

“Hair” They Are: The Ideologies of Black Hair

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A woman’s hair is said to be her crowning glory and manifestation of her femininity. Hair is considered a key indicator of a woman’s health and beauty. The Western standard of beauty defines beautiful hair as that which is long and preferably straight. Having such a standard creates a hair hierarchy, with long straight hair on the top of the hair pyramid and African American hair on the bottom. A black woman’s hair is traditionally dry, tightly coiled or curled. In order to attain the Western standard of beauty, the majority of African American women chemically straighten or “relax” their hair. This notion is embedded in media such as *Sophisticate’s Black Hair Styles and Care Guide* and other magazines featuring black women with straightened hair.

However, more recently, there has been an increase in the number of black women returning to their natural hair texture; that is, they are no longer chemically straightening their hair (Healy, 2011). The decision to return to the natural texture of one’s hair is termed “going natural.” The media has noticed black women’s sudden movement toward natural hair and has begun to include more natural-haired African Americans in advertisements. Some reasons that black women decide to go natural are: to follow a healthier lifestyle, to explore curiosity about their natural texture, to support their daughters’ hair, and to save the time and energy they spend using relaxers. Although the reasons for going natural may vary, it is an exciting journey nonetheless. Black women’s return to the natural state of their hair is often an act of self-awareness. On their journey to natural hair, many black women not only discover their natural texture but also the masked ideology (Hebdige, 1979) that natural black hair is unattractive and unacceptable in society, which stems from years of oppression and racism.

Since the beginning of slavery, black women have been conditioned to believe that their natural hair is unattractive. Today, this notion is still present for many black women. The images in popular black media subliminally suggest and conceal the ideology that natural black hair is unattractive. Storey (1993) states that “ideology operates mainly at the level of connotations...[and] often unconscious meanings, texts and practices carry, or can be made to carry” (p. 6). The ideology that straight hair is the most attractive exists beneath the consciousness of black women. Therefore, many black women are unaware of this ideology. The use of the term “sophisticates” in the magazine *Sophisticate’s Black Hair Styles and Care Guide* works on this level of connotations, whether intended or not. According to Webster’s online dictionary, one definition of sophisticate is “to alter deceptively” (Sophisticate, 2011). To use the term “sophisticate” and have images depicting what is considered a sophisticated hairstyle implies that hairstyles that are not pictured in the magazine are not sophisticated. In turn, black women subconsciously reject hair styles that are not in the magazines they read. Cheryl Thompson (2009) is correct in her assertion that “the image of black beauty in popular black magazines gives the impression that black hair is only beautiful when it is altered” (p. 847). By “altered,” Thompson is referring to the changing of the natural hair texture either chemically or thermally.

The constant coverage of black women in the media with straightened hair suggests that black women need to change their hair in order to be perceived as beautiful. The images in black magazines sell the idea to women and young girls that straight hair is beautiful. Magazines such as *Sophisticate’s Black Hair Styles and Care Guide*, *Essence*, and *Ebony* contain images of black women with hairstyles such as buns and ponytails. Most of the women in these magazines have their hair chemically straightened and/or use hair extensions to achieve such hairstyles. These images continue to reinforce the notion that straight hair is the most attractive for all women. In a 2009 interview with *Essence* magazine, Tonya Lewis Lee, the wife of Spike Lee, recalls her childhood experience of having her hair thermally straightened by her mother. She states, “My mother would press my hair, and I would just cry, I would be so red afterward, and she’d say, ‘But go in there and look at how pretty your hair looks.’ And then I

would feel better” (Taylor, 2009, p.138). Lee’s statement exemplifies many black girls’ experiences of having their hair thermally straightened; that is, it is often unpleasant and painful. The comment made by her mother after the ordeal supports Thompson’s claim that many people believe that black hair is only attractive after it has been altered. Lee, unaware of the ideology at work, internalizes the notion that straightened black hair is beautiful, which is seen in the pleasure she felt after having her hair straightened. It is as if the pain she felt during the process is insignificant compared to the results of having her hair straightened. The practice of straightening black hair is meant to carry this meaning, namely, that it is okay for one to experience pain while striving to be beautiful. However, the connotations presented in popular black magazines are only the more recent reinforcers of the traditional beauty standards. Negative stigmas have been associated with natural black hair throughout history.

The Black Power Movement influenced many blacks to wear their natural hair in afros and other natural hairstyles. During this time blacks’ natural tightly coiled hair gained political meaning. The afro in the 1960s “became a reflection of political and cultural progressiveness as well as self-esteem, among black people” (Jere-Malanda, 2008, p. 14). Yet, the dominant white majority stigmatized the afro as militant, unkempt and the symbol of the Black Panthers, and many people still hold these meanings as true today (Jere-Malanda, 2008). Because many people still hold the notion that natural black hair is political, Dick Hebdige (1979) would say that this belief supports the idea of hegemony. Hebdige in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* states that “hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes ‘succeed in framing all the competing definitions within their range’” (p.16). Hebdige here is saying that hegemony exists when the dominant majority is successful in shaping how something is perceived or understood.

Today, although we are more accepting of different races and cultures, black women’s natural hair and styles are still considered political or unprofessional by many people. According to Jere-Malanda (2008), the negative stigmas about black people’s afros from the 1960s discourage many black women from wearing their hair in a natural hair style. In her analysis of the implications

of black women's natural hairstyles, Jere-Malanda (2008) states:

Black women's hair goes far beyond mere sprucing up and aesthetics, with its history of deep roots in slavery and its politics that change many people's viewpoints [;] it's a marker of femininity that can influence how the global society embraces the black woman in both political and social circles. How else can society explain this outrageous scenario at a New York law firm which invited Ashley Baker, then associate editor of the prominent magazine *Glamour*, to speak to them on the "Dos and Don'ts of Corporate Fashion." In a slide show, she says about a black woman in an Afro hairdo: "A real no-no! As for dreadlocks, how truly dreadful! Shocking that some people still think it's appropriate to wear those hairstyles at the office. No offence, but those political hairstyles really have to go." (p.18)

Baker's statement is a clear example of the thoughts shared by many women about black women's natural hair. The Western standard of beauty not only suggests that straight hair is the most attractive, but also the most professional. With this in mind, many black women do not see natural black hairstyles such as braids, afros, and dreads as professional. In fact, many black women believe that in order to have a decent job or be taken seriously, their hair needs to be straightened. The dominant force was and still is the white majority. They framed the definitions of beautiful and professional hair, which they portray as straight. Although slavery has been abolished, many black women are still contained in the ideological space of the dominant Western beauty ideal which says that natural black hair is unprofessional and unattractive. Men are also a dominant force in society and as such they also help shape what is or is not acceptable for a woman.

The images of black women in the media with long straight hair leads many black men to believe that black women should wear their hair in a straightened style. In an effort to be seen as attractive to the opposite sex, many black women comply with the Western beauty ideals and chemically relax and/or weave their hair (Banks, 2000). Fiske (1995) writes that "there is a space where compliance or contestation is negotiated" (p.322). Fiske is suggesting that one has a choice in deciding whether to comply with or reject ideals. In a 2009 interview conducted by Mikki Taylor of *Essence* magazine, she asks her guests if they have ever altered their hair for the opposite sex (p. 139). Solange Knowles, in response, says, "After I had my son, and I was married, I wanted to be the typical pretty, long-haired trophy

wife. That's when I started wearing weaves long and blond" (p.139). Knowles' statement exemplifies the effects of the traditional standard of beauty on black men. She uses the term "trophy" to describe herself as a wife. In this sense she is objectifying herself, namely as a prize, and her husband as the owner of the "trophy." In her description of the physical characteristics of a trophy wife, she states that they are pretty with long blond hair. The mention of the length and color of the hairstyle is significant in that not only does Knowles recognize what is considered the ideal hairstyle for women, but also believes it to be true. In response to the question of changing one's hair to suit a man, Tonya Lewis Lee says, "I danced with Diddy, and Diddy did not like curly hair. You had to have straight hair to dance behind Diddy" (p.140). It could be argued that P. Diddy's preference for straight hair is just his personal preference. Perhaps his preference for straight hair derives from what he is constantly exposed to in the media and in his videos, namely, women with straight hair.

History has shown that blacks, especially black women, had less power in shaping ideas about themselves. Women were, and are, in most places, seen as inferior to men. Hebdige notes that "some groups have more say, more opportunity to make the rules, to organize meaning, while others are less favorably placed" (p. 14). After being conditioned to believe that natural black hair is unattractive, blacks still struggle to define the texture of their hair with new terms that are not derogatory. In the black community there is a notion of and debate over "good" and "bad" hair (Banks, 2000). With these terms, blacks are trying to separate their hair from ideal straight hair. The black community is also attempting to reshape the traditional meaning of "good" and "bad" hair. In the traditional sense, the distinction of "good" hair and "bad" depends on the texture of the hair such as wavy, curly, or tightly coiled. Many black women have tightly coiled or curled hair. Wavy or curly hair is considered "good" hair, while tightly coiled or kinky hair is regarded as "bad" hair. However, today many black women believe that the distinction between "good" and "bad" hair is not solely based on texture but the perceived ease of maintenance of the hair. If a person's hair is wavy or less kinky, it is perceived that the hair is easier to comb, so that person will be said to have "good" hair. Although many black women

are trying to redefine the terms “good” hair and “bad” hair, the terms are still derogatory. Through the continuous distinction of “good” and “bad” hair in the black community, hegemony is maintained.

Black males are also subjected to the Western standard of beauty of how they should style their hair. Some black men might chemically alter their hair with products such as S-curl or a Jherri curl. However, it is common for black males to wear their natural hair in a caesar or low cut. Children are also influenced by what they see in the media as beautiful or acceptable. A young black boy named Jacob Philadelphia asked President Obama if his hair was the same as his (Calmes, 2012). In response, President Obama bowed so the young boy could feel for himself (Calmes, 2012). After feeling the hair of the President, Jacob knew that the President’s hair not only looked but felt like his. Jacob now knows that his natural hair is not inferior to any other hair, is socially acceptable, and that one can have hair that is not straight and be successful in life, or even a leader of the world. The touching of the President’s hair sheds light on the hidden idea that natural black hair is unacceptable and unprofessional. It also illustrates that African Americans’ natural hair is still an issue in today’s society.

Young girls are not the only ones that are influenced by the images of beauty they see in magazines; many young boys are also affected by the images they see and how their mothers style their hair. Black women who wear curly or kinkier hair weaves sometimes receive backlash from other black women or their children (Taylor, 2009). Tonya Lewis Lee describes her experience when she had a curly weave, saying, “My son hated my weave. Hated, hated, hated it. He was like, ‘Why are you wearing that? Please take it out’” (Taylor, 2009, p. 140). Although Lee had a weave, a common hairstyle for black women, her son was perhaps not pleased with the texture of the weave. Because the weave was curly, her son did not approve of it. Lee did not state any objections from her son when she wore a straight weave. Lee emphasizes that her son “hated” her weave by repeating the word four times. This is a clear example of how the traditional beauty ideals shape young black males’ perceptions of beauty.

However, recently many black males have begun embracing

the natural hair texture of black women. On February 23, 2012, Viola Davis wore her natural hair at *Essence's* Black Women in Hollywood red carpet event (Melton, 2012). Mrs. Davis starred in the 2011 movie *The Help*. *Essence* inquired if she styles her natural hair for special occasions. In response, Davis said that “there hasn’t been any occasion that I felt brave enough to do it” (Melton, 2012). Wearing her natural hair on the red carpet is significant in that the red carpet is where celebrities are expected to look their best; the celebrities are surrounded with paparazzi and are constantly photographed. According to Davis, her husband encouraged her to wear her natural hair, telling her to “step into who” she is (Melton, 2012). Davis also mentioned that she feels “more powerful every day, more secure in who I am, and I waited so long for that...it feels so divine” (Melton, 2012). Davis’s statement of feeling secure with who she is as a person is significant because she felt more secure and empowered when she embraced her natural hair. The feeling of security is a common feeling amongst black women who decide to wear their natural hair. Davis also notes that she has waited a long time to wear her natural hair, which is important because many black women want to show their natural hair, but are hesitant because of the negative response they might receive. The support and encouragement of her husband is a clear example of a black male accepting and also loving a black woman’s natural hair texture. Seeing more black women in the media with natural hair has also encouraged many black women to transition or wear their natural hair.

For years black women were coerced into straightening their hair. America has become more racially and culturally accepting and today black women have a choice in how they wear their hair. Moreover, today natural black hair is taking on a more positive meaning and is slowly becoming mainstream. Celebrities such as Erykah Badu and Tracee Ellis Ross always embraced their natural hair. Many Black women have been transitioning to natural hair by wearing curly weaves. By wearing a curly hairstyle, black women are silently objecting to the ideal standard of beauty, which is straight hair. Hebdige (1979) states that “the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style” (p.17). Hebdige

suggests that subordinates do not explicitly express their rejection of the norms by the use of words; instead, they implicitly express themselves through their appearance and style. The non-traditional hair styles many black women are now wearing such as braids, twists and curly serve as the medium in which their objection to the ideal standard of beauty is displayed. In fact there has been a recent shift from straight weave to curly weave in the last couple of years (Wellington, 2012). Black women still hold on to the notion that beautiful hair has to be long, so many of them will buy a long curly weave or wig (Wellington, 2012). Long hair is perceived to be more attractive on women. In some cultures it is also an indicator of a woman's health. Nonetheless, they are slowly moving towards their natural hair texture and eventual length, be it short or long.

Many may argue that the movement towards natural hair is a trend and that many black women are only following what they see in the media. Today women do have a choice in how they wear their hair, which may be influenced by the images they see in the media. However, the natural hair movement is not a trend because it operates within oneself and eventually manifests into confidence and self acceptance. Trends, on the other hand, are temporary in nature, and the majority if not all trends do not encourage one to look deeper within oneself. Many black women on their natural journey begin to realize the hidden ideologies of using a relaxer. The majority of black women who decide to go natural do not see it as political act, but more of a personal choice for a healthier lifestyle. Hair in itself cannot be political, but many people still consider natural black hair to be political. Political hair is hair that challenges the traditional perception of beauty and hair that is acceptable in society. Natural black hair, whether intended to or not, opposes the western beauty ideals while altering the woman's perception of beauty and self worth. In her documentary *Black Women's Transition to Natural Hair*, Zina Saro-Wiwa says, "God, I could just see myself getting uglier," after having one of her dreadlocks cut off. After all her hair has been cut off she asks if she "finally looks gorgeous" (Saro-Wiwa, 2012). The respondent assures her that she is gorgeous, but Saro-Wiwa did not feel beautiful so she whispered "Yeah right" (Saro-Wiwa, 2012). Yet Saro-Wiwa's perception of herself shortly began to change and she saw herself as

beautiful with her natural hair. Her perception of beauty changed internally as she began to see her natural self and hair as beautiful.

As black women's hair changes, many of them find that their perceptions of beauty and their selves are also changing. It is here that many black women realize the political implications of their hair. By wearing their hair natural, black women are accepting their unaltered hair in its entirety and displaying to the world their true beauty. Through transitioning, many black women begin to learn about themselves and their hair. Although many black natural-haired women do not see their personal choices to go natural as political acts, it is indeed political because of the self acceptance that comes with going natural. Black women who decide to go natural are subliminally freeing themselves from the Western beauty ideal that society has used to unconsciously oppress them.

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