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Rhetoric of Natural Hair: Cultural Contradictions

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Abstract

To accomplish assimilation Black women have often altered their appearance—specifically their hair—to be accepted by the dominate culture even as this adaptation may run counter to their own cultural sensibilities. This cultural battle within the Black community has ostensibly created a sub-culture that not only struggles against Western culture, but the assimilated faction of their own group. This stance clashes with the widely accepted Western cultural standards of straight hair as a symbol of beauty because African Americans are expected to see themselves through a white gaze. Are Black women who choose to straighten their naturally kinky hair or lengthen it with weaves and extensions betraying their culture, as opposed to those women that embrace their hair in its natural state? Can one be included in, but not a part of a group's culture? This cultural battle within the Black community, has compelled black women to redefine beauty on their own terms as it relates to the symbol of their natural hair as a cultural point of pride, ostensibly creating a sub-culture that not only struggles against Western culture, but the assimilated faction of their own group. Yet, even as Black women strive to claim a place in the hierarchy of their culture, they remain marginalized by the larger society.

Keywords

Kinky, Natural, Black Hair, Marginalized, Women, Western Culture

1. Introduction

The novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison unveils the tragic life of Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl that struggles against her "ugliness". Young Pecola becomes enamored with child-star Shirley Temple and all that she represents—the epitome of beauty and perfection with her alabaster skin, blonde curls, cherry cheeks and brilliant blue eyes. Pecola Breedlove's growing obsession with the

image of Shirley Temple devolves from fascination to madness as Pecola prays daily for blue eyes; for blue eyes would make her beautiful, accepted and loved, and allow her to see a more beautiful world. While the narrative is extreme in its depiction of Pecola's descent into madness, it does however cast a glaring light on the idealized notion of what beauty is and who is beautiful. Though Morrison's center is "blue eyes" it is merely a metaphor for a much broader concept of what is acceptable as beauty; beauty that is defined through the social construct of a Eurocentric-white lens. The social constructs of race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation along with definitions of beauty create norms and biases. Not meeting these constructs marginalize individuals and groups. Blacks are marginalized on several levels, in particular is natural hair—unprocessed, untreated hair in its kinky, coily state. Wearing natural hairstyles for the Black-women specifically—is a symbol of cultural pride that clashes with the wider Western culture's precept of beauty and acceptability. "Given both her color and her sex, she is presumed to have been twice victimized. For a black woman the double oppression of race and gender complicates the problem of identity and choice. The messages given about what is attractive and necessary are often contradictory and impossible to achieve" (Okazawa-Rey, 1986: pp. 13-14). Thus, those who do not assimilate into that image, are marginalized by these social constructs. As such, black women have found ways through the rhetoric of their hair to challenge, accept and create their own definition of beauty.

Western culture expects from those entering its society to assimilate, even as it often marginalizes those whom it seeks to transform. To accomplish assimilation Black women have often altered their appearance—specifically their hair—to be accepted by the dominate culture even as this adaptation may run counter to their own cultural sensibilities. This cultural battle within the Black community has ostensibly created a sub-culture that not only struggles against Western culture, but the assimilated faction of their own group. Yet, even as Black women strive to claim a place in the hierarchy of their culture, they remain marginalized by the larger society. While gender and ethnicity cannot change, what Black women can change is whether their hair is "natural" or "straight". "Hairstyles serve as important cultural artifacts, because they are simultaneously public (visible to everyone), personal (biologically linked to the body) and highly malleable to suit cultural and personal preferences." (Weitz, 2001: p. 667). This work examines Western cultural norms that conflict with Black culture, and will argue that even as Black women have been marginalized, they have rebelled against Western norms through their hair, and thereby reclaim the power stripped from them.

2. Marginalization as Power

Blacks are marginalized on several levels, one of which is wearing their hair in its natural state. For many Black women wearing natural hairstyles is a symbol of cultural pride. This stance clashes with the widely accepted Western cultural standards of straight hair as a symbol of beauty because Blacks are expected to see

themselves through a white gaze. Are Black women who choose to straighten their naturally kinky hair or lengthen it with weaves and extensions betraying their culture, as opposed to those women that embrace their hair in its natural state? Can one be included in, but not a part of a group's culture? This cultural battle within the Black community, has compelled Black women to redefine beauty on their own terms as it relates to the symbol of their natural hair as a cultural point of pride, ostensibly creating a sub-culture that not only struggles against Western culture, but the assimilated faction of their own group. To complicate this complex reality for Black women, employers, schools and even the military have implemented and enforced rules governing and policing "black hair".

3. Hair as Rhetoric

The universal understanding of rhetoric is the ability and or method of influence, essentially the ways in which words persuade people. However, if we expand that idea to include "meaningful items, images and so on that surround us—the ways in which *signs* influence people" (Brummett, 2015: p. 4) we can include hair as one of those signs "that induces you to think of something other than itself—and everything has that potential" (Brummett, 2015: p. 4).

This work examines those intersections of race, gender and social constructs and explores the Black woman's love/hate relationship with her hair. By addressing natural hair as a rhetorical *sign* we can begin to understand the multiple interpretations that natural hair evokes. Western cultural norms conflict with Black culture as it relates to hairstyles worn by Black women, thus resulting in contradictions within the Black community and ostensibly elevating the rhetorical dynamic of hair and its power as a cultural artifact. "A cultural artifact identifies all artifacts as signs of group identification… Part of the meaning of an artifact is its connection with a group. Artifacts are charged with meaning but many of those meanings bespeak (that is speak of or speak for) our identifications with groups" (Brummett, 2015: pp. 54-55). In this instance the group is Black women identified by the indexical sign of their natural hair. However, when one artifact of culture clashes with another it results in contradiction.

For example, a Black woman aware and proud of her naturally kinky, coily hair opts to wears an Afro or dreadlocks. However, the dress code at her place of business prohibits "natural styles," which is dismissive of an entire culture's artifact, and raises the issue of discrimination and marginalization of a select group. What then does the woman do? Does she bow to the dress code to keep her job or embrace her naturalness? This is a dilemma faced by many Black women as they grapple with what has been deemed proper and professional by the power structure from which they have been excluded.

This rhetorical dynamic of hair as an identifier can further be considered an *indexical sign*—linked by cause or association—affording hair with a kind of power. Rhetoric both verbal and non-verbal wields a spear of influences. Rhetorical stances determine what and how society believes, eats, drinks, dresses, or

drives. "Those who control the rhetoric control the power" (Brummett, 2015: p. 5). Rhetoric in all its forms are sources of power. When we examine the impact of rhetoric on popular culture, for instance, natural hairstyles worn by Black women *are* indexical signs. For women, hair is the "crowning glory." However, in the dominant Euro society, the crowning glory must meet certain criteria. Long, sleek (often blonde) hair is the template by which women's hair is judged. What then of those women who do not meet this standard, specifically Black women whose basic texture—its naturalness—defies those standards? Many Black women have embraced the power of their hair to start the conversation, shift the dynamics and bring exposure to other cultures when the culture clash sheds light or provides awareness of the conflict. As a result, we are compelled to examine the artifacts of the culture and how those artifacts influence us. This awareness can lead to a greater understanding between cultures, even as Black women continue to struggle with the paradox within their own group.

4. Natural Hair: A Cultural Paradox

I grew up in the predominately black neighborhood of Bedford Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. The only time I interacted or saw white people was on television, or the smattering of owners of the local stores that still hung onto their businesses, the nuns and priests at my Catholic grammar school, and when my grandmother took my sister and I "downtown" on Saturday mornings to Abraham and Straus (A & S), and Woolworth to shop. It wasn't until I went to high school that I was exposed on a daily basis to young people that didn't look like me. It was an eye-opening experience. In my Catholic high school there were maybe two-dozen Black girls (an all girl's school) in the entire high school. I was the only student of color in my class. The girls who became some of my best friends were fascinated with my hair, and I with theirs. They could not understand how I could have an Afro all week and come back the next week with my hair bone straight, the result of sitting for a couple of hours under the skillful hands of my grandmother who wielded the hot comb through my hair like a Samarai warrior—leaving no kinky knot or twisting coil unscathed. I thought it was wildly amusing, and was equally fascinated by my white friends that put their hair on an ironing board and ironed it!

I would, throughout my early adulthood, attend the annual International African Arts Festival that ran for several days during the Fourth of July holiday week. As I'd stroll among the stalls overflowing with afro-centric artifacts, and the men and women adorned in Kente, heads wrapped in galees, cufees or angelic afros and long twisting braids and locs, I often felt like an interloper, an imposter of sorts. Though my skin, my sensibilities, and timbre of my voice matched those surrounding me, my shoulder-length bone straight Ultra Sheen® permed hair made me feel "other". A tiny voice in my head whispered that I was somehow selling out my cultural identity by trying to mirror what was "acceptable" hair. That voice drifted back into my subconscious many years later and I decided to loc my hair. The external transformation was as impactful as the internal one. My

hair took on a rhetorical dynamic. My natural hair style symbolized pride in my culture, and in myself as a Black woman. My hair made a statement. Conversely, are Black women who choose (as I'd once done) to straighten their hair or lengthen it with weaves and extensions betraying their culture as opposed to those who embrace their hair in its natural state? Which raises the question whether one can be included but not part of a group's culture? Hence, the paradox. I have been fortunate—since my full transition to natural hair—to work in environments that were diverse and culturally embracing. Many Black women do not have that opportunity and must conform to the ideological norms of beauty and professionalism even if it goes against their beliefs. A young woman that made the transition to natural hair says this:

> I think for some, it symbolizes our strength in our culture. For so long, we've been told our hair isn't good enough. That straight and/or really long hair is the only hair that's acceptable. Going natural absolutely rejects that claim. — *LaToya Smith.*

The policing of black hair—being told how to style hair, what texture it should be—is pervasive and infiltrates schools, businesses, sporting events, and the military. So much so that cities have had to enact legislation banning discriminatory practices stemming from natural hair.

In South Africa, Black female students at the prestigious Pretoria High School for Girls, were allegedly told to straighten their hair and not wear afros. The school, which had once been attended by all white students, began to admit Black students at the end of apartheid in 1994. Students protested, and even politicians weighed in stating that the school policy was attempting "to directly suppress blackness in its aesthetics and culture." An online petition garnering more than 10,000 signatures demanded assurances that the "school's code of conduct does not discriminate against Black and Muslim girls." (Agence France-Presse, 2016). More than two decades after the end of apartheid that country is still grappling with long-held racist views and policies.

In a case that went as high as the Federal Appeals Court, the court ruled that Chastity Jones, who alleged that she was not hired for a job because she refused to cut her dreadlocks, determined that "firing an employee for wearing her hair in dreadlocks is not racial discrimination." Ms. Jones in her action claimed that a white human resources employee told her that she would need to get rid of her dreadlocks because they "tend to get messy." When Jones refused, the offer of employment was rescinded. Essentially, the court ruled that employers can fire or not hire people who wear their hair in dreadlocks (Cauterucci, 2016).

The rhetoric of hairstyles has helped Black women redefine beauty on their own terms. Although the standards of beauty have marginalized many Black women, it created a movement within the Black culture to redefine beauty for themselves, and by virtue of their marginalization they are empowered. "Not in the traditional sense, but in the power that comes from increased presence in the shared text of a culture" (Brummett, 2015: p. 6). Rhetoric in all of its forms are sources of power.

Black women take and use that power in various ways, even when laws prohibited Black women's hair to be visible.

There was a time, dating back to the mid-1700's when black women were not allowed to have their hair displayed in public. These Louisiana laws were known as the Tignon Laws. The Tignon laws were intended "to return the free women of color, visibly and symbolically, to the subordinate and inferior status associated with slavery," as historian Virginia M. Gould notes in 1997's *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South*, but free women of color subverted this original intention. "Instead of wearing drab headscarves that minimized their beauty, Black women enacted their autonomy by purchasing bright, colorful headwraps, elaborately wrapping and tying them, and adorning them with jewels, beads, and ribbons" (Gabbara, 2019). Tignon laws were abolished in the 1800s. However, black women across the globe continue to use headwraps as wardrobe staples paying homage to their culture, turning heads and sparking conversation (Wanjiru, 2017). The women of New Orleans refused to allow a piece of cloth to humiliate them, erase their status, or diminish their femininity. Instead, the reinterpreted the Tignon as a symbol of empowerment. Pop culture is the most reliable place to look for Black women who still resist the policing of their hair (Gabbara, 2019).

In the article "It is More than Just Hair" Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie underscores the notion that Afro-textured hair has a negative connotation linked to it. When asked what she thought the reception to former First Lady Michelle Obama would have received from voters had she worn her hair natural when her husband was running for president, she writes:

> It would signify that she is some sort of militant, neo-Black Panther… frightening, angry. And it would somehow signify that she is not mainstream, because we have decided that mainstream hair is hair that sort of falls down. When you have natural hair that is Black, it stands up and it is not really considered mainstream (Wanjiru, 2017).

5. Perspectives

From scholars to journalists, entertainers to college students entering the job market, the mystique of natural black hair sparks discussion, controversy and even activism.

Tracey Owens Patton—Associate Professor of Communications at the University of Wyoming—in her article, "Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: Black Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair" offers an insightful perspective on the definitions of beauty established by the white ruling class. Specifically, Patton addresses how white standards of beauty have had adverse effects on Black women. One aspect is hair as an implicit artifact that defines and separates, elevates and diminishes Black women. She asserts that the racist history of the United States that includes the pseudo acceptance of light-skinned blacks with features that resemble those of the ruling class and wavy hair creates an unattainable standard for women with "darker skin hues, kinky hair and broader

facial features" (26). These untenable expectations fold into the practices of assimilation. In order to fully assimilate, Black women have often altered their physical appearance to be accepted by the dominate culture. Many black women straighten their hair in order to ascribe to standards for employment. "However, engaging in organizational social mobility does not mean that one will automatically assimilate or substitute her cultural, racial and ethnic identity for that of the majority culture" (27). From this perspective Patton addresses not only the difficulty of black women who must aspire to the unattainable image of beauty but white women as well. "Until we critique the message of stereotypical standardizations of beauty, Black women and all women in general, and the disparagement of their beauty, we will never get past the wall of misunderstanding, sexism, and racism" (Patton, 2006: p. 46).

"Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?" folds neatly into the discussions of pop culture rhetoric, with hair being a building block of cultural artifacts. While black hair is an indexical sign, "much of what once was African or Black culture is now mainstream and worldwide: pierced ears, nose, nipples and other body parts come from the twelfth century and were introduced to Euro Americans once Africans were enslaved; music (spirituals, gospels, jazz…) all have origins or have been influenced by African or Black culture" (46). For as much as Black culture may be disparaged in some circles, black culture *is* popular culture.

While the overarching message of the article is on standards of Euro beauty, Patton's article, provides a metronymic perspective by focusing on the struggle of the Black woman and their innovative approaches to define and redefine beauty with hair as the prevailing method of rhetoric.

Additionally, Ashe (1995) in the article "Why Don't He Like My Hair?" Constructing Black Standards of Beauty in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, looks within the Black community and examines why Black men often dismiss the beauty of Black women, which according to Ashe is because they have been indoctrinated on the ideas that beauty is only Euro white and therefore, the Black woman cannot be beautiful, which tracks back to the point of natural hair as an indexical sign. Its mere existence evokes associations to things that are often negative. How then can Black women who choose to wear their hair as it grows naturally out of their head feel empowered if men in their own culture dismiss or demean their presence?

This paradox of not belonging or being accepted within the cultural group to which one identifies is examined in L. Vetta Sanders Thompson's (2001) article "The Complexity of Black Racial Identification." The authors address the concept of racial identification as it relates to Blacks and the oppression and discrimination they face. While the focus of this article revolves around how Blacks see themselves within society and within their own group, it also supports the assertion that a sense of belonging is paramount in developing a positive image.

When hair is understood to be rhetorical, it stands to reason that it is also political. "As Adicie noted, wearing Afro-textured hair in its authentic form is perceived as being political because it goes against the norm and status quo" (Wanjiru,

2017). Scholar Connie Koppelman (1996: pp. 87-88) in her article "The Politics of Hair," explores how hair is interpreted as a sign of "power or powerfulness" and its social implications. While Margo Rey-Okazawa in her article "Black Women and the Politics of Skin Color and Hair" approaches color consciousness through the lens of literature and how Black women were historically depicted—only beautiful if they reflected the tenets of Euro beauty standards. These notions are not only relevant in literature which, is a reflection of real life, but the reality that shapes black women's views of themselves. Additionally, Zimitri Erasmus addresses the process and practice of black hairstyling and the politicizing of black hair in and out of the community and how black women's concepts of how their hair defines them. "The meaning of 'good hair' for some black women is slowly beginning to shift from its colonial-racist content—straight and shiny—to the notion that 'good hair' is healthy hair whatever the texture" (Erasmus, 1997: p. 15).

Drs. Tabora A. Johnson and Teinsha Bankhead performed an extensive internet driven survey of more than five-hundred respondents for their article "Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair." The article in part looks at the perceptions and prejudices heaped on the heads of Black people regarding their hair. These perceptions and prejudices have long historical roots, dating back to the removal of Africans from the continent. "Wolof, Asantes, Fulanis and Mandingos entered the slave ships, yet enslaved unidentifiable people exited the shores of the Americas. Without their combs, oils and native hair recipes Africans were left unable to care for an essential part of themselves…" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014: p. 88). Europeans unable to understand or embrace the uniqueness of African hair deemed it in derogatory terms such as "peppercorn, matted and woolly, [and] remain in the lexicon of people in the U.S., Africa, the Caribbean and worldwide, to describe black hair… the description emerged in the 1800 and 1900's and remain current irrespective of societal changes" (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014: p. 88).

The *Huffington Post* launched an initiative "Black Hair Defined," a project that is "aimed to untangle conversations about our crowning glory," (Jones, 2020). The piece is an outgrowth of the many publicized incidents around the policing of black hair—black women in particular. There is the bigotry of discrimination: not being allowed to work somewhere, model in a certain fashion show or anchor a specific news broadcast because of one's hair. A problem so systemic that three states—New York, New Jersey and California—all issued bans outlawing discrimination against natural hairstyles—[The Crown Act] (Jones, 2020).

Duke University historian Jasmine Cobb argues that enslaved Black people developed hair habits and traditions of their own, even under the thumb of oppression: "Even in slavery, a hair story is also a story of self-invention in the face of oppression" (Jones, 2020).

6. A Brief History of Black Hair Care and Styling: From Africa to the Americas: *Thirstyroots.com*

1444—Europeans trade on the West Coast of Africa with people wearing elabo-

rate hairstyles included locks, plaits and twists.

1619—First slaves brought to Jamestown, African language, culture and grooming tradition begin to disappear.

1700—Calling black hair "wool" many whites dehumanize slaves. The more elaborate African hairstyles cannot be maintained.

1800—Without the combs and herbal treatments used in Africa, slaves rely on bacon grease, butter and kerosene as hair conditioners and cleaners.

1865—Slavery ends, but whites look upon black women who style their hair like white women as well-adjusted. "Good" hair becomes prerequisite for entering certain schools, churches, social groups and business networks.

1880—Metal hot combs, invented in 1845 in France are readily available in the U.S. The comb is heated and used to press and temporarily straighten kinky hair.

1900—Madame C. J. Walker develops a range of hair care products for black hair. She popularizes the press and curl style.

1970—Angela Davis becomes an icon of Black Power with her large Afro.

1979—White actress Bo Derek wears beaded cornrows in the film "10"

1988—Spike Lee exposes the good hair/bad hair, light-skinned/dark-skinned schism in black America with his movie "School Daze."

1999—*People Magazine* names lock-topped Grammy winning artist Lauryn Hill as one of its 50th Most Beautiful People.

7. H(er)air Story

Over the course of several weeks I sent out a request to respond to a brief survey via email and social media. The survey was a series of questions regarding natural and permed or straightened hair. The focus of the questions was to gain a sampling on how Black women viewed the styling and texture of their hair in relation to the expectations of the larger society, and if they saw their hair as a cultural statement, as well as the things they were told or made to believe about black hair. The questions were asked of women that wear their hair natural or straightened and what the "transition" process was like if they took the leap. Their responses reinforce my argument of the cultural contradictions and societal criteria that Black women face with regard to their hair:

> I transitioned for 1 year before the "big chop". I have been natural for 9 years. I have always loved the texture of natural. I can remember when I started perming my hair around 12 years old just because that was the normal ritual of young black girls in my community at that time. However, when I got in High School I found myself getting weaves that were natural and the crazy thing is I would take my hair down after 6 weeks, wear for two weeks, relax if needed and weave another natural style. Blindly I did this for years. I did not realize my foolishness until I was well into my late 30's. I began to examine the mind set of why Black woman did this from a cultural perspective. I began to examine the ritual that has become such a normal familiar process of straightening your hair in-spite of not feeling any kind—a-way about your

> natural hair. I transitioned because I always loved the curls, fullness and over all texture of natural hair. I realized, stop perming silly and you can have that!!!!—*Kelley Eubanks*

Similarly, Sophie Sealy and LaToya Smith had their own ah-ha moment in transitioning from permed and straightened hair to its natural state:

> In 2005 I began the process, made a mistake in 2009 and permed it. By January 2010 I began the process again and been here since. I am an Afro-Latina and I wanted to portray that all Latinas don't wear their hair straight, whether naturally or processed.—*Sophie Sealy*

Because Black women have traditionally been indoctrinated into the "what true beauty is philosophy" by the larger society; many Black women opted for chemicals to straighten their kinky hair to better meet societal standards, some with detrimental results:

> I did my first big chop in August 2010. My hair growth had been stumped from perms and permanent color (bleach). I tried to go natural a year prior to making the real commitment, but I gave in and permed my hair. The second time around, I realized I had been going longer and longer without touchups and got to see how beautiful and curly my natural hair was—it actually matched a lot of the weaves I was getting. And that was it. I stopped perming my hair and never went back to the creamy crack after that.—*LaToya Smith*
>
> Initially, I stopped the relaxer because my hair was thinning, and balding. Thus, the wigs. I also take a lot of medications, and I believe this lends to the thinning/balding as well. However, I'm getting older and I personally am evolving as a woman. As I'm enjoying living and walking in my purpose, I felt the need to be free in all areas. My natural hair is freedom. I love it!—*Carla Nix*

With regard to hair discrimination addressed earlier, several of the respondents shared their experience in the workplace, the military and even among family members:

> When I was in the military, back then you couldn't wear more than two braids. You couldn't have locs. I couldn't wear an afro that was long…. It went on and on. It was like they were saying you couldn't have your hair in natural black styles. It sucked. It is easier when you straighten your hair. When I worked in corporate America, I quickly learned when to blow dry my hair straight and when I could be kinky me.—*Deatri King-Bey*
>
> I have been discriminated against (more so, indirectly). I remember when I transitioned to natural hair, I was told from black people that it would limit my career. I completed an interview and the manager mentioned to the HR contact that I had locs—almost like she wanted to make sure it was ok. When I cut my locs into a short style, I was told by my white supervisor that I looked

> more professional, which let me know she always had a problem with the locs but never confirmed it until the comment. I was the only black in my role at the time. For the most part, I changed my hairstyles for interviews. Made myself look less natural by shortening my locs into a style, wearing it in a bun (look like micros/braids) and reducing my afro.—*Ronenia Jenkins*

To Ms. Jenkins point about her family's response, natural hairstyles have been tagged with negative connotations that have been absorbed and perpetuated into black culture:

> When I had locs, I was shocked at how many black folks would ask crazy things like if I washed my hair.—*Deatri King Bey*
>
> This is one of the reasons we don't swim, wash only every other week, you need to grease your scalp.—*Debra Owsley*
>
> I've heard such things like: 1) Black hair isn't good hair; 2) Short black hair is nothing to be proud of and 3) You'll never reach full potential as long as you don't press/perm your hair.—*Linda Breed*
>
> Untamable, not good hair and not professional in its natural state. People assume with locs that you do not wash them, they smell, have a lot of buildup and you must be a smoker.—*Ronenia Jenkins*
>
> Growing up, Black society made me think that our hair in its natural state was ugly, difficult, etc. It seems like the goal was always to make it straighter and longer.—*Carla Nix.*

As a result, the internalized dislike and dismissal of natural black hair as an option continues to present itself, particularly as it is reflected in business and in professional realms:

> As a hair stylist of over 30 years it's important to look a certain way to attract the clients you want. To me some natural looks just look unkept and angry. That won't work in many businesses. If they are well kept and styled I feel they would be received better.—*Debra Owsley*
>
> Unfortunately. However, more and more styles are being accepted as long as they are neat. But I do feel if someone with a more "polished look" comes in vs someone wearing a fro or dreads, they probably would be hired first.—*LaToya Smith*
>
> When I first transitioned I worked in the private sector and did not have face to face dealings with the public so wearing my hair natural was not an issue. I now work in the public sector/public service and my hair is not an issue since I also represent the public. My sister however, works in the public sector white collar industry and natural hair is not acceptable. If it's going to be worn, then a wig will be recommended.—*Sophie Sealy*

Even as the struggle continues on several fronts with regard to Black hair and the natural hair movement, the rhetorical power of Black hair in its natural state has shifted not only the conversation but the consumer market as well. As Black

natural hair has become more popularized, through the sheer force of Black women, companies have developed full lines of hair care products to address this consumer:

> Yes, more natural products, more natural stylists and more women rocking natural styles in movies, commercials and modeling.—*Ronenia Jenkins*
> The market has finally realized that our hair comes in many textures and they are addressing it.—*Debra Owsley*

The following respondent encapsulates the mixed feelings of many Black women:

> "For the longest time I wanted to embrace my natural hair, but society and family image prohibited it. Even when I did start wearing my hair 'Natural' it was always conservative (micro-braids, slicked down buns). Society and family screamed natural hair was unruly, wild, not professional on black women, but white women were fine with 'bed head', bright colors, or even short hair. Once I turned 40, I found myself 'free' of those prohibitions and now my hair represents me-1 month it will be down my back, 2 months later 3 different colors. I proudly rock an afro and afro puffs. My message is I'm free and my hair doesn't take away anything I've earned."—*Tamika Baker*

8. Hair We Are

Five friends, in an effort to celebrate themselves and their naturalness, formed the Curly Girl Collective. And in 2010 CURLFEST® bloomed from that gathering which "was born to be the change that was long overdue in the beauty industry. To flip the false narrative around unruly brown beauty, and create one that accurately showcases the glory of our crowns, the richness of our skin, and the joy of our culture." CURLFEST brings black women (and men) together from across the country for a full day of events to pay tribute to their naturalness. (http://curlfest.com)

As the natural hair movement continues to sweep through society, and the imagination and ingenuity of Black style fuel pop culture, natural, kinky, coily hair and the women who embrace it, thus claim and assert the rhetorical power of their gravity defying hair—dismissing critics within and out of their culture. In doing so, Black women control the rhetoric by reframing the narrative in their image, and redefining beauty on their own terms.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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