. Black hair defies the law of gravity. Of course there are exceptions, but *for the most part,* Black hair (in its natural, non-manipulated state) does not dangle, droop, or lay down. Black hair grows upward and outward. It stands at attention. Because of this, it can be easy for onlookers of other ethnicities to think that Black hair is tough and invincible. However, because of its dry nature and wooly or cotton like texture, it's actually quite delicate and sensitive. Therefore, in addition to honoring one's culture and/or spiritual or religious beliefs, timeless and historic protective styles like braids and dreadlocks are extremely beneficial. Not only can Black hair hold styles for lengthy periods of time, but Black hair is much less oily than White hair so it doesn't need to be washed every day or as frequently. Due to the thick, coiled, curly, or kinky nature of

Black people's hair, styling the hair *every* morning is not a time conscious option and can end up being emotionally draining on the child and the one styling, especially if the child is tender-headed. So yes, there are benefits in having the hair "tamed" but it's problematic when this benefit constantly prevents Black girls from having the opportunity or even the choice to wear their hair out freely, especially if it's being oiled, moisturized, and/or otherwise properly maintained, in terms of general hygiene. To reiterate my word choice of "freely," I'm referring to a black girl being able to wear her hair out in whatever kinky or curly wondrous mass that is present when she wakes up. The Black mother might use her hands to fluff the hair a little bit (to make it fuller or more even, if it happens to be flat on the side her daughter was sleeping on), but there's no heat usage, braiding, twisting, contorting, heavy brushing or combing involved. Ultimately, the hair is free to do whatever it wants.

For example, CiCi, who's in her late twenties, keenly remembers wearing her hair in pig tails for so long that she laughingly states, "I still have a part going down the middle of my head, from wearing pigtails as a girl." As was the case with the majority of women that I interviewed, this so-called "taming day" was typically not a day marked by felicity. When the day came, you already knew that the majority of your day would be compromised. CiCi recalls, "I hated having my hair done. I absolutely hated it. I had a lot of hair. Still do. When washday came, it was 'C'mon go head- get your hair washed.' We had these old school counter tops and cabinets where my mom would actually lay me down on the cabinet, just so, ya know, my hair is hanging in the sink and she washes it while my head is hanging in the sink too. That was probably my main memory of having my hair done as a kid –and I absolutely hated it." This was only half of the hair taming

procedure for CiCi. After she arose from the awkward and uncomfortable position, her damp hair was then meticulously blow dried (with heat), parted faithfully down the middle, then twisted into two rope-like fixtures at opposing sides of her head, and finally sealed with a beret at each end.

It's important to note that although blow-drying one's hair is definitely less intense and damaging than perming the hair, it's still an extra unnecessary step in the taming process. It's an unnecessary step because Black hair can be done while damp or in the process of drying. Black people do not *need* to blow dry their hair. However, it's a step that lengthens and slightly straightens the hair. The blow dryer is used in order to stretch the hair and smooth it out, because still, eradicating and controlling the kinkiness is typically the goal of taming day.

That said, in my perspective, the blow dryer is like the person who smiles at you and befriends you, but deep down they don't really like you. However, the hot comb, another traditional, tried and true staple of many a Black household, is the person that will boldly tell you that they don't like you. The hot comb has no pretense. In my perspective, its mere existence is like law enforcement for a Black girl or woman's head.

A hot comb was the straightening tool of choice for many Black mothers and hairstylists, regardless of the generation. Even though she says her hair was and is really soft, and would "frizz right back up shortly after I got it straightened," Ms. Williams, a woman in her mid-60s remembers "getting burned on the ear with the hot comb" during her childhood taming days. I point out that her hair was soft because countless Black girls have soft hair – hair that is fluffy and cotton-candy-like to the touch. But clearly, having

soft hair (as opposed to a coarser textured hair) didn't make Ms. Williams immune to the swift high heat voltage of the relentless hot comb. For those baffled as to how her ear would get burned in this process, I'll explain. In order to successfully straighten the root of the hair, the person styling needs to get the hot comb extremely close to the scalp and ear area, in order to smooth out the kinkiness: a site that is still a detractor of femininity in the eyes of many Black people, still today. This is essentially the process of getting one's hair "pressed." And, at this point in my sociological education, I can't even look at the word 'pressed' without immediately thinking of oppression. As Marilyn Frye so eloquently puts it:

> The root of the word 'oppression' is the element "press." *The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button*. Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce. (Frye, 2000, p.11)

The last three words of her bold statement –*Mold. Immobilize. Reduce*- rang out like an echo, as each word became infused with symbolic meaning. After all, the finished product of a press is to represent one of two ideas: a Black girl who is being molded into a little lady or a Black woman that has been properly molded to fit comfortably within the parameters of a particular type of femininity. Quite literally, when one is locked in the process of getting one's hair pressed, a girl or woman is very much immobilized, because moving (even an inch to the left or right, forward or backward) significantly increases her chances of getting burned. In a different setting, immobility takes on a different meaning as where one can go and what one can do is severely restricted. For instance, once hair is pressed, Black girls are warned not to go near water: yes water, the very essence of life.

Just short of bathing, Black women with pressed hair already know not to engage with anything water related; nobody has to warn them anymore because they can now police themselves. For if a Black girl or woman with pressed hair gets caught in the rain, perspires too much, or God forbid – goes swimming, the clock will strike twelve, her fanciful carriage will turn to a pumpkin, her glass slippers will morph into dusty sandals, and she'll transform from a princess to a peasant and the world will soon see who she really is. Expressed less dramatically, contact with water makes a Black woman's straight hair revert to its natural curly or kinky texture.

Lastly, the reduction process that takes place may not be as obvious, but it's still there. In a sense, getting one's hair pressed (*especially* when it's not one's choice to do so) reduces a girl or a woman to a size where she can safely fit into other people's comfort zones: the people at the church, the people at school, the people at home, the people at work. She is lessened, so that others can think more of her. To this point, *The Good Hair Study*, conducted by the Perception Institute, found that "White women demonstrate the strongest bias — both explicit and implicit — against textured hair. They rated it as "less beautiful," "less sexy/attractive" and "less professional than smooth hair" (Johnson, Godsil et al, 2017, p. 14). It's 2018 and Black women *really* do not need to spend another ounce of precious energy worried about what a White woman thinks of *their* hair (especially when it's negative and particularly when it's not workplace related). But, because many White women occupy management positions with the ability to hire *and* fire, many Black women end up straightening their hair, taking the reduction and conformist route (or some may argue -the survival route) to stave off any potential discrimination and/or to assist in getting or keeping a job. Even though these findings are

vexing, I'm somewhat coming from a place of privilege because, as someone working in the world of academia, dress code and/or hair code is more relaxed. In all of my years working in academia (from a PWI to an HBCU, from a Teaching Assistant to Faculty) no one has *ever* told me to change my natural hair. And, what's more, a White woman hired me for my current teaching position at N.C. A & T. But, as a single mother, I do realize the sacrifices that women make everyday in order to put food on the table. So, while it saddens me that some Black women still *think* that they need to straighten their hair for the workplace, and while I don't really agree with their choice to continue reducing themselves, I *totally* understand why it still happens, even for childless Black women.

After all, there is a reason why former first lady Michelle Obama was always seen and photographed with pressed hair (even when she was outside working in the garden, even when she was exercising and dancing with kids in her *Let's Move!* program). Tellingly, from 2008 to 2016 (2,920 days) Mrs. Obama was never seen wearing her hair freely, in an afro or a braided style, even though she had natural hair. However, although White women may have shown the strongest bias toward natural hair in *that* study, they are not the only ones that have derogatory attitudes about Black women's natural hair. Recalling a time where she felt judged by her own people, Calana, who spent her childhood in Jamaica, sometimes wearing "tiny braids" that her dad use to loathe undoing, remembers one memory at her former place of employment:

> "When I was transitioning, it was hard to work with the kinky and the straight at the same time. So I would wear wigs a lot. I got so good with wigs that people would think that it was my hair. I didn't do too much braiding. I use to go to Africans and they would do them really tight. I remember getting this one style and I had to take it out before the end of the day. It was just way too tight. At that time, I struggled with being comfortable in my own skin- just being ok with…ya know, just letting it

> out. So, I kept it covered a lot. And, eventually, I was ready to start being myself—letting it be free. And the guys at the job were like 'Oh, I liked your hair better the other way.' And this was the Black guys that were saying this to me!"

Calana's experience with the Black men at her job reinforces Spike Lee's 1993 observation. He says,

> "Whether Black men admit it or not, they feel light-skinned women are more attractive than dark-skinned, and they'd rather see long hair than a short Afro, because that's closer to White women. That comes from being inundated with media from the time you're born that constantly fed you White women as the image of beauty. That's both conscious and unconscious. But on the whole, talking to my friends and knowing men, I see that a premium is put on light-skinned sisters with long hair" (Lee, 1993, p. 109)

Instances such as these highlight why countless Black women end up choosing to reduce themselves in order to appease the tastes of others. Vereda, one of my mother's closest friends and a woman who went natural in her 50s recalls, "going to the parlor to get my hair hot combed." This was one of her foremost memories of her childhood in the 1950s and early 1960s. And even though going to the salon to get one's hair done may not seem like a significant event, it matters because it was a reflector of socioeconomic status. Not every girl could afford to get her hair done, professionally. For instance, Brenda, who is a year younger than me, and who says that her mother was primarily in charge of her hair when she was a girl, says

> "We didn't have a lot of money, so I couldn't afford to get my hair taken care of properly. My parents couldn't afford that, so I had to find friends who knew how to braid with weave, and do different styles that was inexpensive but would last a long time without damaging my hair."

However, she said that relying on "sista girl from around the corner" often put her hair in peril because they lacked the professional training and certified knowledge of hair care,

especially when it came to applying perms. Plus, the low cost and low quality of the products they used, led to hair damage that forced her to have to cut her hair, a few times. Therefore, Brenda's taming days were a mixture of her mother's efforts and the efforts of the girls from "around the way."

Tiffany, who has lived in Greensboro "for a very long time" but spent her early childhood in Jamaica, is of mixed heritage (her mother is mixed, and family "descends from Jamaica and Guyana"). She remembers frequently getting popped in the head by her grandmother and others that attempted to do her hair because "I'd be talking junk to'em." She was talking back because taming her hair really hurt. She later proclaimed,

> "I use to hate everything about my hair. The only time I use to like anything about my hair was going to the hair salon because I knew she was gonna' get it right, and it was gonna' be good for a week. But if you not rich - you don't go to the salon every week, so for me, it was like once a quarter: for back to school, for my birthday, then back to school in January. In the summer, it was braids."

Because of the passion she expressed when she talked about the disdain for her hair, I wanted to follow up with Tiffany about why she use to "hate everything" about her hair, so I asked her. She said,

> "There's definitely disenfranchisement and socialization toward Black hair being"—she holds up big exaggerated air quotes – *"bad"* – she continues, "but it wasn't that because I was a mixed girl so Black people didn't like me, neither did White people. And I was from Jamaica—so it was like 'you foreigner' so I got all of that and I didn't care. So it was not for the feedback. It just wasn't what I wanted. It wasn't pretty in my head. It wasn't pretty not because they told me it wasn't pretty. It wasn't pretty because it was frizzy and I knew it could be a curl. I knew I had curly hair and I knew that they were messing it up. It was like 'I don't think I'm sposta have a perm Ma. I don't know why, but I don't think I'm supposed to have this perm. But, you couldn't tell them that though.' "

For many, braids were not just the summer taming option of choice like it was for Tiffany. For others, it was year round. Luckily, braids didn't require any heat usage, but even though a hot comb or blow dryer wasn't used, it wasn't without its fair share of setbacks. Jasmine, who resides with her husband and two sons in Greensboro, but was born and raised in "Chocolate City," would get braids using extensions—which can totally be an *all day* procedure. She said that this was her main hairstyle growing up. For those not familiar with the process, this is where one gets synthetic hair braided into their own hair. Depending on how many braiders are working on a person's head, the length of the braids, and how many braids the person gets, this can take anywhere from 5 to 10 hours, or maybe even longer, particularly if it's a busy day. This usually takes place in salons, managed by West African women and these businesses are all over the country. Jasmine recalls,

> "I remember literally going to get my hair braided every few months. And it was exhausting: taking them out, putting them in. So even though my hair was its natural texture, it was still somewhat unnatural in terms of me not having my natural own hair on my head at all times. So, I had some other situation wove into my hair. And ya know, I don't wanna have to wear this every day. I don't wanna have to go through the process and as a child. The process was the most consistent piece of my understanding of what I'm going through; 'my neck hurts, I'm tired, I'm hungry' — too many things that have to be taken into account, in order for me to come out with this accomplishment."

And, 'accomplishment' couldn't be more of an appropriate term. As the word conveys, it's a successful *accomplishing* of some type of feat, or difficult task—in this case, the Black girls' hair being the obstacle that needs to be defeated, conquered or overcome.

Beverley, who spent her childhood and adolescent years between Ghana and London, but currently lives and works in Greensboro, says that her taming days didn't revolve around heat usage either, but it was nevertheless dreadful. She remembers,

> "I use to hate Saturday nights. My mother, she would wash it and instead of blow dry like in American culture- we use to thread it with Black thread- so it goes all the way down. Then she puts it back into cornrows— cause by then, it had been straightened out. And you know, it was in the 80s, so she'd finish it off with those balls —those elastic balls and ribbons. My mom would always get a ribbon to tie things back.

Beverley, like most that I interviewed, was not a fan of taming day so she would desperately request less time-consuming styles. Beverley said "I'd tell my mom, that I want a pineapple, ya know, with the big pony tail on top of my head and she'd be like 'No.' It was always No." This issue of control emerges again in Brenda's story as well. When asked how she use to wear her hair as a child, she says,

> "I didn't have a choice at that age. My mom did my hair. I remember it being in braids or she would use hot combs, or sponge rollers that she would put a bang in the front. The bang would be sticking off the top of my head - just stiff. By the time of 5th grade, I started wanting to do my own hair."

So, whether the controlling mechanism is an actual living entity, like a mother or hair braider, or an inanimate object, such as a hot comb, thread, blow-dryer or sponge rollers, "taming day" is basically a period of time comprised of domination, restriction, discipline, containment and supervision – all words associated with imprisonment. Washing and conditioning the hair is a hygiene factor for all people, but this idea, practice, and reality of Black girls' hair *needing* to be blow dried, hot combed, threaded, braided, lengthened, or tied back, is what places Black women's and Black girls' hair story, in a different category. Put another way, Jasmine pensively relays how she thought

about the Black women in her circle—the women who were actually quite affirming of her natural hair:

> "So it's like, while we celebrate your beauty and your authentic Blackness, we still got to tame this thing to make sure this thing is respectable. So, while my natural hair was revered and loved and appreciated; it was all of that to a degree. Because we still have to respect ourselves and walk out to the world, and be cute. And being cute means slapping it down with something and maintaining it."

The notion of not having a choice, hair *needing* to be "slapped down," and/or the constant pressure to live up to someone else's perceptions of cuteness, correlates to Durkheim's thoughts on social control, which asserts "yet, since it is indisputable today that most of our ideas and tendencies are not developed by ourselves but, come to us from the outside, they can only penetrate us by imposing themselves up us" (Durkheim, 1895, p. 52). For Black girls, most ideas and tendencies about our hair come from our mothers or the maternal persons managing our hair. Most of our ideas about our hair are definitely imposed on us – *from the outside*- starting at a very early age.

Finally, if we take a trip (literally or simply using our imaginations) outside of the U.S. and zoom out for a minute, one might come to the conclusion that taming day—in the bigger scheme of controversial cultural traditions like female genital mutilation or foot binding—is a relatively harmless ritual or rite of passage of Black girlhood, something that Black women can look back on (years later) and laugh endearingly about. But, just because the intention behind taming day isn't to consciously, maliciously or deliberately suppress or oppress a Black girl's freedom, autonomy, or self-expression, it does not mean that that's not what is actually happening. In addition to time management, from listening to the narratives of my interviewees, and from remembering my own

taming days, I get the sense that most mothers, caregivers and hair stylists, at the core, genuinely think that they're acting in their daughters' (or the girl's) best interest. But, it's critical to at least question who this taming day is really for. Is it really in the child's best interest? Or is it in the best interest of the outside world? Furthermore, how do these hair-controlling techniques dictate how a Black girl thinks and feels about herself, throughout her entire life?

At this point, I think it's useful to shed light on the words of Jada Pinkett Smith. She's a Black mother who not only uses her international platform to speak on various social issues (from ending human trafficking, to the importance of women's self-care) but who is also someone "committed to allowing her daughter to wear her hair any way she chooses" (Jothianandan, 2012).

Because Mrs. Pinkett Smith is a super successful and wealthy actress married to one of the biggest movie stars of our time, some will contend that she occupies a space notches above everyday common folk—a space detached from reality, free from the everyday anti-Black racism and/or overall societal muck and mire. While I do believe there is credibility to that argument, "reality" is relative and Jada, born and raised by a single mother in Baltimore, is still a Black woman raising a Black son and daughter in the United States of America. And, because of that, her insight is very much relevant and useful. In 2012, when a swarm of critics questioned why she "let" Willow, her daughter, cut off her hair, she responded on her Facebook page by writing:

> This is a world where women, girls are constantly reminded that they don't belong to themselves; that their bodies are not their own, nor their power or self determination. Willow cut her hair because her beauty, her value, her worth is not measured by the length of her hair. Even little girls have the RIGHT to own themselves and should not be a slave to

> even their mother's deepest insecurities, hopes and desires…
> (Jothianandan, 2012)

And, let the church say Amen.

Even though critics and skeptics are quick to dismiss her thinking, because they believe that Willow lives in a privileged bubble and doesn't have to live in the "real world" or truly deal with the tribulations and struggles of Black girlhood or womanhood, it's vital that Black women (or really*, all* people) consider her ideas before immediately submerging themselves in defensive, outdated thinking: thinking that claims, in one way or another, that for Black girls and women to "make it" or to get their foot in the door, they have to somehow appease and cater to the pervasive European standard of beauty *first.* Then and only then, once they are "accepted" they have the green light to show the world their authentic selves*.* And, even then, they must do so in moderation, so as not to shock or offend anyone.

In my perspective, this line of thinking *must* perish. For the betterment and prosperity of future generations and for Black girls and women breathing now, it's important that we think about the long lasting benefits and advantages of raising Black girls who have the "right to own themselves," of raising Black girls who get the opportunity to "develop their own ideas and tendencies." And yes, even though American Millennials (of all races) get a bad rap for being self-absorbed, spoiled, and directionless, that stereotype—while not altogether false—overlooks the positive and invaluable lessons that we will be able to pass on to our children. For Black Millennials in particular, these lessons include (but are certainly not limited to) everything from: being genuinely accepting of people's sexual orientations, being more open-minded to the diverse expressions of masculinity

and femininity, either using our platforms to create the images we want to see or demand representation in media (realizing that Black Barbie or the one Black funny character on an all-White show isn't going to cut it), letting one's daughter wear their hair to school how she chooses, not spending one's life sticking to a job that one hates just because they have "benefits," traveling more to receive a "universalized sense of self" (at a time when travel rates for all Americans are decreasing), really analyzing a politician's message and what they're all about before *immediately* voting for or belonging to a political party just because said party is supposedly "better" for Black folks, and taking the time to acknowledge mental health is important and that prayer alone isn't always sufficient.

I believe things are definitely changing; we have the generations before us to be grateful for. They taught us how to be Black and proud. They showed us how to stand up for our rights, in the face of seething animosity. Of course, not every single Black ancestor or living person from preceding generations was out in the open (or even privately) fighting for Black rights and, of course, there were probably many Blacks that were ashamed of their Blackness. But, the great part about being alive now is that we have endless examples of those that were proud to be Black, and endless examples of those that sacrificed their lives in the name of equality. We're really just one click away from a lifelong affair with history.

With the existence of clothing companies that specialize in "Free Black Child" T-shirts, with the blossoming of predominately Black festivals like AfroPunk (where every single type of Blackness imaginable is welcomed and celebrated), with the *majority* of my female students at N.C. A & T being natural, with comic giant Marvel releasing the long anticipated movie, *Black Panther* where all the female characters and leading

women are sporting elaborate and beautiful natural hairstyles, and the existence of *Washington Post* articles like "Raising Free-Spirited Black Children in a World Set on Punishing Them" (Brown, 2015) I know that the seeds of change are continually being planted.

Additionally, there was a recently published NBC News Op-Ed piece, entitled "Does the Revolution begin with a Free Black Child?" that declared, when speaking of Willow and Jaden Smith, "It's their unapologetic nature to not 'fall in line' with the mainstream that makes people uneasy—yet, it's this uneasiness and desire to live outside-of-the-box that we should be encouraging most in Black children—it's called freedom" (Moodie-Mills, 2016). While there will always be exceptions to the rule and there will be always be outliers, articles, observations, movements, and mindsets like the ones just mentioned, make it easier to believe that the majority of this next generation of Black girls and boys, will be able to look in the mirror and automatically see power, not problems.

Section 2: Unsupporting Actors

I titled this section "unsupporting actors" because we often look to the family or community as a source of support and guidance, and in countless cases, it truly is. That said, humans, especially children, often believe what our parents, guardians, or authority figures tell us because they care for us and are superior to us – in size, age, experience and supposedly, wisdom. But, what happens when certain family members are not a source of support? What happens when certain family members have good intentions and think that they are being supportive, but in actuality, are being the exact opposite? While varying levels and amounts of these unsupporting actors showed up differently in each woman's narrative, I noticed that *everyone* had at least one unsupporting actor: some mild, some intense. But, they were all there sprinkled throughout the lives of these Black women in some capacity, great or small. To keep it concise, in this section I will focus on the unsupporting actors who made the most direct and swift impact.

Jasmine and I are the same age. Born and raised in the nation's capital, she happily calls herself "a child of DC." She says that "While D.C. is a city, it has historically been a Black city for those who are doing very well. It's a site for the Pan Africanism movement, so the embrace, amplification, and love for one's African self has been front and center for my coming of age in DC." When asked about her childhood hairstyle's she muses "it was usually in styles like Senegalese twists[8]. I often times wore extensions with the braids, mainly because they were a reflection of

[8] When a girl or woman gets Senegalese twists, her hair —along with synthetic hair—is two-strand twisted together, from the root to the shaft. If requested, the stylist will continue twisting past the shaft (using the synthetic hair) for length.

West African culture. They were styles that were supported by my family members who were not gonna' do my hair. So, they were long lasting, it was ethnically beautiful, and prideful." She also commented that the majority of her peers wore braids too, so that was another element that heavily influenced her affinity toward them. At one point in her adolescence, her father, who was in the military, moved the family to a base in North Carolina.

While he was away, serving the country in the Gulf War, his new wife, her stepmother, was in charge. Her stepmother, a figure she describes as a dark skin woman from a small town in North Carolina, and "not necessarily a proponent of natural hair and embracing natural hair" gave her a perm "totally against my father's request." Away from DC and her nucleus of friends who loved their afrocentric braided styles, Jasmine admitted that she had become slightly curious about relaxers, and looking back, she felt that her slight interest in getting one, added fuel to her stepmother's deep-rooted disempowering beliefs about natural hair. This curiosity, she recalls, truly motivated and confirmed her stepmother's decision to give her a perm, at 8 years old. When her father found out, he was "pissed off, to say the least." His anger was understandable, considering that Jasmine said her father raised her and her sisters "to live in love, celebrate, and express our natural beauty without any alterations." It was years before she received another perm. Even though there are other looming factors to consider (i.e. where was Jasmine's mother? Why would her dad, who loved Blackness so much, marry a woman that had issues with embracing her Blackness?) it seems quite obvious that the unsupporting actor in this instance was Jasmine's stepmother—now ex-step mother. Her stepmother even went so far as to tell Jasmine to lie to her D.C. family. Her

stepmother told her, "when you go visit them and they ask you about your hair, tell them you got it blown out[9]." The fact that a grown woman told a child to lie to her family makes it quite clear that the stepmother knew that permanently altering Jasmine's virgin hair was wrong, even if her intentions were well meaning. But as the proverb states, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The word 'hell' still makes me think of extreme and insufferable heat, which is exactly what Beverly was engulfed in, when she received her first perm over two decades ago, outside in a courtyard in Ghana. While Beverly attended college in New York and currently lives and works in Greensboro, she was born in Ghana and spent her childhood between the West African country and London. Beverly remembers her mother leaving for the U.S. when she was in second grade in order to make a better life for herself and her daughters. Her father soon remarried. On this fateful day, which "must've been 100 degrees" as Beverly remembers, "it was the most excruciating pain I'd ever gone through as a child." Her stepmother had grown tired of doing her thick hair and summoned a hairdresser to relieve her of her natural hair styling woes. "It was a sunny day and I remember thinking my hair was gonna look like those *Jet* magazines, like in American culture. I remember thinking that 'this is gonna be so different.' " And different it was, but totally not in the way she had imagined. The American culture that Beverley refers to reflects a society where "light skin and long hair are synonymous with being a beautiful female. Those who do not fit these descriptions are considered less desirable and less beautiful, both 'in the racist White imagination and in the colonized Black mindset'" (Puff, 2012, p. 188).

[9] Getting one's hair "blown out" or a "blow out" is a reference to a style where the hair is straightened and lengthened using the heat of a blow dryer and a comb and/or round-shaped brush.

And to be fair, this isn't endemic to American society or the West. Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, or "ideological domination" as one scholar puts it, can help explain why these limited and discriminatory ideals of beauty exist worldwide. He states, "When one ideology, or world view dominates, it suppresses or stamps out, often cruelly, any other ways of explaining reality" (Adale, 2015, p. 16).

Because Europeans still occupy some of the world's most powerful political, media, and military positions, their worldview is the one that dominates. And, per hegemony in mass media, one of the ways this is understood can be expressed in the following accurate assessment,

> For Whites, cultural invisibility is rarely, if ever, an issue. Given the globalized nature of Western media, wherever a White person travels, they can turn on the television, open a newspaper, or look at a billboard and see their own reflection. Through representation in the mass media, they experience themselves as citizens of the world, globally present, globally relevant. Furthermore, Whiteness and advantage are contemporaneous experiences. (Haynes, 2007, p. 163)

Therefore it becomes easier to understand why loads of Black women covet straight hair, or even if they don't want straight hair (like in Beverly's case), they think that this new hair will magically transform their life and make it "so different." And while I do not know *exactly* how Beverly imagined her hair would turn out post-perm, the setting was the early 90s when she was getting the procedure. And, in *Black* American culture, images of caramel colored Black women with straight hair graced magazine covers (including *Jet*), billboards, and movie screens. Think Vanessa Williams. Halle Berry. Robin Givens. Tyra Banks. Naomi Campbell.

After the perm had been applied, her hair was thinner, and perhaps easier to manage for her stepmother, but Beverly did not like it. The dream was deferred. Again, in this story, the glaring unsupporting actor was a stepmother, but like Jasmine's story there are other factors to consider (i.e. what role did her father play or not play in the decision to perm *his* daughters hair? How much power should a stepparent really have?)

While these stories take place on opposite sides of the Atlantic, 5,000 miles away from each other, one thing remains the same: Black hair that naturally grows from the follicle, is not good enough as is. And while both of their stepmothers made it seem like getting a perm would be "better" and easier for them and their stepdaughters, both Jasmine and Beverly admitted that this line of thinking was just a cop out. In a nutshell, they both felt like their stepmother's were projecting their own antagonistic beliefs about *their* hair onto them. Even though their stepmothers were not fans of their natural hair, luckily Jasmine and Beverly were never admonished for wearing their natural hair to school, but Ms. Williams definitely was.

In her case, the unsupporting actor was an entire school administration, and the shocking part of it all: it was a historically Black school! In the early 70s, Ms. Williams was suspended from Dudley High School, Greensboro's historical and only predominately Black secondary school. She was suspended because she decided to no longer wear her hair straight. While she was shocked and saddened for being suspended nearly forty years ago, time heals and she can humorously recall the memory now: "Yea, I was sent home for wearing my fro girl. I was graduating that year and they wouldn't even let me come back and get my cap and gown unless I changed my hair." I remember having to stop her to make sure we were talking about the same high school: the

predominately Black school that I use to dread playing in football and basketball because their soulful band, unprecedented school spirit, and talented athletes would put my school, a predominately White school, to shame. As a cheerleader I was typically proud to be a Pirate, but playing Dudley made me realize just how White my school was and subsequently question my school spirit.

Inspired by one of her classmates who had spent the summer in New York and came back wearing an afro, she decided to grow her natural hair out. “I saw it and I was like, ‘yea I like that, Ima try that.’ When I started growing it, it took me some time to get used to it, but after a while, I knew what to do and because my hair grows so fast, before long, they was calling me Angela Davis honey!”

I was and still am shocked at the level of internalized racism that must’ve been present for a Black principal of a Black high school to facilitate a school suspension for a Black student wearing her hair in a Black hairstyle. The only thing I can attribute this to was the timeframe and geographic location, the American South. In “400 Years Without a Comb,” a book released in the 70s, when Ms. Williams was a teenager, the author touches on this generational schism in perceptions of Black Americans’ appearance. He states,

> Oddly enough, many mothers and fathers, members of an older generation of Blacks refuse to associate themselves with the Afro and even refused to allow their children to wear it. So brainwashed are they, that they believe their children become wayward or corrupt simply by growing longer hair! These parents, demand that their child maintain the straightened, Anglo-Saxon appearance if they stay in the home. (Morrow, 1973, p. 88)

To this day, Ms. Williams’ mother still makes negative remarks about her daughter’s natural hair. In an attempt to explain her mother’s thinking and perhaps the thinking of

people in her mother's generation as well, Ms. Williams, who wore her hair in a lively free flowing natural bob at our interview, says "I think, with our race, they think 'why would ya wanna go back to that? We had to do braids and all that, plats and all that, all our life, *and now you wanna go back to that*?" To give a visual of her mother, she is 87, and according to Ms. Williams, her mother's hair – in its natural state, is that "fine type hair, wavy - ya know, the kind you can just comb straight back." Even though she's pushing 90, Ms. Williams says that her mother still gets perms. Clearly, the deep conditioning that all Black women have been subjected to, goes far beyond the shampoo bowl.

Section 3: I know why the Caged Bird Doesn't Sing

In "Caged Bird" a poem by Maya Angelou, the critically acclaimed poet, author and legendary wordsmith, she writes of two birds: the one who is free and the other who is trapped. To give the reader the opportunity to visualize the caged bird's milieu, she infuses the poem with the following stanza, *twice:*

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard on the distant hill
for the caged bird sings of freedom.

Reading this iconic poem makes me picture the ways in which Black women feel trapped in a symbolic or mental cage. But, contrary to the hopeful bird of this poem, thousands of Black women do not belt the song of freedom. Per this subject matter, singing of freedom means liberating one's self – by any means necessary- from the fetters of hundreds of years of false indoctrination. It means fully reclaiming each and every nap, kink, curl, or coil, adorned on one's head. It means loving the versatility and divinity in each hair on one's scalp. It means being proud of all the ways one's hair can be twisted, shape shifted, and styled. It means enthusiastically accepting the reality that the Creator made no mistakes and knew exactly what they were doing when one was being crafted, regardless of how wild and unruly their hair can be at times.

However, there seems to be two main reasons that Black women do not sing of freedom: fear or sheer obliviousness, being unaware that they're even encaged or oppressed in the first place. Let's analyze fear first. To start, often Black women don't use their voice or actions to "sing of freedom" because they realize that there are legitimate disadvantages for going against the grain. For many African-American women, the freedom of being one's true self is like endeavoring into the "things unknown" and that concept pales in comparison to the safety, certainty, and security of the cage. In addition to the odd looks or off-color comments from relatives, lovers, or strangers, Black women face dire consequences for wearing their hair naturally. Instead of listing a slew of examples of Black women who are still figuratively caged, in my view, it's more powerful to highlight women who chose to disregard fear and fully show up for themselves. We'll see how they – girls and women that opted for manumission from the cage—were reprimanded for doing so.

The process of White supremacists making an example out of brave, self-sufficient, powerful, or confident Blacks is a grand American tradition. We see this tradition in every epoch of America's history — from the bombing and decimation of over 30 blocks of Black-owned businesses in the Tulsa Terrorist Attack of 1921, the pulverization and murder of 14-year-old Emmit Till in 1955, to the wrongful and incredulous imprisonment of professor Angela Davis, to the 2017 mistreatment of NFL's Colin Kaepernick, to the 1969 FBI-sponsored COINTELPRO assassination of 21-year-old Fred Hampton (while he lay asleep, next to his 9 month pregnant fiancé). And, those examples were the ones that were publicized. Imagine all the stories that go unnoticed, the tales that are swept under America's rug of secrets.

And to be clear, I fully realize that a girl being sent home for wearing dreadlocks (by a white principal) or fired from her job (by a white boss) isn't the *exact* same as being murdered in your sleep, by white police officers - the way that the revolutionary and magnetic Fred Hampton was. I would never want to oversimplify the egregious nature and long lasting effects of that government program. That said, even though there are definitely different levels of intensity to the punishment, I still see similarities between black folks who are neutralized by the government and Black women admonished for wearing their hair naturally. In my analysis, the similarities emerge in *how* natural Black women and Black people who stand up to the government are shown unfortunate and dire consequences (by the hands of white supremacists) for daring to boldly be Black, for having the courage to be themselves, speak out against any injustice, or to simply live their truth.

Moreover, this tradition, this ritual, is meant to mark fear in other Blacks who might be thinking about stepping out of line. It's meant to show them that it's in their best interest to simply keep their head down, follow the rules, and stay in one's place.

For instance, a Florida school threatened 12-year-old Vanessa VanDyke with expulsion for not cutting her natural hair. VanDyke, an 8th grader, wears her hair in a large, free-flowing Afro. She was given "one week to decide whether or not she will cut her hair or leave Faith Christian Academy, a private school in Orlando she has attended since the third grade" (Kim, 2014). VanDyke had been wearing her hair like this since the beginning of the school year, but it didn't become an issue (for the school) until her parents decided to speak with the principal because their daughter was being bullied about her hair. VanDyke's mother, Sabrina Kent, said, "There have been people teasing

her about her hair, and it seems to me that they're blaming her" (News 6 Orlando, 2014). While VanDyke, an exceptional student and violinist, says that her hair makes her unique, the school obviously doesn't share that sentiment, and thinks that this style is in violation of their student hand book, which can be viewed in Appendix A.

Ultimately, the school ruled that her hair is a "distraction" (Kent, 2014). Clearly, the term 'distraction' is subjective in this case, as what is distractive to one, may not be to another. Furthermore, Vanessa's hair, in it's natural form, is big and free-flowing but it's not as if she was deliberately styling it to be "greater than 3 inches off the whole head." That's simply what her natural hair looks like in its un-restrained, non-straightened state, and unfortunately, she is being punished for it. For any Black student thinking about wearing their hair out, Vanessa Vandyke's expulsion may make them think twice.

But even when hair is tied back and "kept tidy" problems still arise for Black girls with natural hair. For example, 7-year-old Tiana Parker of Tulsa, Oklahoma, was sent home from Deborah Brown Community School for wearing dreadlocks. She wore her locks pulled back into two neat ponytails. To be clear, wearing two ponytails on each side of the head is an extremely popular childhood hairstyle, commonly worn by girls of many ethnicities.

However, because her hair was in dreadlocks (which is a hairstyle mostly worn by people of African descent) it was in violation of their handbook, which specifically states: "hairstyles such as dreadlocks, afros and other faddish styles are unacceptable" (Deborah Brown Community School 2007-2008 Handbook, p. 13).

While it is acceptable that a school would move to implement a dress code to prevent extreme, perverse, or racist visuals or appearances (i.e. prohibiting nudity or

racially-offensive clothing) it is unacceptable to make rules that discriminate against, directly or indirectly, one group or race. This rule is racially discriminatory because dreadlocks and Afros are hairstyles historically and contemporarily worn by Black people. Moreover, lumping afros and dreadlocks into a group of "faddish styles" disregards and undermines the historical relevance, everyday practicality, and tradition of those hairstyles. In a television interview with MSNBC's Tamron Hall, Tiana's father, Terrence Parker, expressed his empathy for what his daughter was going through. Parker, who is not only a barber, but also proudly styles his daughter's hair, said that "It made me feel just like she felt–like she wasn't wanted in school" (MSNBC 2013). The school did not budge on their decision, so he ended up enrolling his daughter in a different, more accepting school.

Unfortunately, school isn't the only formal space where Black females are punished for wearing their natural hair. This type of hair discrimination extends to the workplace as well, which provides yet "another incentive for African American women to chemically alter their hair. Employment is the reason so many African American women will spend so much money on their hairstyles, so frequently" (Bellinger, 2007, p. 70)

What's more, "In an effort to protect their professional image, some individuals opt to downplay or conceal marginal identity traits such as an Afrocentric hairstyle and instead wear the 'mask of the professional' only allowing others to see their chosen professional identity (Opie & Phillips, 2015, p. 3).

For those women not willing to wear the mask, for those women willing to sing the song for freedom, they suffer the consequences. For example, twelve-year veteran,

Navy Hospital corpsman, Jessica Sims was discharged from the military for wearing her dreadlocks in a bun. The Chief of Naval Personnel spokesman Lt. Commander Chris Servellow said that Sims was discharged for "disobeying a lawful order" (Myers, 2014). This lawful order was one that banned hairstyles like cornrows and dreadlocks--styles that the military thought would hinder a woman's "ability to wear certain equipment like gas masks and safety helmets" (Myers, 2014). Sims, however, said that she "never had a problem wearing safety helmets or gas masks" and that she shouldn't have to "straighten my hair in order to be within what they think the regulations are, and I don't think I should have to cover it up with a wig" (Obell, 2014 via The Navy Times, 2014).

The military offered those two alternatives (wearing a wig or straightening) in addition to cutting one's hair, in order to fit within the guidelines. Fortunately, the military has since eased off of these limitations on Black women's hair since 2014, but it doesn't help those women like Jessica Sims, who were already discharged for wearing their hair naturally.

Unlike Jessica Sims, a woman who didn't receive much television or media time, until this hair debacle arose, Rhonda Lee, a meteorologist for KTBS ABC Shreveport, Louisiana, delivered the weather to thousands of television viewers daily. Because Lee was working in the field of television, an image based profession, it's fair to say that her aesthetic presentation was more of a focus than women in the military or other non-media related fields.

When a viewer visited the television station's Facebook page and posted a comment about her hair (which can be viewed in Appendix B) and she responded, she was soon let go for violating, their "social media policy." Lee felt that this post was up

too long on the station's Facebook page (five days to be exact) and that the station should have either defended her or at the very least, deleted the comment. What's even more disturbing is the fact that someone from KTBS actually "liked" that status. Furthermore, for Lee, the station's silence felt like they were condoning these racially harsh comments (CNN, 2013). Because she felt like the comment was directed to her, and because the station did nothing to defend her, she was motivated to respond to the comment in a direct, informative, yet cordial way. Earlier I put social media policy in quotes because in an interview Lee had with CNN's Soledad O'Brien, she claims, "Upon my termination, I asked 'Could I see it?' and I was told 'No.' I plead for my job this past Friday and asked to see the policy and was told that 'there wasn't anything written down." Lee feels like she was fired because of the negative reactions that her short hair produced, but this wasn't the first time her hair was a controversial issue in the job market or job search.

> "With nearly 20 years in the business, Lee says that her hair has always been an issue. Most of the complaints have come from Black men, she said. Or at least they would be the ones most likely to voice their concerns. 'I've had a manager once say that he loved everything about me and was seriously considering hiring me, but 'Your hair. I can't hire you with that hair,' she recalls him saying. That manager, who was an African-American male at a Sacramento-based station, added that her hair was "too aggressive" for his viewers" (Starr, 2014).

Colossal entities like the military or broadcast television stations have an easier time enforcing their policies because of their sheer magnitude and the intimidation that accompanies large organizations, but apparently, much smaller companies have the same ease and autonomy in enforcing hair discriminating policies towards women as well.

Twenty-four year old Ashley Davis, who has been growing her dreadlocks for ten years, has been asked to leave her job at Tower Loans because of a change in the

company policy that now requires her to cut off her dreadlocks. She told St. Louis station Fox 2 News, "I've only been there for two months, and they came up with a policy. I feel like it's degrading." The policy was implemented on September 21st— a few weeks after Davis began working there. The policy states, "dreadlocks, braids, mohawks, mullets and other hairstyles are against company guidelines" (Huffington Post Black Voices, 2013).

Davis had dreadlocks when she was hired, and she is the only one in the office with the hairstyle, so altering the company policy to include these new prohibitions, felt particularly discriminatory. She was given a week to either change her hair or lose her job. Fox 2 News reporter Shandrea Thomas reached out to Tower Loans for a comment, and Eric Kimes, the company's Vice President, said:

> Tower Loan does not comment on individual personnel matters. However, Tower has an appearance policy that is clearly defined in its training manual. Tower believes a professional appearance is necessary for the success of the company (Thomas, Fox 2 News, 2013).

From his statement, it's obvious that they believe that having a professional appearance and wearing dreadlocks are mutually exclusive. She loves her locks and feels that it's a part of her culture. "Everyone in my family has them," said Davis, during the television interview.

Unfortunately, having to choose between financial or academic stability and embracing the hair they were born with, is still an issue for Black girls and women. These examples "illustrate that many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the

race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1244) Put in a more direct way, these girls and women are not being admonished *just* for being Black or *just* for being female. They are uniquely discriminated against, violated, and made examples of, *because they are Black women — because they are Black girls.*

Secondly, what's even more insidious than fear, a feeling that, at any moment can be used to powerfully fuel one toward opportunity, is ignorance. For ignorance is not always bliss. Because Black women are constantly inundated with social facts –"the beliefs, tendencies, and practices of the group, taken collectively" (Durkheim, 1895, p. 54)—many don't even know that they're being oppressed in the first place. How does one fight back when they're not even aware there's a war going on? Take for instance, Ruby and Tiffany, and the multitudes of other Black girls who are given perms before they step foot into kindergarten. Ruby, who is now 19, had her first perm at 3 years of age. Her mother gave it to her. Tiffany, who is now 33, had her first perm at 4; her grandmother gave it to her. Considering the high level of parental/guardian dependency at that age, having one's head – the area of the body where the sacred third eye and crown chakras are located – smeared with a tub of chemicals, can seem normal, especially since its being given by the person that they depend on everything for, especially if there is no alternative view of how Black hair can be managed.

Even though Emile Durkeim was a European and White men of that era had a tendency to write as if they were the only humans that roamed the earth, I feel that when Durkheim wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method*, he was speaking about how social facts work for everyone, for all cultures. However, what makes social facts operate in a unique context for African Americans (or perhaps any society that has been tormented

by colonization) is that these ways of life that are "taken collectively" are often at odds with a Black person's core identity. In terms of this country, European-Americans create "facts" to make them appear esteemed, advanced, beautiful, pure and good but "through the process of socialization, those at society's margins have been taught to view themselves and their experiences as negative, to be ashamed of, ignored, or discarded, instead of as a source of strength, knowledge, and pride, to be valued protected and shared" (Espin 1993). In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Frantz Fanon declares,

> Colonisation is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the natives brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon, 1963, p. 170)

In terms of *inter* and *intra* race relations in this country, this is where social facts begin to emerge. As Fanon states, it is not enough to erase a Black person's regal and vibrant cultural memory, but the system must also do everything within its power to make everything associated with Africa appear primitive, backwards, poverty-stricken, and abhorrent, even though the continent is responsible for the birth of civilization. This malicious contortion of Black people's past, set the perfect stage for Americans (Black and White) to believe that anything coming out of Africa is degrading and to be ashamed of.

That's why legendary sports athletes like Sammy Sosa (with a reported net worth of $70 million) took measures to obliterate his rich mahogany skin tone in order to become a spooky alabaster version of himself. Due to skin bleaching, Sosa, born in the Dominican Republic, transformed his complexion from the color of chestnut to chalk,

and is now almost unrecognizable[10]. That's why, at one point, being called a Black African was one of the biggest insults a Black American could receive. That's why some Black churches still have images of a White Jesus, White Mary and White disciples, gracing their stained glass windows. That's why darker-skinned African-Americans with stereotypically Black features (i.e. broad noses, thick lips, dark skin, kinky hair) receive harsher sentences than their lighter-skinned counterparts (NPR, 2006). That's why, even though it's been proven that "Ancient Egypt was a Negro Civilization" (Diop, 1974, p. xiv) in an attempt to match historical greatness with all things European, Hollywood continues to make movies, like *God's of Egypt* where the Kings, Queens, Gods and Goddesses are portrayed by White actors. That's why some Dominicans and Puerto Ricans who are "Blacker than a 1,000 midnights" claim to be "Spanish" instead of Black. That's why there's probably a mother giving her daughter a perm right now because she believes that her child's hair is an error - a mistake. That's why Black parental figures tell their daughters not to have children by dark skinned men because, as one of my students told me during a class discussion on colorism, her grandmother didn't "want any ink spots runnin' around." That's why so many Black childhood taunts, started with "You so Black" or "Yo' mama so Black" followed by a derogatory comment meant to make everyone erupt in laughter (i.e. "Yo mama so Black, every time she steps out of the car, the 'check oil' light comes on").

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[10] "Sosa's skin color has become noticeably lighter over the last eight years since fans first questioned his seemingly different complexion in 2009. However, in his most recent appearance during an interview with ESPNDeportes at the Home Run Derby early this week, Sosa is almost unrecognizable, sporting not just a lighter skin but nearly a completely white complexion" (Williams 2017).

Because of the ubiquitous nature of social facts, they do not have to be taught. They can be observed. They are felt. They are experienced. Although Gwendolyn Brooks may not have known about the Durkehimian terminology of a "social fact" it certainly seemed as though she did, when she expressed,

> One of the first "world" truths revealed to me when I at last became a member of SCHOOL was that to be socially successful, a little girl must be bright of skin. It was better if your hair was curly, too- or at least a Good Grade (good grade implied, usually, no involvement with the Hot Comb) – but bright you marvelously needed to be" (Brooks, 1972, p. 37).

A 'world truth' is another phrase that excellently captures these wide spread oppressive thoughts and ideas that seep into our consciousness, frequently against our will. All of these reasons make a case for why it's imperative that Black girls and women are constantly engaging with and surrounded by affirming people, places, and things, that counter these disempowering "world truths" and "social facts." This is essential, so that they can be encouraged to embrace who they really are—who they were meant to be.

Section 4: Supporting Actors

Because balance is important, there needed to be a section dedicated to the people who helped affirm and support the authentic identities of these Black women. While all of these women had unsupporting actors along their journey, fortunately, all of these women also had supporting actors in their lives as well. Some were directly influential, while others had more of an indirect impact. Some of the supporting actors were lovers, while others were the family patriarchs. Some supporting actors were viewed from a distance, people who may not have ever known their influence on the natural hair journey of these women. These people (both Black and White, seasonal and permanent) reinforced just how beautiful they thought their natural hair was.

Through all of her transitions (perming, cutting, braids, weaves, hair loss, going natural etc) Brenda states,

> "I never received anything negative about my natural hair from my dad. He was very pro Black. He was all, 'love your nappy hair' so those type of words were never an insult to me. My dad was really supportive, like extremely supportive of me going natural. He'd be like 'Girl you good. You just beautiful. That's yo' glory right there. You rockin' yo crown.' My dad was the most supportive in me going natural."

This thread of her narrative filled me with joy for a couple of reasons. It made me happy mostly because "in the parlance of social psychology, social work, and urban social scientists, African American fathers have often been described as 'absent,' 'missing,' 'nonresidential,' 'noncustodial,' 'unavailable,' 'nonmarried,' 'irresponsible' and 'immature' (Connor, White, 2006, xi). So, to hear about Brenda's father and also Jasmine's father, both men who were not only thoroughly involved in their daughter's lives, but also supportive of their natural hair, is majorly refreshing. Long before a husband, boyfriend or partner enters the picture, a father is one of the most, if not *the*

most influential male figure in a woman's life. Therefore, having one's natural self affirmed in the eyes of one's daddy, not only validates one's sense of self, but it also sets a standard for how one is to be treated and appreciated by other men, later in life. Secondly, the encouragement from Black fathers highlights how crucial and useful it is to get positive feedback from Black men, even if it is a relative and not a potential love interest.

In a few instances, the sources of support came from an unlikely or unexpected group: White people. Vereda has a Ph.D. in Economics, and is the chairperson and associate professor in the Department of Economics and Finance at N.C. A & T. She is "often the only woman of color in meetings with all White men." She recalls going to the salon in the mall to get her hair done. Her new growth (a term that Black women with permed hair use to describe the natural hair that is growing from the follicle) was becoming visible and like clockwork, it was time for another perm. Her usual beautician was not in that day, so she went to someone else. When she sat down in the White hair dressers' seat, Vereda said that stylist touched her hair and asked, in shock and bewilderment, "Why are you perming your hair?! You don't need a perm. Your hair is so soft. It's so pretty." This was not the first time that someone had commented on the delicate texture of Vereda's hair, but having it come from a White woman really made her start to think differently about her loyalty to this chemical process.

Tiffany recalls getting compliments from this unlikely peer group at her school. She says, "Yea, White people loved it. Back in the day, White people were all like 'Oh That's SO cute!'" But, even though the compliments were nice, especially at periods in her life where she struggled to appreciate her hair, she chalked that up to their fascination

with something foreign, rather than them actually liking it, saying "They didn't know what it was. Frizzy looked good to them. They didn't have it."

CiCi, who had her hair pulled back into a neat bun during our interview, told me about her White boyfriend's thoughts on her hair. She states, in a matter of fact tone, "Yea, he loves when I wear my hair out. He loves my natural hair." For Ruby, my youngest interviewee, her influencers were not within her circle, nobody that she knew personally, but that didn't keep them from making a deep impact on how she related to her hair. Influenced by Instagram models and Blacks on screen, she often felt like their lyrics and messages were directed at her.

> "I'd look at Lauryn Hill and Alicia Keys and see how pretty and comfortable they were, with their natural hair. And, I loved the India Arie song, *I am not my hair*. I was in middle school then. And at the time, it was like, 'Even though I have long hair, I am not my hair. This is not what defines me.' And then, I remember watching *Malcolm X,* watching that scene when he was getting his hair permed. That really affected me. I just needed to come down from my royal high horse and get real. It was time for me to get real with myself and just be proud of being Black."

If Malcolm X were alive today, I feel like Ruby's revelation would put a smile on his face. Prior to his transformation into Malcolm X, Malcolm Little, better known as 'Red' was a petty thief running the streets of Boston and Harlem in colorfully elaborate suits and at that time in his life, he too, was firmly seated on his royal high horse. In the following memory, he recalls going the extra mile to abandon his African features. He says,

> How ridiculous was I? Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking "White," reflected in the mirror in Shorty's room. I vowed again that I'd never be without a conk, and I never was for many years. This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to

> have it look like a White man's hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the Black people are "inferior" – and White people "superior" – that they will even violate an mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look "pretty" by White standards. (Haley, 1964, p. 56)

Like the influence that Malcolm X, Alicia Keys, Lauryn Hill and Instagram models had on Ruby, Brenda was influenced from afar as well. In addition to the steady backing and optimism of her father and the support of one of her friends who cut off all their hair and went natural, Brenda remembers taking a trip that totally transformed her perception of natural hair. She states,

> "In 8th grade, we went to all the HBCUs and everybody was natural. That's when Erykah Badu and Lauryn Hill were poppin' on the scene and I remember seeing dreadlocks look so good on girls and I remember coming home and was like 'Ma, can I cut my hair off and go natural? And she was like 'No.' Granted, I was still doing my own hair by then, but I still had to get permission to do something like that. And, I guess for them, the older people, they thought it would look tacky. *But, it looked so good to me."*

Section 5: The Return

There were many moments in each interview that moved, touched, and resonated with me, but the parts I found most fascinating and inspirational were located within the mental, emotional, and physical epiphanies and processes associated with my interviewees' decisions to go natural. Some women's motivations to go natural stemmed from adverse bodily reactions while others were prompted by emotional turmoil. For instance, Ruby, was bubbly, bright and to me, she seemed mature for her age. Her mother was a flight attendant, so she spent most of her girlhood raised by her doting dad, a dad who she speaks lovingly of and the one who drove her to the interview. But, he was also a man who had no idea how to do his baby girl's thick, natural hair. Laughing, she says "He couldn't even plat it in two." Because her mom was up in the skies providing for her family, it was difficult for her to come down to earth (literally) and take the time needed to nourish and style her baby girl's hair on a daily basis Ruby recalls getting her first perm at about three and a half.

Although she has been living in Greensboro for the past five years, Ruby and her family moved quite a bit, and she grew up in the entertainment industry, appearing in shows on Broadway and other local productions where she was living at the time. As far back as Ruby can remember, she had a passion for the stage and in this theatrical field, she often felt like she didn't blend in with her contemporaries, and comparison (being the thief of joy that it is) would sometimes get the best of her. She explains:

> "I was just, always having to go against females who were skinnier than me, that had blue eyes, ya know the hazel eyes. Oh my God, that's something that I'm still getting over today: accepting that I have Black eyes. But, the one killer thing is that they always had straight hair- long beautiful blonde or brown straight hair. And it, it was like.. it was like.. I was Black and I had long, but Black hair and it kinda confused me really,

> because it's like I'm a Black Barbie in a sense and I'm trying to live in this White Barbie doll world, so..it kinda confused me a little bit, because it was like 'What am I really trying to be?'"

Ruby's simple, yet profound reflexive question struck me during the interview and actually hung over me during my drive home afterward. I admired her self-awareness for that age; she was only 13 or 14 when she asked this of herself. It was impressive that Ruby possessed that level of consciousness to even stop and ask herself such a question at a time when most teenagers are trying, in one way or another, to simply fit in and be accepted. It's not surprising then, that weeks after asking herself this question, Ruby decided that she'd had enough of hopelessly trying to assimilate into the "White Barbie doll world" and she proceeded to lock herself in the bathroom (because she was afraid her parents would stop her if she didn't lock it) and cut the majority of her long permed hair off.

Confidently, Ruby states,

> "see, when you're in the acting industry, you act for the people, you act for the director. And so it was like I was a puppet, and it was just like 'I didn't wanna be a puppet anymore. I wanted to be my own person.'"

Taking ownership of who you are, or being your own person is probably one of the most soul satisfying and gratifying acts one can participate in, particularly for Black women who live in a world that has historically sent us the message (explicitly or implicitly) that we belong to everyone else but ourselves – that we are to serve everyone else before we eat, even if we made the food.

While Ruby's struggle was primarily an emotional and psychological one, I found that other women were motivated to stop perming for primarily physical reasons. Take for instance, Ms. Williams. I didn't ask her age, but she was in high school around the

same time as my mother was in high school, so she is probably in her late 60s. In terms of perming, Ms. Williams says,

> "There was always some kind of drawback with it, ya know: like a burnt spot in my head or my scalp was tender. But we keep persevering, putting that in our hair for years and years and years and when I got so sick, well I couldn't put anything in my hair for months..so it was about out anyway, so I decided I wasn't going to put anymore in. And since 2013, I haven't had anything in there and I just feel better."

While this conclusion is definitely a moment of triumph, it's still disturbing that for many Black women, it takes hospitalization and a life threatening disease (as was the case with Ms. Williams) in order to come to the conclusion that chemicals on the scalp is not only bad for you, but also one hundred percent unnecessary.

Unlike Ms. Williams, who says that hospitalization caused her not to be able to put anything in her hair "for months," Calana realized on her own that a perm wasn't in her best interest. She says,

> "My body just started to hurt. The chemicals at some point, it started to burn as soon as it would even get on me. I don't know if it was psychological or if it was really something. I think it was hormones for me… but for a while I tried for a long time to keep doing it, even though it hurt- I think for maybe like two years.. I did take a break for a little bit, then I started again because it was easier to handle. And, at the time, to me, it looked better straight with a relaxer. In that transition period, I struggled with pain. When the pain became unbearable, that is when she says she stopped perming and never looked back. Adopting a more holistic lifestyle, she says that "there's enough chemicals in the water – there's enough in the air, losing the perm is just one less thing that I have to think about."

Another one of my participants was moved to go natural for similar reasons. After months of secretly admiring the natural Black women at her gym (the ones who could just "wash their hair, play with it a little bit, and go") and after years of tormenting her body with these chemicals, Vereda had realized that she could no longer do this to herself

anymore. When asked what influenced Vereda to go natural, she responded with a bold but gentle certainty in her eyes, she said,

> "See, the texture was - it was soft, but the texture wasn't my own hair. It was very limp. It had no life. It was lifeless: lifeless hair. As I got older, I think it thinned it out- then the perms starting burning. And I guess, after years and years of it, I just decided one day that I had had enough. I mean- *I had just had enough.* I had gotten down to the lowest kind I could get, and it was still burning my neck."

Vereda and Calana's painful experience with chemical burns is what led them to lead a more holistic lifestyle. And to be clear, this pain had the potential to produce effects that transcended the initial burn. Based on a study conducted by Boston scientists, relaxers are linked to early menarche and uterine tumors. Published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology,* scientists from Boston University followed more than 23,580 pre-menopausal Black women from 1997 to 2009 and discovered that the women suffered scalp lesions and burns from using relaxers, facilitating "entry of hair relaxer constituents in the body" (Wise et al, 2011, p. 432). Moreover, the chemicals seeped through their bodies and into their urine and as a result they acquired Uterine Leiomyomata (uterine fibroid), which are tumors that grow in the uterine. Although these tumors are benign, leiomyomata are associated with "significant gynecologic morbidity and the leading indication of hysterectomy in the United States" (Wise et al, 2011, p. 432). Because relaxers are so hazardous, it's understandable why foregoing perms is a critical major step in leading a more holistic lifestyle, a lifestyle where the best six doctors are "sunshine, water, rest, air, exercise, and diet" (Fields, 1990).

Even though Beverly admits that her hair started to become thinner and more damaged by the constant perming, unlike Vereda and Calana, she didn't notice any

significant changes in how the perm felt, when it was being applied. However, the major change she noticed—was in her waistline. The impetus behind Beverley's decision to finally get back to her roots was her lackluster workout routine that revolved around keeping her hair looking presentable for work.

Because she had "gained so much weight in college," upon graduation, she decided it was time to start working out again. Beverly says,

> "The idea of getting my hair relaxer on a Saturday and not working out, cause Monday I wanna look decent for work wasn't making any sense. I was spending all this money and time getting my hair done. I'm not working out jus because of a hairstyle, which doesn't make sense. There were activities I loved, like swimming, but was putting it on hold for three days. This is just the most ridiculous concept, because that's three days lost out of an entire week. So, yea my decision just came out of wanting to take better care of myself"

Although these past four stories have made it clear that growth is rarely a sunny experience, sometimes growth doesn't involve a major blow to the head, heart or waistline. Sometimes growth or enlightenment simply comes from being influenced by an external factor and/or listening to the voice within. For example, CiCi recalls watching Chris Rock's *Good Hair* and after watching it, she recalls:

> "I saw that and I said, 'ya know what- he's right. It really is 'creamy crack' if you will, because my hair had to be laid all the time. When I first saw that fuzz comin up, I was like 'Oh noo we gotta do something about this.' But then, I noticed, how much thinner my hair got, too. And that's just what the relaxer does, it thins out your hair. And after watching the film, I really wanted to see if my hair could be the way it used to be, before I got a relaxer. So I grew it out for about a year… transitioned, then did my big chop—and it was still thick, my hair was still there!"

Although she was in tears after she cut her hair off, she remembers looking in the mirror and feeling a new found sense of self-confidence too. CiCi who says that going natural:

“really makes you accept yourself for who you are and how God made you” says that the catalyst behind her decision to transition was a benign and not particularly soul-wrenching self-inquiry. She states “What really made me go natural was me just saying ‘let me see if I can do this, because, why not? It’s so much more healthier for your hair …the whole body.’”

Chapter 6: Hindsight

As the old adage states, "hindsight is 20/20" and often that phrase is lightheartedly tossed into the atmosphere at considerably neutral and innocuous moments—perhaps after ordering a bland meal at a fancy restaurant, or choosing to take the highway instead of the city route, only to be met with bottle neck traffic—both examples being choices and circumstances that don't provide rich revealing details into how we truly think and feel about ourselves. But the reality is, that adage can be applied to many parts of our internal, personal *journey of self-discovery:* a phrase that my chair, Dr. Kwame Harrison once mentioned at a pivotal time in my life.

So, I wanted to end my interviews with a question that would to cut through the conditioning, through the social facts, through the world truths, through the brainwashing, through the "White Barbie doll world," and through the internalized racism. For my final question, I asked, "As a natural haired woman, what would you tell your former self, the one who hadn't yet permed her hair? Or, what would you tell the person who permed your hair?" Their answers were as equally inspiring and informative as their stories about why they chose to go natural. Their answers conveyed a knowing: an unshakable acceptance and celebration of self, and really, of all Black girls and women. CiCi's response seemed to escape from her mouth before I could even finish the question. She urged:

> "Don't do it. Don't do it. Because that was virgin hair, in its purest form, like straight out the scalp, and I don't feel like my hair went back to the way it was before the relaxer. Or maybe, my hair has changed with time. I just would not have done it. I woulda just threw it back in my bun like I always do. The thing is: not everyone has hair like we do. Being natural, I have hair days where I can't do absolutely anything with it—it just will not do what I want it do, ya know? And I'll go out and people are like 'Oh

> my God, I love your hair." And it's like, you thought you were having a bad hair day, yet everybody sees it for what it really is - in all its glory."

Echoing CiCi's warning, Vereda, a woman who admitted that she delayed going natural because of "the fear of not being accepted," says:

> "Don't get it. Don't do it. Don't tear up the texture of your hair, because our hair is beautiful. Our texture is different. This is what we were born with. You don't have to worry about how it's going to turn out because it's going to fit your face, because it's *your* hair."

After proudly wearing her natural hair for over ten tears now, Vereda sates, "I find that people accept it pretty well and they even compliment you, too!" Even though these interviews were done weeks apart, and Vereda and Brenda have an almost 35 year age gap, Brenda's answers reflected Vereda's. She proclaims:

> "Don't do it girl. Do not. Your hair is beautiful the way it is right now. And, although it doest seem cool or in because of all the stuff you see on TV, don't. Your hair will be healthier. People are gonna be paying to have hair like yours and it comes out your scalp the way it does."

Ms. Williams didn't urge Black girls or women not to perm, but it was implied in her clear message when she said:

> "This is how God made us and we are natural beauties and we don't need to do all that stuff to our hair. There are so many hairstyles that you can do with natural hair that can make you just as beautiful, if not more, than having a perm. Stay with your natural. Stay with the way God made you."

Calana enjoyed a pensive pause before answering. Mirroring the revelations of those before and after her, Calana says:

> "Love you as you are. What's really important is what you feel about yourself not what others project onto you or tell you what you look like. Your hair is beautiful. You're beautiful. That's how God made you. Just be happy in your own skin. Play with it, touch it, let it out, and take a break whenever you feel like, whenever you want to. The most important thing is not allowing other people to define what your beauty is or what's beautiful for you."

Other participants infused their heartfelt answers with some practical advice. For instance, Ruby, says "I'd probably say 'Take some funds away from clothing and put that into a hair stylist, because the money has to come from somewhere to get the hair done.'" Reflecting for a hair longer, then she continues, "There was definitely a peace of mind that was brought about when I cut my hair and went natural."

Jasmine, staying in the line of logistics, knowingly declares:

> "I would say 'Girl, lets talk about how to fix your hair' because although braids are beautiful, they are time consuming and they can be painful. I would teach the people who are raising her how to do hair, because they didn't know how to do hair, and that was a problem; that was *the* problem."

She then, like the other participants, ended with inspirational thoughts for her younger self. Jasmine said, "I would teach her that the statements, the fears, the doubts and the insecurities- with regard to how other women present to the world - does not have to be absorbed by the you—little young Jasmine."

Even though these women were directing their answers at their younger selves, due to the international phenomenon of perming, I believe that their advice could help any Black girl or woman on the fence about going natural. It is my wish that any Black girl or woman will realize that "going natural" is an abundant experience, full of gain. Hopefully they will realize that, "we have nothing to lose, but our chains" (Shakur, 1973)

Chapter 7: Closing Thoughts in The Age of Aquarius

When I first approached this topic, I really thought that I knew why Black women permed their hair. In one way or another, I felt, quite confidently, that most Black women had been brainwashed and this brainwashing had led them to either want to be White or led them to do whatever was needed to obtain a slice of the European standard of beauty: a standard which predominately portrayed a straight haired woman as the pinnacle of pretty. After spending a significant portion of the year researching, interviewing and writing, I must admit that I'm slightly embarrassed that I had that premature mindset. The thing is, in talking to all of these women, I never got the impression that any of them wanted to be White. Not once. What I found is that the majority of these women were immersed in environments, families, and situations that prohibited them or made it quite difficult for them to fully embrace their Blackness: an embracement that would have invariably included the appreciation for and love of the hair upon their head.

I believe that most would agree that (in addition to the quality of your relationships) self-love and self-acceptance are two indispensable elements of a fulfilling and happy journey. And, when these two elements are present in a Black woman's life, it'll be much easier for her to embrace her natural hair. But, before we insist that Black women love and accept themselves or look down on the Black women that don't, it's important to first comprehend why it might be difficult for her to do so. We must ask the questions that shed light on what would keep a Black girl or woman from loving and accepting herself. For instance, how can a girl naturally accept herself when she's receiving a perm before she even knows how to write out her own name? How can one

love their natural hair, when they're being suspended from school specifically for wearing their hair in a style that affirms their Blackness? How does one accept their natural hair when one's co-workers tell them that they prefer their *fake* hair over their *real* natural hair? How does one embrace their natural hair when one's own mother views it as a daunting task that needs to be accomplished, instead of admired? There is no singular response to these questions, but I strongly believe that the stories of these women have the potential to lead us in the direction of an answer. What I've found in these interviews, is that in order for one to embrace their Blackness, which includes their natural hair, it starts by being guided by and listening to the woman in the mirror, despite all of the external forces telling one to do otherwise. Even though their decision to go natural was influenced by a host of factors, ultimately they were the architects of their own destiny.

Sure, Black women may never be able to genuinely gain access to the "Good ol' Boys club" but the real question is: do we really want to anyway? I feel and believe quite strongly that Black women *do not* need to gain access to these clubs to feel complete or validated, nor is getting into these clubs any significant symbol of "making it" or breaking through the glass ceiling. Furthermore, nobody (regardless of race) should want to be in a space where they're not really invited or wanted in the first place. Black women must continue to dwell in and create spaces where we are celebrated, not merely tolerated. And since we aren't really welcomed to their WASP-esque clubs anyway, we're better off creating our own organizations, ones that serve the needs and concerns of other Black women and our community. And while the internet offers a special way for us to spread messages, get together and connect worldwide, this gathering and meeting of

minds is nothing new, as "Black women began to organize themselves into clubs and leagues in the early 19th century" (Abdullah, 2007, p. 337). Moreover, Elizabeth Lindsay Davis asserts that "Black women's clubs offered a way for Black women to organize and represent themselves, rather than being subject to the definitions imposed by a White male-dominated society (Abdullah, 2007, p. 340).

Furthermore, there are swaths of White women (both liberal and conservative) blinded by and/or fueled by their privilege that may never see or refuse to see that their version of feminism isn't valid unless it's intersectional. Because they enjoy the perks of European-Americanness, they fail to see that sexism (albeit a system of oppression for all women) affects them in an entirely different manner. But the real question is: Is it Black women's job to spend our sacred time forcing them to understand this very simple reality? Instead of using our energy on proselytizing, trying to get White women to see our point of view—explaining our humanity to a group of women like Colleen Campbell, a Philadelphia TV journalist, who can yell obscenities at a cop, drunkenly telling him to "lick my a-hole" and still live to see another day—why not use that time on taking care of ourselves and our families especially since "Black women have never had the opportunity to devote their full attention to family life" (Jones, 2010, p. 277) ?

Why not continue to spend our time protecting and fighting for women like Sandra Bland, a young Black woman who ended up dead, mysteriously hanging in a Texas jail cell, only three days after a "routine" traffic stop where she was pulled over for not signaling when switching lanes? Keep in mind that during this traffic stop, Bland, who wore her hair in dreadlocks, remained calm and cordial and gave the cop everything (i.e. license and registration) that he asked for. The situation turned ugly when this fragile

man, protected by his badge, and in turn, by an entire apparatus of White supremacy, asked her to put out her cigarette. She didn't (initially) because she said it was her car and she shouldn't have to put out a cigarette in *her* car. So, he had to revert to the grand American tradition of making an example of her. That's when he violently pulled her out of the car and eventually arrested her without telling her why, even though she asked him several times. Bland, a woman who had just moved from Chicago to Prairie View to start a new job, may still be alive today if she kept her head down, looked up at the cop sheepishly, said "yessa massa" and put out her cigarette the first time he asked. She was arrested and presumably killed, for not swallowing her words, for refusing to shift into a different role or wear a mask. She's not with us today because she chose to operate using one conscious, for being a full person, instead of splitting herself in two, in order to appease someone else. She's not alive today, for daring to be human and for courageously expressing the range of her emotions, in the face of and in response to seething disrespect and animosity. But it's not just racist White folks that Black women no longer need to focus on changing.

Because White male patriarchy (which includes the dehumanization of Black women) had a sneaky way of infiltrating the lifestyles and mentality of Black American men, there will always be some Black men who fail to see how their misogynistic and sexist mentality and actions deleteriously affect the Black girls, teenagers, women, and elders that surround them. One doesn't even have to visit a particular part of the city or read an in-depth journal article to witness or understand how some Black men put down Black women. All one has to do is turn on a popular mainstream "urban" radio station and listen to the lyrics to just one or two songs in order to begin to grasp the all-

consuming degradation toward Black women. But the real question is: Instead of zeroing in on the Black men who don't give a damn about Black women, the ones who see us as dispensable, brainless hoes, prostitutes and/or bitches, why not spend our lives learning from, building bridges with, and fostering relationships with the multitudes of supportive Black men who do see us as the yin to their yang and who do genuinely support and love us for who we are. Black men are the allies that we *definitely* need.

Black women have spent their collective history, educating people about our humanity –speaking to, working for and entertaining people who don't even see us as people. No more. I have nothing but admiration and respect for the women and men before us who have shed light and written beautifully on the ways in which Black women have had to become a chameleon in order to merely survive. But, I feel that we're moving into a time where surviving is not sufficient. Surviving is not what we're here to do. Survival is not our birthright. Surviving is the bare minimum of this human existence. Black women want to thrive. And luckily, with the bonds that we've established with other uplifting Black women (because the reality is, not all Black women are interested in uplifting each other and seeing other Black women do well) and with allies (i.e. enlightened White men and women, Black men, and other ethnic groups who are genuinely interested in hearing our perspectives and helping out) we are moving into a time, where *thriving*, not just surviving, can be the new norm. It's within these spaces of acceptance, where the voices of Black women are heard, validated, and acted on. In these spaces of acceptance, Black women do not have to "shift," downplay, cower, or wear masks. Contrarily, because we are supported, Black women get to continue showing up with their full selves, with their natural hair. We can display and embrace our "plural

personalities" because we really have nothing to lose and everything to gain. It can be dizzying at times, but even still, Black women do not need to look at their multiple orientations to the world as a burden, or a curse. Rather, we should see them (i.e. our triple consciousness) as a bonus imbedded within our genetic makeup, to help us thrive and excel.

Because Black women have been socialized to be ashamed of their hair, to hide their natural hair, some will automatically view going natural as courageous or revolutionary—an act meant to make some sort of external statement. While those perceptions are simply the byproduct of a Black woman choosing to be natural in a racist country, in my findings, *making a statement* is not what drives Black women to return to her original textures. While yes, there will be some Black women that go natural to specifically anger a White person or a group of White people, from speaking with these women of three different generations, that was not a common catalyst at all. Therefore, for anyone entertaining that notion, they need to abandon the idea that Black women who go natural are doing it to get a rise out the White community. We must remember that Black women's hair was never an issue or a point of contention until we were dehumanized and effectively put in last place on the totem pole of attractiveness and of humanity. Black peoples in ancient, pre-colonial Africa were styling their hair in magnificent ways as a natural manifestation of what their fingers, combs, and hair could do—not because they were "sticking it to the man" for there were no White people around to stick it to. Black hair was never a crime, until we were made criminals. That said, Black women will never reach the European standard of beauty, not because those standards are too high, but because those standards are fundamentally and wholeheartedly

not for Black women. Black beauty, from Greensboro to Ghana, from Alabama to Addis Ababa, from Pittsburgh to Paris, from Memphis to Malaysia, transcends all of the lily-White cookie-cutter images that have been thrust upon us for centuries. Making a Black woman feel like she needs to live up to a European standard of beauty is like telling an original masterpiece that it needs to live up to the artistic standard of its derivative. Not only is it unjust, but it just doesn't make sense. Due to archeological evidence, scholars have found that "the common ancestry through the mitochondrial eve means that our genetic differences are literally skin deep. That, at the bottom, we are all descended from the same family" (Abaka – PBS, *Africa's Great Civilizations*).

To drive home this point – the reality that everyone's original foremother is a Black woman (aka mitochondrial eve) – Dr. Henry Louis Gates, professor and narrator of *Africa's Great Civilizations*, asks Dr. Emma Mbua if all of us today are descendants of Black ancestors. She says, "That's exactly right. All of the humans, all of the homo-sapiens all over the world, be it yellow, White, Black— we have a descendant from a common ancestor in Africa" (Mbua, PBS, *Africa's Great Civilizations*). So, genetically speaking, everybody inhabiting the planet, comes from a Black woman. A Black woman is the mother of civilization. So, while we must recognize that women of *all* cultures are beautiful, brilliant, and dynamic in their own ways, it's necessary that we also acknowledge who the original "standard" was – and not just in terms of aesthetic, but in terms of humanity itself. On that note of being the "standard," Jasmine happily and assertively states,

> "As Black American people, we are the foundation of what culture is. We set the tone for culture not only in this country, but actually in the world.

> We define pop culture. Even though the reality is that our culture is often appropriated, we set the tone for style. As far as I'm concerned, I'm setting the tone for style with my natural hair as is."

So yes, there's an entire industry dedicated to those who want to hopelessly strive for the European standard of beauty (i.e. perms, weaves, skin-lightening creams, rhinoplasty, color contacts, and more) but if one opens their eyes wide enough, they'll see that there's a smorgasbord of procedures, creams, surgeries, machines, padding, and industries dedicated to co-opting Black women's beauty as well. There are countless White women (of all ages) who risk skin cancer (by going to tanning salons and/or by laying out in the sun much longer than their skin can bare) just so that they can get darker and try to obtain the hues that Black and Brown women have naturally. There are White women that pay thousands of dollars to get treatments that will enhance their appearance: procedures that plump the lips, cheeks, hips, and buttocks, to resemble the curves, suppleness, and voluptuousness that Black women have – naturally. There are aging White women who spend top dollar on surgeries and anti-aging creams, with the hope that these nips, tucks and creams will magically hide their laugh lines, crow's feet and wrinkles. But these anti-aging advertisements are rarely targeted to Black women because, as the cultural proverb states, "Black don't crack." Of course Black women have other unique beauty issues, but visibly aging skin is not something that most Black women deal with, at the rate or urgency that White women do.

Rachel Dolezal — a White woman who fantasized about being from Africa when she was little, who, during art class in elementary school, drew herself as a Black girl, and who, during her childhood, told her aunt to knit her a Black Raggedy Ann doll— revealed all of these details in an interview with CNN's Michael Smerconish in April of

last year as well as in her book *In Full Color: Finding my place in a Black and White world.* Dolezal, a woman who feels that "Black is inspirational," legitimately feels that she is Black and even claims to *be* Black. She is a woman who sports every single Black hairstyle imaginable and who even passed for Black, which gave her the ability to serve as the leader of the NAACP in Spokane, Washington. Her cover was eventually blown, but she still held on to her "Blackness" because, as she maintains, "race is a social construct."

White women like Australian born Iggy Azalea obliterated her homeland accent, reforming the organic manner in which her mouth and tongue move, in order to adopt the dialect of a Black woman from the "dirty South[11]," so that she could assimilate into certain parts of Black culture and sell more records for personal gain—*not* because she had any motivation to actually fight against any of the oppressive forces that historically or currently plague the Black community.

I don't believe that Iggy Azalea, any White woman like her, or any White woman participating in the above mentioned processes actually wants to *be* Black (well, save for Rachel Dolezal). As comedian Paul Mooney once said during a taping of the iconic *Chappelle Show,* "Everybody wanna be a nigga, but nobody wanna be a nigga:" which, in softer terms means that people, specifically non-Blacks, love Black culture but they

[11] The dirty south is "the cultural and geographical South of Black America. This term was made popular by Hip-Hop in the 1990's. The term "dirty" exemplifies the conditions the Blacks of this region have lived, survived, and thrived in since Blacks were brought over as slaves" (Rich, 2011).

don't love Black people. They don't love the struggle. They love the ability to put on our culture like a costume, and take it off at their discretion. They love the beauty, the style, the strut, the resilience, the talent, the innovation, the point of view, the creativity, the strength, and the indescribable soul that emanates from Black people's pours. But are simultaneously glad that they don't have to deal with the discrimination, the hate, and the subjugation.

Having said that, it's important to note that the people who originally taught us to hate ourselves, are the same people that know and keep finding out, how amazing Blackness is: which, in my belief, is one of the main reasons why Whites felt and feel that Blacks have to be suppressed, stopped, destroyed, and killed. Black Americans weren't ever supposed to discover their power or greatness. But, we're in the Age of Aquarius, an age that is about "acknowledging that the system is broken:" it is about "making room for a more egalitarian world and individuals assuming more power;" additionally, "Aquarius is heavily associated with information and technology, and so the way we're seeing social media facilitating revolution is very much of this era" (Crimmens, 2016). Therefore, those times of ignorance, self-suppression, playing small and blindly going along with the status quo are surely coming to a close. We are just one click away from seeing millions of images of Black people living their best lives and loving themselves unapologetically. We are one click away from seeing natural-haired Black women running their own successful companies (@chefahki @thewraplife @ovonion @freddieharrel @queenofgreen @travelnoire @issarae @cocoandbreezy @nikishabrunson @heyfranhey and countless others). We're one click away from seeing a host of shows that are created and directed by Black women, featuring natural Black

actresses (*Queen Sugar, Insecure, Greenleaf, Chewing Gum,* just to name a few). We're one remote control click away from seeing famous natural haired Black girls, teenagers, and women not only speak out on pertinent local and world issues, but also flawlessly show up and *shine* on the red carpet – at both predominately White and predominately Black awards shows (like Issa Rae, Amandla Stenberg, Lupita Nyong'o, Tracee Ellis Ross, Viola Davis, Yara Shahidi, Taraji P. Henson, Nicole Ari Parker, Solange Knowles, Teyonah Parris, Ava Duvernay, Jill Scott, Janelle Monae, and Mara Brock Akil, just to name a mere snapshot). We are also one click away from a bottomless online vault of media that includes historical speeches, films, tapes, newspaper articles, performances, and interviews with iconic, pioneering and everyday powerful Black women—everyone from Fannie Lou Hamer to Elaine Brown to Marion Anderson to Angela Davis to Dorothy Height to Rosetta Tharpe to Assata Shakur to Shirley Chisolm—all women who threw caution to the wind and used their voice, mind, art, or platform to uplift Black women (and Black people) and infuse a generation with hope, truth, and power. If we so choose, we can be perpetually flooded with past and present examples of Black excellence.

In this day and age, we have to actively and deliberately choose to be ignorant to the brilliance of Black culture. Yes there has always been oppression, and maybe there will always be oppression, but hidden within the muddy terrain of oppression are seeds of opportunity. All of these examples of Black brilliance are like one inexorable wave that gains more momentum each day. This force, this movement of Black love and acceptance is marked by promise and pride. This movement is showing us that we have the ability to define ourselves and flourish in that definition.

In 1982, during the Malcolm X Weekend at Harvard University, in her address entitled *Learning from the 60s,* Audre Lorde proclaimed, “If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies of me and eaten alive.” In speaking with Black women from three different generations, I’ve found that going natural is about self-determination and self-definition. It’s about owning one’s awesome. It’s about coming home to one’s self. It’s about easing back into one’s own element. It’s about experiencing freedom within the borders of one’s own skin and bones. It’s about honoring one’s mind, body, and spirit. It’s about nourishing and loving the forgotten, yet essential pieces of one’s self. It’s about learning how to cultivate a level of inner peace and self-acceptance that cannot be tainted by anything or being.

Perhaps one of my favorite ways to conceptualize and summarize the process of going natural comes from a young Black woman born in 1998, who, as a mere toddler, received her first perm right around the turn of the century. Ruby says,

> “When I look at myself now, it's like looking at a little kid. It's like looking at my three-year-old self in the mirror and saying, ‘Hey, I'm back!’”

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Appendix

Appendix A

Faith Christian Academy Secondary Student Handbook, 2015 – 2016

Boys and Girls

The following guidelines apply to both girls and boys.

- Hair styles should be neatly combed/brushed and present a nicely shaped appearance.
- Hair should be styled or secure so as to not be a distraction.
- Braiding should be freshly groomed and kept neat and tidy.
- Fads (trendy styles that are not neat and tidy), dreadlocks (not tidy), mohawks, bunny tails, rat tails and other styles are not acceptable. Hair must be kept neat and tidy.
- Hair should not intentionally be styled greater than 3 inches off the whole head - this includes afros, teasing and blowing out. Hair puffs are allowed.
- Girls' hair must not be worn covering eyes or impairing eyesight.
- Hair color and highlights must be a natural color and must not be a distraction.

Appendix B

Viewer's Facebook comment for Rhonda Lee:

Emmitt Vascocu ▸ KTBS 3 News
October 1 at 3:41am ·

the black lady that does the news is a
very nice lady.the onlt thing is she needs to wear a wig or grow some more hair.
im not sure if she is a cancer patient .
but still its not something myself that i
think looks good on tv.
what about letting someone a male have
waist long hair do the news.what about
that

Like · Comment

KTBS 3 News likes this.

View all 23 comments

Alexa Lopez omg lol
October 1 at 11:16am

Meteorologist Rhonda A. Lee Hello Emmitt-- I am the "black lady" to which you are referring. My name is Rhonda Lee. Nice to meet you. I am sorry you don't like my ethnic hair. And no I don't have cancer. I'm a non-smoking, 5'3, 121 lbs, 25+ mile a week running, 37.5 year old woman, and I'm in perfectly healthy physical condition.

I am very proud of my African-American ancestry which includes my hair. For your edification: traditionally our hair doesn't grow downward. It grows upward. Many Black women use strong straightening agents in order to achieve a more European grade of hair and that is their choice. However in my case I don't find it necessary. I'm very proud of who I am and the standard of beauty I display. Women come in all shapes, sizes, nationalities, and levels of beauty. Showing little girls that being comfortable in the skin and HAIR God gave me is my contribution to society. Little girls (and boys for that matter) need to see that what you look like isn't a reason to not achieve their goals.

Conforming to one standard isn't what being American is about and I hope you can embrace that.

Thank you for your comment and have a great weekend and thank for watching.
October 6 at 5:33am · 75