

**“HAIR IS IT, FOR AFRICANS:”
AFRICAN-AUSTRALIAN HAIR STORIES**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship African-Australian men and women have with their hair. Through open-ended interviews with seven African-Australian men and women, aged 22-63, this thesis analyses the cultural significance of hair and its methods of stylization in the African-Australian diaspora. Building upon empiricism and scholarship from the United States and Britain, this thesis broadens the debate by including the voices of African-Australians. It explores the highly ritualized modes of black hairstyling practices in Australia as intra-rationally disciplined, managed and contained. I examine Afro-diasporic hair practices of weaving, braiding, and going 'natural,' through established frameworks that psychologise and depsychologise black hair practices. This thesis problematises academic and socio-cultural arguments that situate Afro-diasporic women who choose to process their hair as engaged in 'inauthentic' practices engendered by self-hatred, low self-esteem, and the desire to be white. I explore the gendered nature of Afro-diasporic hairstyling, and the significant burden of representation placed upon African-Australian girls and women to perform culture on behalf of the African-Australian diaspora. Finally, this thesis examines the industrial and personal economy of black hair as imbricated with the explicit and implicit labour of African-Australian identity.

Table of Contents

Introduction:	
Hair in the Black Atlantic and African-Australian diasporas	1
1. Black Aesthetics and the Black Atlantic	12
2. To Weave, To Braid Or Go ‘Natural’	21
3. Branding, Touching and the Labour of Racialisation.....	37
Conclusion: Risking it all for Hair.....	52
References.....	54
Appendix A.....	61

Introduction: Hair in the Black Atlantic and African-Australian diasporas

*I am not my hair,
I am not this skin,
I am not your expectations
I am a soul that lives within.*
— India Arie, “I am not my hair”

The lyrics to India Arie’s song, “I am not my hair,” highlights the manner in which women of African descent have sought to define themselves *beyond* their hair, while also, somewhat paradoxically, re-centralising hair as a powerful signifier of difference. African hair styled in all its tangled, straightened, dyed, curled, braided, twisted and locked¹ glory is a complex and intricate topic, and most importantly, is a filament woven with meaning. Arie’s declaration, “it’s not what’s on your head/it’s what’s underneath,” is familiar to women of the African diaspora, and in some ways these lyrics form the starting point of this project. But the title of this thesis, “Hair is *it*, for Africans,”² is taken from one of the interviews I conducted for this thesis. It is a statement made by Hillary, a Ghanaian Australian woman and it stands alongside but also in contrast to Arie’s lyrics because it speaks to the various enduring investments that African-Australians make in their hair. In using this as part of my title, I aim to show under what conditions (positive and/or negative) “hair is *it*, for Africans.”³

In this thesis, I continue the conversation with seven African-Australian men and women about their relationship with their hair and all that interweaves with it: shame and pride; visibility and invisibility; the labour of racialised identity

¹ ‘Locked’ hair indicates African textured hair that is turned into dreadlocks, freeform locks, genie locks, interlocks, micro locks, braid locks, two-strand twists, or single twists.

² Hillary, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, February 2, 2013.

³ Ibid.

(“branding”⁴), and the gendered experiences of the seemingly relentless pursuit of “good hair.”⁵

My Liberian born father instilled in me the view that my hair would never be *just* hair. It was he, as opposed to my Australian born mother, who took control of my hair. My hair story has taken me from curls to ‘relaxer,’⁶ braids to weaves, from bright orange to pink to purple, and finally back to my ‘natural’ brown curls. Each stage of my hair story has been a significant rite of passage. Every hand, product, tool, and process that transformed my tightly curled hair profoundly reconstructed my sense of self. It inspired this thesis, it informed much of my writing as an undergraduate, and continues to influence much of my life.

In my father’s eyes, as a child, my hair never seemed quite right. It was too curly, too frizzy, too coarse, and too knotty. My earliest memories of my relationship with my hair are marred by feelings of shame, embarrassment, pain, confusion, and sadness. I remember, as a little girl, I would take a t-shirt and place it over my head, covering my dark curls. I would let the body of the shirt fall onto my neck, sweeping past my shoulders. I would shake my head and stare into the bathroom mirror imagining that this is how it must feel to have hair that moves the right way.

Outside of this imaginary hair performance, my father devised a practical method for disciplining my hair. Whilst a parent combing their child’s hair can be a quotidian task, in retrospect, my reaction to the wide-toothed comb in the hands of my Dad shifted into unique territory as a result of the physical pain and anxiety I encountered. It is an experience that is described in this thesis as hair trauma – something that affected all of the female participants interviewed for this project. The following is my earliest recollection of the process involved in taming my hair:

⁴ Elizabeth V. Spelman, ““Race” and the Labor of Identity,” in *Racism and Philosophy*, eds. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell, 202-215. (New York: Cornell University, 1999), 202.

⁵ Labour intensive black hair practices have begun to be inter-racially understood as a result of the commercial success of Chris Rock’s 2009 documentary, *Good Hair*. In the film, Rock investigates what constitutes ‘good’ hair in the African-American community by interviewing African-American hairstylists, men, women and children as well as travelling to India to document the transnationalism of the African-American hair industry. It was a film that incited thoughtful and heated debate on Afro-diasporic hair stylization. Nevertheless, this discussion continued to focus on a dichotomous paradigm that women are denying their African self during processes of relaxing and weaving.

⁶ ‘Relaxer’ or ‘relaxing’ are the colloquial terms used within the Afro-diasporic community to refer to the process of chemical hair straightening.

In the bath, I take a deep breath and a jug of water is poured over my head. My father pats my curls down, heavy with water. I take another breath, nervous at what is to come. He takes a sturdy wide-toothed comb — an object of pain — and wipes it clean on a dry towel. He begins at the base of my neck, pushing my head forward with his palm, guiding the comb from the tips of my hair to the root. Each pull of the comb and my head bounces back toward him.

I can feel strands of my tight, spiralled curls being *wrenched* from my scalp. The comb gets stuck and one of its teeth snaps off, flying violently across the bathroom. With that, my Dad takes the comb and dips it into the bath water. As he does, clumps of curls fall from the comb and begin swimming through the mass of soapy water.

These are the strands that have proven too weak to withstand the process; curls that have matted into thick, locked hair that refuses to loosen. By now, the tears are welling up; I bite my lip, willing them away. But the pain consumes my six-year old body and the tears roll down my cheeks. My father continues combing, focused on turning my matted locks into soft curls, cursing the state of my hair.

This was a constant scene in my childhood; visiting my dad who would ‘manage’ my hair and apply thick layers of Vaseline, ensuring that it was resplendent with petroleum jelly. On the other hand, my mother with her light brown, straight hair found it too difficult to deal with my screams and tears whenever she would attempt to comb my hair. Consequently, for the most part, my hair was left unkempt. It matted into dreadlocks so thick that by the time I was allowed near scissors sharp enough, I had taken to excising these thick knots from my scalp. Needless to say, my hair — with its short tufts and bald patches — was a source of shame, particularly within the African-Australian community.

Close family friends would grab my hair and rub my scalp, shaking their heads. They would castigate me, while offering to ‘fix’ my hair or bellow with disdain; “your hair is your beauty,” as though my hair had failed my body, my family, my beauty, my femininity, and my own community. As I got older the pressure to ‘fix’ my hair was so strong that by aged eight I got my first ‘relaxer.’ I remember the tension of nervous excitement at the thought of ‘solving’ my hair

‘problem.’ A close family friend⁷ relaxed my hair in her laundry, and I remember it vividly for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the overwhelming smell of sodium hydroxide — also known as lye — that was so intense I could no longer breathe through my nose; secondly, the moment that the chemicals came in contact with my scalp, I experienced my first burn. This process stings the scalp, however, it is this feeling that is the rite of passage, with the logic being that the stronger the burn, the straighter the hair. Instead of removing the sodium hydroxide, my stylist began fanning my head to relieve the pain, cajoling with, “just a little longer ... not long now.”

Once the lye is removed — a process in itself, where the hair is immersed in water multiple times before the chemicals are completely abstracted — heat is then applied. At this point, the scalp’s pores are open and the skin is hypersensitive. The hair is then combed whilst being blow-dried. The heat from the hair dryer and comb scraping across your scalp results in another form of torment. However, once the lathionization⁸ is complete, the response intra-racially is unreservedly affirmative. In spite of the flattery, I felt confused. My hair was flat yet it still did not move and bounce the way straight white hair would, but more than that, I did not recognise myself.

As an adult, I have chosen to keep my hair in its ‘natural’ state with the addition of hair colour. I recently dyed it pink and went in search of a job. The first time I handed in my résumé I was hired because of my hair. The CEO of the company said, “you’ll look good in the shop.” I laughed it off thinking it was absurd to hire someone to work in a store on the basis of his or her hair. However, it was only later in my employment that I decided to dye over the blonde and pink, back to a ‘natural’ brown. In the coming months I chose to cut my shoulder length curls off to a short, mini-Afro. My boss walked in and screamed, “What have you done to your hair? GET OUT! We hired you for your hair.” It was a confronting experience.

⁷ A common practice within the African-Australian community is hair being processed by a family member or close friend.

⁸ Lathionization is an alternative description of the chemical hair straightening process, colloquially referred to as ‘relaxing.’

My capacity to gain and retain this job was based on the hair on my head. I felt as though my large pink Afro had been used against me, while also being something that worked in my favour when deemed a desirable ‘exotic’ feature by those outside the African-Australian community. It was a convoluted form of gender and racial discrimination that I struggled to understand.

It intensified my resolve to learn more about African hair: the experiences of those with it; and how African-Australians attempt to work with, and/or against, the paradoxes of their hair in relation to their lives in a predominantly white Australian city such as Sydney. This thesis began because of my own personal experiences but I have gone on to discover other viewpoints, attitudes and experiences in the interviews I conducted with other African Australians; two Ghanaian-Australian men and five African-Australian women. Three of the seven — Shonae, Hillary, and, Lynda — are Ghanaian-Australian, while Amelia is of Nigerian descent, and, Nadine is of Zambian descent. Each of the participants who generously offered their time and knowledge to this project are identified by the following pseudonyms: Amelia, 24; Shonae, 23; Nadine, 22; Hillary, 42; Elroy, 50; Lynda, 53; and, Kwame, 63.

The interviews occurred between December 2012 and March 2013 and were semi-structured. Although I asked prepared questions,⁹ much of the dialogue resulted from the open-ended questions driven by the participants. All of the interviews conducted were audiotaped and transcribed, then analysed thematically. The use of a qualitative interview approach allowed participants to play a significant role in directing the length of discussion, the topics covered, and any introduction of new material. The questions focused on the relationship participants had with their hair, the labour involved in their practices of hair stylization, their definition of beauty and ‘good’ hair, as well as an understanding of how their hair influenced different stages of their lives. Some participants were Australian born, whilst others had migrated to Australia as adults. While their experiences of hair in Australia and Africa differed, the women, in particular shared a common experience; their hair *mattered*.

To date, discourses on African hair practices, both socio-culturally and academically, have been largely centred on the United States and Britain, while in

⁹ See: Appendix A.

Australia there is no research on African Australian hair practices specifically. Research from *The African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific* documents Afro-diasporic experience¹⁰ but focuses mostly on the legal, human rights and social implications of being an African refugee in Australia.¹¹ Part of the challenge in this thesis is to think about how the African-Australian experience relates to, but also might differ from the Euro-American framing of hair provided by the literature that has emerged from the US and Britain. This thesis builds upon scholarship on hair from the Black Atlantic, while attending to the differences of location and histories of inclusion and exclusion that comes from an African-Australian perspective.

As a marker of connection and difference, I refer to the African-Australian *diaspora* to describe the dynamic processes by which individuals from a shared homeland are divided by distance and yet united in their African provenance. It is this connectivity to Africa as the motherland; imagined intra- and inter-racially, that can become “a rhetoric of desire and fantasy.”¹² In this model, Africa becomes the site in which discussions of ‘authenticity’ abound, where “the insistence on a unitary point of origin becomes untenable and ... politically undesirable.”¹³ However, I use the terms ‘African diaspora’ and ‘Afro-diasporic’ *vis-à-vis* hair and identity as a means of highlighting the continuation and reinterpretation of culture outside of Africa — the metaphorical and literal homeland. Given that the African diaspora “has been conceived in very narrow terms ... [focusing] primarily on African descendants in

¹⁰ The most comprehensive article at present is: Virginia Mapedzahama and Kwamena Kwansah-Aidoo, “Negotiating Diasporic Black African Existence in Australia: A Reflexive Analysis,” *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 34, no. 1 (June 2013): 61-81.

¹¹ With specific reference to: Mike Oliver, “Standing Up, Reaching Out and Letting Go: Experiences of Resilience and School Engagement for African High Schoolers From Refugee Backgrounds,” *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 33, no. 1 (June 2012): 151-164. Melissa Phillips, “Convenient Labels, Inaccurate Representations: Turning Southern Sudanese Refugees into ‘African-Australians,’” *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (December 2011): 57-79; Julie Robinson, “Sudanese heritage and living in Australia: Implications of demography for individual and community resilience,” *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (December 2011): 25-56; David Lucas, Monica Jamali and Barbara Edgar, “The Sudan-born in Australia: a Statistical Profile,” *The Australasian Review of African Studies* 32, no. 2 (December 2011): 10-24.

¹² Lola Young, “Hybridity’s Discontents: rereading science and ‘race,’” in *Hybridity and Its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, eds. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes, 154-170. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*

western Europe and the Americas,”¹⁴ it is critical to reorganise notions of spatiality to recognise the complexity and heterogeneity of how space is experienced. As Foucault argues, “spaces” are “irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.”¹⁵ This concept of spatiality is useful to my project that engages with the term ‘African diaspora’ not as a reification of Black Atlantic discourses, but rather as an extension of this scholarship. The inclusion of African-Australian voices and perspectives is then strategically necessary in African diasporic scholarship to ensure the term does not simply reinscribe Euro-American centrism.

African-Australian diasporic identities in Australia are revealed as constituted through a set of distinct factors including, but not limited to: gender, socialisation, language, history, location, culture and power. These create spaces, identities and empiricism *beyond* the Black Atlantic, where African-Australians have lived since the very beginning of colonisation of this continent by the British. This fact alone constitutes a significant point of difference that is worth exploring further, not least because it has, up until recently, been overlooked in the history of Australia.

According to Cassandra Pybus “there were at least a dozen black convicts on the first fleet which landed at Sydney Cove in January 1788.”¹⁶ Pybus continues that, “between 1788 and the middle of the nineteenth century, almost every convict ship carried people of the African diaspora to New South Wales and Van Diemen’s Land.”¹⁷ Many of these Afro-diasporic people were freed slaves from North America, the West Indies and Britain who committed petty crimes and had been sentenced to transportation to this newly established and distant colony. Of these former slaves, the story of John Black Caesar has gained notoriety due in part to his accolade as Australia’s first bushranger. However, what distinguished Caesar from the revered status of Irish-Australian Ned Kelly was his blackness. As Pybus asserts, “he was not

¹⁴ Judith Byfield, “Introduction: Rethinking the African Diaspora,” *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 1.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 23.

¹⁶ Cassandra Pybus, “A Touch of the Tar: African settlers in colonial Australian and the implications for issues of Aboriginality,” *Australian Studies* 3 (2001): 3.

¹⁷ Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders: The unknown story of Australia’s first black settlers*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006), 180.

Aboriginal as one might suppose ... He was a man of the African diaspora.”¹⁸ Black Caesar was described by David Collins, Deputy Judge Advocate and Lieutenant-Governor of the colony, as a “mere animal”¹⁹ whose body “was muscular and well calculated for hard labour; but in his intellects he did not very widely differ from a brute.”²⁰ Collins’s rhetoric simultaneously severed Black Caesar from the settlement that he was forcibly brought into, and from the very condition of being human. The added effect of such rhetoric was to naturalise whiteness as inextricably linked to humanness, giving whites the power over “their troublesome black chattel”²¹ to determine membership of humanity itself.

I emphasise this history to show that the African diaspora extended to Australia from the moment of invasion and to highlight that race relations in Australia were not limited to a contest between Aboriginal Australians and their white invaders. The forcible and voluntary transportation of Afro-diasporic people to Australia ensured that “the settlement ... was a multi-racial process.”²² This history not only complicates the hegemony of Australia’s supposed white colonial past and present, it also highlights the need to include the specific African-Australian experiences as equally valid to those of other Australians, and also different to the predominantly American and British contexts of African studies.

As Pybus states, the neglect in accounting for this aspect of Australian history has become:

One of the many tragedies of race relations in this country that we have not allowed space for the stories of people of colour who were not Aboriginal, especially those of the African diaspora.²³

This oversight speaks of the determination of settlers to define Australia as an intrinsically white settlement in order to consolidate the subsequent national myth of

¹⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹⁹ David Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in New South Wales, with remarks on the dispositions, customs, manners, etc. of the native inhabitants of that country* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davis, 1798-1802), 58.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Pybus, “A Touch of the Tar,” 13.

²² Pybus, *Black Founders*, 181.

²³ Pybus, “A Touch of the Tar,” 23.

white Australia. The disavowal of Indigenous Australians and Afro-diasporic people worked to “more or less subtly emphasise the ‘fact’ that Australia [had] a core national identity grounded in its Anglo-Irish origins.”²⁴ This was, of course, an idealisation that attempted to “achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis.”²⁵ This “imagined sense of community”²⁶ predicated on whiteness produced “deeply spatialized stories”²⁷ that ought to be unmapped “in an effort to uncover the hierarchies that are protected and the violence that is hidden when we believe such spatial relations are naturally occurring.”²⁸ The work of Pybus disputes the idea of a homogenously white colonial Australia and shows that while Afro-diasporic people have been present throughout Australia’s colonial history, their personal experiences remain underrepresented in Australian history and scholarship.

This thesis seeks to contribute to the circulation of stories of African Australian experience in Australia by highlighting how hair is regarded, politicised and depoliticized, today. As the literature on hair from the Black Atlantic shows, hair is interwoven with so many aspects of cultural life that it remains an intensely rich source for the analysis of the politics of identity and community.

In chapter one, “Black aesthetics and the Black Atlantic,” I examine the academic discourses surrounding hair out of the Black Atlantic, in particular, the British scholarship of Shirley Anne Tate and Kobena Mercer, and the work of bell hooks and Tracey Owens Patton from the United States. I analyse the ways in which Tate and Mercer advocate for the depsychologisation of black hair practices as a counterargument to hooks’ maintenance of the psychologisation of black hair straightening practices. Building upon this de/psychologising framework, I question whether ‘natural’ and processed Afro-diasporic hairstyles can co-exist as depsychologised symbols of black female empowerment.

²⁴ Judith Bessant and Rob Watts, *Sociology Australia*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007), 279.

²⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1993), 260.

²⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

²⁷ Sherene Razack, *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2002), 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

In chapter two, “To Weave, to Braid or go ‘Natural’,” I expand upon scholarship from the Black Atlantic, drawing upon actual interviews conducted with seven African-Australian men and women. My analysis of the interviews will focus on what particular hairstyles — weaves, braids, and going ‘natural’— mean to the interview participants. I utilise African-Australian difference as gathered from the interviews, as well as literature from art history, sociology and anthropology, on the significance of hair in African culture. I argue that these discourses problematise the notion that processed Afro-diasporic hairstyles are explicit simulations of whiteness. I suggest that the counterargument that Afros are an ‘authentic’ representation, or rather, the global expression of African identities does not address, or encompass, the simultaneity of contradictions in the everyday lived experiences of the interview participants.

In chapter three, “Branding, Touching and the Labour of Racialisation,” I explore the African-American hair care industry, and its function as both an empowering and exploitative industry. I argue that the current transnational economy of black hair suggests that its empowering and exploitative implications exist simultaneously. I examine the time and money spent on processing hair in the African-Australian community, situating this as the explicit labour of hair and identity. I also explore the interview participant’s aversion to inter-racial hair touching, expanding upon what Elizabeth V. Spelman describes as “the shadow work” — the invisible labour exacted upon black people to do the work of ‘racial’ identity.²⁹ Naming this unnoticed ‘race’ work is a useful strategy in shifting the responsibility of ‘racial’ identity back onto the unmarked category of whiteness. Further, utilising the work of Frantz Fanon, I argue that inter-racial hair touching is an action that pathologises black ‘difference.’ This helps to frame the views of the interview participants, who, I argue, want their ‘difference’ registered only insofar as it does not become a spectacle in the hands of curious white ‘others.’

Finally, I account for the contradictory viewpoints of the interviewees in relation to hair and identity. In doing so, I hope to acknowledge the heterogeneity of

²⁹ Elizabeth V. Spelman, ““Race” and the Labor of Identity,” in *Racism and Philosophy*, eds. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell, 202-215. (New York: Cornell University, 1999), 209.

these voices; how the experiences of the interview participants differ from each other, from my own views, and from the views expressed within the scholarship that attempts to account for them. While I recognise that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the intricacies of African-Australian hairstyling in full, the interview material gathered is a significant inclusion to the continued understanding of the heterogeneity of Afro-diasporic hairstyling and experiences.

Chapter One: Black Aesthetics and the Black Atlantic

In September 2012, Oprah Winfrey released an issue of her eponymous *O Magazine* with Winfrey on the cover without, according to the press release, “blow-drying or straightening her hair.”³⁰ Inside the September issue, Winfrey wrote a column — “what I know for sure” — about transformations and more specifically, hair transformation. It became newsworthy not just because of Winfrey’s high-profile but due, in part, to the manner in which it revealed Winfrey’s ‘natural’ hair in such a public way. However, Winfrey’s ‘natural’ hair became criticised³¹ for not being ‘natural’ enough. The derision was particularly strong from those in the US who are part of the Natural Hair Movement, a community of African-Americans who do not apply chemicals to their hair.

For celebrated African-American poet and early ‘natural’ hair advocate Gwendolyn Brooks, ‘natural’ hair is a signifier of respect for the African self. In “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals,” Brooks declares that ‘natural’ sisters are those who, “have not hailed the hot-comb recently ... never worshipped Marilyn Monroe ... [and] have not wanted to be white.”³² For Brooks, ‘natural’ hair is “an important vehicle in which to rally black sisterhood and Black Nationalist consciousness.”³³ Today, the Natural Hair Movement has continued to gain

³⁰ The Oprah Magazine (O Magazine), “Check Out Oprah's Natural Hair on O Magazine's September 2012 Cover!” *Oprah*, August 1, 2012, <http://www.oprah.com/style/Oprahs-Natural-Hair-on-O-Magazine-September-2012--Oprahs-Real-Hair>.

³¹ Criticism was particularly strong on ‘natural’ hair blogs. For a detailed discussion, see: Whitney Patterson, “Oprah’s Natural Hair Controversy,” *Sporty Afros*, August 3, 2012, <http://sportyafros.com/hair/oprahs-natural-hair-controversy/>; “The Hair Controversy – Gabby Douglas and Oprah Winfrey” narrated by Pamela and Dianne Shaddock, *Natural Hair Care News*, August 1, 2012, <http://www.naturalhaircarenews.com/2012/08/15/nhcn-podcast-002-the-hair-controversy-gabby-douglas-and-oprah-winfrey/>; Hilary George-Parkin, “Oprah's natural hair debut stirs controversy,” *Today*, August 2, 2012, <http://www.today.com/style/oprahs-natural-hair-debut-stirs-controversy-919705?franchiseSlug=stylemain>.

³² Geraldine Brooks, “To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals (Never to look a hot comb in the teeth),” in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, eds. Imamu Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, 84-85. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1983), 84.

³³ Kim Curry-Evans and Neal A. Lester, *Hair Stories* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 38.

supporters through a message of liberation and Afrocentricity where members join in the spirit of committing to:

Hair that is natural and free.
Free of chemicals, glue and weaves.
Spreading the truth that natural is great.
And loving the hair we've been taught to hate.³⁴

An important element in the Natural Hair Movement is transitioning; the period in which one goes from chemically altered hair to 'natural.' It is such a significant process that it inspired British-Nigerian filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa to make a documentary — aptly named, *Transition* — on the subject. Saro-Wiwa discovered that “transitioning changed [her] relationship with [her] entire body,”³⁵ influencing her to photograph women with 'natural' hair. In doing so, Saro-Wiwa found that “the images help us [Afro-diasporic women] affirm and celebrate our aesthetic.”³⁶

However, the Natural Hair Movement has proven divisive in the Black Atlantic diaspora by constructing yet another mediated image that black women are encouraged to adhere to. Proponents of the Natural Hair Movement once again place a heavy burden on the heads of Afro-diasporic women. The privileging of 'natural' hair as the culturally 'authentic' representation of the black self excludes an already marginalised group. The notion that Afros and dreadlocks express a “more ideologically right-on”³⁷ black self imbues these hairstyles with a 1960s-Black Power sensibility in what Kobena Mercer argues is the repetition of “slogans of a bygone era.”³⁸ Mercer asserts that while the slogans of the 1960s — with particular reference to “Black is Beautiful” — were indisputably powerful during that context, their continued usage “no longer has the same cultural or political resonance it once did.”³⁹ From this perspective, African-American civil rights leader, Angela Davis, whose

³⁴ *The Natural Hair Movement*, February 24, 2013, <http://www.naturalhairmovement.com/>.

³⁵ Zina Saro-Wiwa. “Transition,” *The New York Times Op-Docs*, 5:53, May 31, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/video/2012/05/31/opinion/100000001579773/transition.html>.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Mercer, 99.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Afro became symbolic of African-American radical resistance during the 1960s, argues that the Afro, “has survived, disconnected from the historical context in which it arose”⁴⁰ where today it is “understood less as a political statement than as fashion.”⁴¹

Saro-Wiwa explores the depoliticisation of the Afro in *Transition* explaining that while “many naturals ... are happy to be part of a movement, almost none ... consider it political, [backing] away from any talk about black power.”⁴² Saro-Wiwa accounts for this depoliticisation and yet maintains that going ‘natural’ is “the most potent and political act of all”⁴³ for Afro-diasporic women. However, my interviews with Hillary, Nadine, and Amelia complicate this idea; these women have firm views on Afro-diasporic hairstyling and do not want their perspectives locked into one particular slogan which positions the Afro as the most ‘political’ hairstyle.

Therefore, rather than categorising ‘natural’ hairstyles as explicitly political and authentically ‘African,’ I find it useful to draw upon Mercer’s argument that such claims surrounding the Afro reveal more “about the making of Africanness in a diasporic context.”⁴⁴ In other words, proponents of the Natural Hair Movement who advocate going ‘natural’ prescribe the boundaries of political and so-called ‘authentic’ blackness as limited to hair texture. In exploring the politics of black hair/styling Mercer emphasises the “need to depsychologise the question of hair-straightening.”⁴⁵ That is to say, “the widespread argument that because it involves straightening ... [it] represents either a wretched imitation of white people’s hair or, ... a diseased state of black consciousness.”⁴⁶

Mercer contends that one of the common arguments levelled at Afro-diasporic women who relax their hair is a concern about the danger of the chemicals used. Such a contention, according to Mercer, is exaggerated in order to present “a moral

⁴⁰ Angela Yvonne Davis, “Afro Images: Politics, Fashion and Nostalgia,” in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, eds. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, 200-209. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 202.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Saro-Wiwa, “Transition.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Shirley Anne Tate, *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*, (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 39.

⁴⁵ Mercer, 99.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 97.

grounding ... for judgements which are then extrapolated to assumptions about mental health or illness.”⁴⁷ According to Mercer, the active ingredient in chemical hair straightening, sodium hydroxide carries only a “marginal risk” that is “exaggerated”⁴⁸ in discourses on black beauty practices. However, this is where my argument differs from Mercer. From my own experience and interviews, particularly with Elroy who expressed “personal concerns about the application of chemicals and the pain [African-Australian girls and women] go through,”⁴⁹ I contend that there is validity in discussions on the risks associated with chemical hair straightening. In spite of this, Mercer’s attempt at depsychologising hair straightening remains important because it resists the appeal of castigating Afro-diasporic women who process their hair. Mercer contends that the “aesthetic stylization [of] each black hairstyle seeks to *revalorize* the ethnic signifier”⁵⁰ rather than participate in its disavowal.

African-American feminist bell hooks views early modes of black hair straightening practices as a means of creating intimacy between African-American women. hooks claims that black women would “meet at home or in the beauty parlor to talk with one another, to listen to the talk ... [in] a moment of creativity, a moment of change.”⁵¹ The process of straightening hair in this context — hooks’ racially segregated childhood in 1960s America — is described as “not connected in [her] mind with the effort to look white”⁵² but instead “connected solely with rites of initiation into womanhood.”⁵³ In this way, the hot comb, applied to the hair was deemed only appropriate for women, not the heads of children, ensuring that straightening hair became a rite of passage for many Afro-diasporic girls as they transitioned into womanhood.

According to hooks, the acquisition and exploitation of the black hair care industry — which I discuss in Chapter 3 — by white corporations, changed the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Elroy, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, February 2, 2013.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 104.

⁵¹ bell hooks, “Straightening Our Hair” in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, eds. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, 111-116. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 111.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

context in which black women process their hair, leading hooks to claim that, “gone was the context of ritual, of black women bonding.”⁵⁴ Instead, hooks claims that these rituals of black female intimacy were “stripped” leading to her argument that “black women straightening our hair seemed more and more exclusively a signifier of white supremacist oppression and exploitation.”⁵⁵ hooks asserts that processing Afro-textured hair is then concerned with a “need to look as much like white people as possible, to look safe ... [in a] desire to succeed in a white world.”⁵⁶ Similar to hooks, Mariame Kaba explores the notion that straightened African hair offers safety in a hegemonic white society. In “When Black Hair Tangles with White Power,” Kaba contends that black women are willing to go through the physical pain and financial cost of chemical hair straightening in order “to achieve access to the economic and social resources within American society.”⁵⁷ Further, Kaba states that African-American women are often intra-racially pressured⁵⁸ to undergo laborious hair processes in order to “[gain] social acceptance from family, friends, and men”⁵⁹ in a heterosexist culture.

Shirley Anne Tate situates the pressure to fulfil particular aesthetics related to hair stylization as linked to processes of intra- and inter-racialisation. According to Tate, popular sayings such as “beauty comes from within,” “beauty is only skin deep,” and “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”⁶⁰ are not applicable to the bodies of black women because of the invisibility of racialisation, which is unevenly inscribed on the bodies of black women as opposed their white counterparts. The fact that black women have been historically posited as the antithesis of beauty when measured against the socio-cultural ideal of whiteness reveals the continued “racialized paradox of beauty.”⁶¹ In other words, the notion of beauty *vis-à-vis* Afro-diasporic women

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mariame Kaba, “When Black Hair Tangles with White Power,” in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, eds. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, 102-108. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 103.

⁵⁸ The interview subjects also experienced these intra-racial pressures in the African-Australian diaspora, which, I discuss in chapter 3.

⁵⁹ Kaba, 104.

⁶⁰ Tate, *Black Beauty*, 27.

⁶¹ Ibid., 18.

ignores the fact “that there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied *as white*.”⁶²

In order to destabilise the white beauty paradigm, Afrocentric theorist Tracey Owens Patton borrows from Judith Butler’s theory on performativity. Butler’s seminal work in *Gender Trouble* situates gender performativity as an interrogation of notions of the ‘real’ and the ‘natural.’ Patton then expands upon Butler’s argument to suggest that African-American hairstyling practices confront the current essentialised beauty model. According to Patton hairstyling as a mode of performativity challenges hegemonic standards of beauty, presenting “a way for the marginalized to attempt to become centered in a world of beauty that tends not to value African American forms of beauty.”⁶³ Therefore, Afro-diasporic modes of hairstyling have the potential to destabilise whiteness within the beauty paradigm and “can be a challenge to assimilationist notions of beauty (regardless of style worn) because it can challenge perceived expectations.”⁶⁴

In considering the literature from Mercer, hooks, Tate, and Patton, the next section complicates the hierarchy of black ‘authenticity’ claims that privileges the Afro and dreadlocks whilst disavowing other hairstyles as explicit simulations of whiteness. I contend that it is reductive to assume that Afro-diasporic hairstyling today is exclusively a manifestation of “white supremacist oppression.”⁶⁵ Instead, I find it useful to examine the academic and socio-cultural arguments that situate Afro-diasporic hairstyling as paradoxically engaged in the production of difference and sameness, and notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hair as part of a canon that I call the black hair fantasy.

There are four processes that are critical in the continuation and avowal of the black hair fantasy: Afros and dreadlocks, which are considered ‘authentic’ and, chemical hair straightening and weaves which are regarded as ‘inauthentic.’ Weaves involve tightly braiding chemically straightened or ‘natural’ hair into corn rows then

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Tracey Owens Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I more than my hair?: African-American women and their struggle with beauty, body image, and hair,” *The National Women’s Studies Association Journal* 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 36.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁵ hooks, 113.

sewing either human or synthetic hair into the braids to create the appearance of long, straight locks. This has become a symbol of ‘good’ hair in the Afro-diasporic community where simulation, in accordance with Jean Baudrillard’s theory, “no longer needs to be rational, because it no longer measures itself against an ideal or negative instance.”⁶⁶ Baudrillard’s theory on simulacra and simulation is useful to the problematisation of ‘authenticity’ claims based on the idea that the Afro and dreadlocks are ‘original’ and primarily African hairstyles. Expanding upon Baudrillard, I argue that Afros and dreadlocks are untenable icons of Africanness “because it is never clear what ‘the real’ ... is.”⁶⁷ I base this argument on the interviews with Elroy, Lynda, Hillary and Kwame whose views complicated the notion of a ‘real’ African hairstyle. Similar to Mercer, I contend that the valorisation of Afros and dreadlocks as representative of Africanness is a “specifically diasporic”⁶⁸ supposition.

As my thesis shows, the claim that ‘naturalness’ invokes a connection to Africa in a way that processed styles do not, or cannot, ignores the fact that a significant part of continental African hairstyling involves artifice. In spite of this, Afro-diasporic people continue to be locked into an unrelenting debate, socio-culturally and academically, that the ‘real,’ the ‘original,’ and the ‘authentic’ African hairstyle is the Afro or dreadlocks while straightened hair is its antagonist. I argue that this is a myopic understanding, symbolic of the “romanticist version”⁶⁹ of Africa, which is, more often than not, fantasised in diaspora as home to Afro and dreadlock-wearing men and women. This mythic idealisation of continental Africa was realised by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, an African-American, who travelled to Ghana. Danquah became “completely disillusioned, confused and downright bitter”⁷⁰ when her fantasy of Africa did not live up to the reality of Africa. Instead of “ebony-

⁶⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 2.

⁶⁷ Tate, *Black Beauty*, 27.

⁶⁸ Mercer, 112.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁷⁰ Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, “Afro-Kinky Human Hair,” in *Everything but the Burden: what white people are taking from black culture*, ed. Greg Tate, 204-216. (New York: Harlem Moon, 2003), 214.

skinned, corn-rowed women,”⁷¹ Danquah discovered the popularity of skin-bleaching creams, weaves and relaxers.

Likewise, Elroy, a Ghanaian-Australian interviewed for this project revealed that so-called ‘Afrocentric’ hairstyles such as dreadlocks “isn’t the typical African way.”⁷² Elroy asserts that dreadlocks “aren’t done the way we normally do it back home in Africa”⁷³ where the style is worn almost exclusively by fetish priests and not uninitiated Africans. As Elroy continues, dreadlocks are “done with a reason; it’s not just a style. It has a bit of religion attached to it and culture deeper than [what people realise].”⁷⁴ This was an argument supported by Kwame who states that in Africa, the reality is that, “about 99% of the women wear wigs or weaves.”⁷⁵ Elroy went even further to suggest that the notion that there are ‘authentic’ African hairstyles, such as dreadlocks, “[sends] the wrong message to the wider Australian community.”⁷⁶

I find it useful to define the black hair fantasy as a Baudrillardian simulation because the black hair fantasy reifies an unfounded diasporic paradigm based on the notion that Afros and dreadlocks are an explicitly African hairstyle. The various contested modes of ‘authentic’/‘inauthentic’ African hairstyling — dreadlocks, Afros, braids, weaves, and chemical hair straightening — ultimately reveal that claims of ‘authentic’/‘inauthentic’ Afro-diasporic hairstyles are in fact putative. As Kobena Mercer elaborates, Afros and dreadlocks “were never just natural, waiting to be found”⁷⁷ by Black Nationalist movements. Rather, “they were stylistically cultivated and politically constructed in a particular historical moment as part of a strategic contestation of white dominance and the cultural power of whiteness.”⁷⁸

Like Mercer, I am not suggesting that the political deployment of Afros and dreadlocks was not significant to the mobilisation of Afro-diasporic civil rights.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Elroy, interview.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Kwame, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, March 16, 2013.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Mercer, 108.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Instead, I am arguing that the maintenance of this idea — the nexus that binds Afros and dreadlocks to Africa — is part of the black hair fantasy. The effect of this is to construct processed hairstyles as an aberration of a proud black self. The next chapter continues to problematise the implications of black modes of hairstyling. It presents the discussions I had with African-Australians on their hairstyling practices and what these modes of stylization mean to them. These conversations reveal that African-Australian hairstyling is anything but straightforward.

Chapter Two: To Weave, To Braid Or Go ‘Natural’

In this chapter, “To Weave, To Braid Or Go ‘Natural’,” I look at what particular hairstyles — weaves, braids, and going ‘natural’ — mean to the interview participants. Using African-Australian ideas of difference, as gathered from the interviews and academic discourses on the significance of hair in African culture, I challenge the notion that processing Afro-textured hair is an explicit simulation of whiteness. For example, ‘natural’ hair in Australia is, according to Hillary, particularly favoured by what she calls “white kids,”⁷⁹ African Australians who have grown up in Australia. This chapter highlights the significance of the diversity of viewpoints on different hairstyles that are worn by African-Australians. Such diverse perspectives highlight the fact that African-Australians are both part of diasporic conversations about African hair, but that they are also marked by differences of gender and inter- and intra-racial tensions. This chapter explores what African-Australians say about hair, what they find desirable, beautiful, tolerable, and what hair ‘says’ about African identity here in Australia.

The extract below is from Bola Odeyemi’s poem, “It’s only hair today... gone tomorrow,”⁸⁰ that describes the common Afro-Diasporic process known as weaves:

*Three packs of false hair on my head, so now I can get out of bed
Now I feel like a sell out with my sewn in tracks
Patting not really scratching is part of the weave
Take this shit out
I want my ‘fro back PLEASE!
— Bola Odeyemi, “It’s only hair today... gone tomorrow”*

Hair weaving is a practice that involves tightly cornrowing braids across the entire scalp in a circular pattern. A needle and thread is then used to sew human or

⁷⁹ Hillary, interview.

⁸⁰ Bola Odeyemi, “It’s only hair today... gone tomorrow,” in *Hair Power – Skin Revolution: A collection of poems and personal essays by Black and Mixed-Race women*, ed. Nicole Moore, 157. (Leicester: Matador, 2010), 157.

synthetic hair extensions into the braids. These braids mimic hair follicles as each cornrow has created a space where human or synthetic hair ‘emerges’ giving the appearance of uninhibited straight hair. However, these cornrows are often so tight that, after a new weave, your head will throb for at least the first week, or, you will experience the itchy scalp Odeyemi describes.

My first and only weave incurred headaches and an itchy scalp that were not remedied by a strong dose of painkillers. My weave was so unrelentingly painful that I had to have it removed the next morning. I lasted just twelve hours. As my hairstylist painstakingly removed tracks of human hair extensions and undid rows of carefully braided hair I felt embarrassed that I could not withstand the pain. Even the hairstylist seemed disappointed in me and tried to convince me to persevere. “Give it time,” she urged.

This brief weave experience altered the meanings I accorded my hair. Instead of constantly viewing my curly hair as the ‘problem,’ I began to see these processes as the real issue. The weave completely transformed the way I interacted with, and styled, my hair. I developed a new respect for my ‘natural’ hair and an understanding that my ‘natural’ hair could be painless in both a literal and figurative sense. I went from fighting my naturally curly hair to not only accepting it but also loving it. It has been eight years since I had that weave. In that time I have not processed my hair. I wear my hair as it naturally grows out of my scalp in tufts of frizz, curls and tangles. For me, this ‘natural’ mode of hair stylization is a personal rebellion against the intra-racial expectation that I need to style my hair through artifice.

While I have eliminated weaves from my beauty regime, my interviews with Amelia, Shonae, Hillary, Lynda, Elroy, and Kwame reveals the enduring popularity of this hairstyle in the African-Australian community. For instance, Kwame feels that weaves beautify an African woman while dyed hair reveals “a problem of identity.”⁸¹ According to Kwame, individuals with dyed hair, “lack self-confidence or they’re

⁸¹ Kwame, interview.

crying for deep help.”⁸² When I probed further, asking Kwame why he did not believe that weaves signify “a problem of identity,” his response was:

It’s different in a sense because weaves enhance their beauty ... What we are saying [with weaves] is that hair defines your beauty and unfortunately not everyone is able to have ‘good’ hair ... If you’re able to get a very good professional to do it [weaves] for you, obviously you look beautiful, you look better than applying colours.⁸³

For Kwame, dyed hair signifies a desire to “look exceptional from the norm”⁸⁴ while sewing straightened hair extensions into cornrows becomes a necessary beauty enhancement. Kwame does not perceive store bought hair as artificial or exceptional. Instead, it is one of the critical elements for the production of ‘good’ hair. Within Kwame’s schema, weaves become the new ‘natural,’ or, as Susan Bordo explains, “the dominant reality, the normalizing standard against which all else is judged.”⁸⁵ Hairstyles that deviate from “the dominant reality”⁸⁶ such as dyed or Afro-textured hair are subject to Kwame’s counsel. Kwame further explicated this point in stating:

When I see [dyed hair], I wish I could help this person.
To open them up and be able to share what is really hurting them.⁸⁷

Kwame’s psychologisation of hair practices that deviate from the straight-hair rule attests to a distortion of African-Australians’ self-perception and their perceptions of each other.⁸⁸ In other words, weaves are privileged as a naturalised hairstyle by Kwame; the way things are, or, more specifically, the way things ought to be.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Susan Bordo, “Normalisation and Resistance in the Era of the Image,” in *Feminisms*, eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, 451-455. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 452.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Kwame, interview.

⁸⁸ This distortion of perception aligns with the black hair fantasy.

Kwame also feels that weaves enable a woman to present herself in a “neat and tidy”⁸⁹ fashion. This idea that processed hair is clean and tidy hair is espoused in West African culture. In this context, hair is closely linked to “death and disease, on the one hand, or with sexuality, fertility, and vitality, on the other.”⁹⁰ Ivorian sociologist Harris Memel-Fotê also notes the importance of stylized Afro-textured hair in this way:

The curlier hair is, the more it is apt to become tangled and, as a result, trap dirt ... Thus, one would expect Africans to shave their heads or keep them closely cropped, which they frequently do. But *abundance* (emphasis added) of hair is also prized in many African cultures.⁹¹

Affirming Memel-Fôte’s point, Kwame believes that an African woman with long, abundant hair is not only a sign of cleanliness but also indicative of a mature woman of marrying age. As Kwame explained:

When you are young you don’t care about your hair but when you are married you *need* to care about your hair.⁹²

In turn, Judith Wilson states that abundant hairstyles such as weaves are not perceived as “vain, deceitful, grotesque, tasteless, or at best merely frivolous,”⁹³ instead they are a necessary component of African femaleness. According to Wilson, highly stylized hair in African culture is interpreted as “an extrusion of the life force and, hence [serves] as a corporeal measure of physical and metaphysical potency.”⁹⁴ Wilson concludes that, “given these associations, it follows that long hair would be aesthetically desirable.”⁹⁵ In fact, the process of weaving is, partially based on

⁸⁹ Kwame, interview.

⁹⁰ Frank Herreman and Roy Sieber, *Hair in African Art and Culture*, (Munich: Prestel Books, 2000), 26.

⁹¹ Harris Memel-Fôte, “The Perception of Beauty in Negro-African Culture,” (paper presented at the annual meeting for the Society of African Culture, Dakar, Senegal, March 30-April 8, 1966).

⁹² Kwame, interview.

⁹³ Judith Wilson, “Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women’s Art,” *The International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3, (1994), 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

traditional African hair practices that promote an “anti-naturalist”⁹⁶ aesthetic. Wilson outlines the specific techniques used in these traditional practices that include:

Binding the hair with leather, thread or fibers in order to make it stand upright or fall to unusual lengths; augmenting human hair by adding animal hair, leather or fibers to it, and fastening columnar rows of metal bands or beaded strands to the hair.⁹⁷

Over time the use of animal hair or leather, amongst other materials, has been supplanted with human or synthetic extensions in both diaspora and continental African beauty practices. Because of this African provenance, Lynda readily views weaves as distinctly African rather than a practice pitched as an imitation of whiteness. Lynda explains that weaves are meaningful because of this African connection:

It all comes from Africa, the [styles] we do here are the same ones we do at home. Whether you come from Sierra Leona or Ghana or Liberia, that’s the way it is ... Some people think it’s because of here [Australia] that we do our hair but it’s not because of here; we’re doing it back home.⁹⁸

For Lynda, weaves are not only a way of simplifying her beauty regime by having ‘manageable’ hair; they also symbolise the connection to, and adherence of African culture. As Lynda puts it, “we learn the tradition; we learn it back home.”⁹⁹ In turn, hairstyling becomes part of what Kandiatu Kanneh describes as “the geographies of racial memory”¹⁰⁰ and is an expressive reaffirmation of Africanness. Kobena Mercer states that the artifice of weaving is “valued in [their] own right as a mark of both invention and tradition”¹⁰¹ and continues to be reified in diaspora.

Weaves as a highly stylized form are a contentious element in the broader process of becoming an African woman. They are also inextricably linked to the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Lynda, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, March 16, 2013.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Kandiatu Kanneh, *African Identities: Race, Nation, and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism, and Black Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 116.

¹⁰¹ Mercer, 111.

black hair fantasy whereby Afro-diasporic hairstyles are perceived as manifestations of ‘authentic’/‘inauthentic’ black subjectivities. In the Althusserian sense, weaves engage in an overdetermined¹⁰² process of hair. That is to say, weaves materialize out of cultural, familial and mediated “apparatuses”¹⁰³ that work to maintain cultural traditions and, in turn, the intra-cultural status quo. In other words, the gendered cultural ideology that make weaves meaningful — including Kwame’s statements surrounding weaves as indicative of African female maturity, femininity, and femaleness — are utopian, or rather, symptomatic of, the black hair fantasy.

In spite of the significance of weaves in the African-Australian community, Amelia expressed a strong dislike for weaves, having worn them herself. In this excerpt Amelia explains that:

I look back on how I was before [I wore my hair ‘naturally’], I feel very weak. I look at myself as being very weak because I was conforming to a lot of things ... I don’t like weaves, I don’t respect them at all ... you’re essentially changing yourself, [hair] is every bit of your DNA.¹⁰⁴

For Amelia, weaves are not a connection to, or symbol of, African culture, instead they function to weaken Afro-diasporic identity. In this way, weaves return to the category that labels them ‘inauthentic’ and situates them as fundamentally opposed to expressive black subjectivity. From Amelia’s perspective, weaves mean conforming to an ideal that excludes and alters the ‘natural’ black self. If Afro-textured hair is an essential cultural referent, as Amelia implies, then weaves as the concealer are the ultimate disavowal of blackness. In turn, Amelia does not “respect them at all”¹⁰⁵ because, for her, they are outside the limits of a black self: “your DNA.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰² See: Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (New York: Verso, 1996), 112-114.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰⁴ Amelia, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, December 4, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

I find it useful to situate Amelia's comments on weaves within the concept of hybridization and, more specifically, draw on Robert Young's theoretical model. According to Young, hybridity:

Makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different.¹⁰⁷

So weaves become hybridity 'in action' revealing the "apparently impossible simultaneity"¹⁰⁸ of difference and sameness; that weaves cannot represent difference because they mimic sameness. In this way, Amelia's strong dislike of weaves because they "essentially change yourself,"¹⁰⁹ speaks to a position that does not see the possibility of 'natural' and processed African hair co-existing as a depsychologised symbol of black female empowerment. For Amelia, it is a hairstyle that is firmly locked into a fixed category of white mimesis.

Against this aversion to the use of weaves, the various forms of braids, including but not limited to: box braids; cornrows; microbraids; tree braids; natural braids; and, Nubian twist braids, have been viewed as traditional modes of African hairstyling and particularly meaningful to Amelia, Hillary and Shonae.¹¹⁰ Taiia Smart explains the process of hair braiding with synthetic extensions whereby the hairstylist must:

Part a small box in the scalp, braid the section to the end, and then flick on a lighter, letting the tiny orange flame singe the braid's tip, melting it like plastic, so it won't unravel.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 26.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Amelia, interview.

¹¹⁰ African braids involve multiple plaits covering the head with or without synthetic extensions. Cornrows, Nubian twist braids, and natural braids tend to make use of natural hair without the need for extensions. On the other hand, box braids, tree braids and microbraids tend to incorporate synthetic or human hair extensions to create length.

¹¹¹ Taiia Smart, "Hair Braiding, Miss?," in *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories*, eds. Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, 85-89. (New York: Washington Square Press, 2001), 86.

Smart asserts that the average number of braided extensions per head is 150-200 braids.¹¹² It is then little wonder that it takes upwards of five hours to complete a braided African hairstyle. In spite of the frequent use of extensions in African braids, Amelia and Shonae did not view this hairstyle in the same way as weaves, which also make use of hair extensions. Instead, Shonae and Amelia saw braids as a traditional African hairstyle with Shonae stating that, “everybody knows that braided hair is African hair.”¹¹³ Victoria Sherrow observes that, “braiding remains one of the most common styling techniques in Africa,”¹¹⁴ closely related to gender, sexuality and status.

Frank Herreman and Roy Sieber explain that these hairstyles “are not limited to the purely aesthetic but serve as a marker to distinguish between youth and adult, girl and boy, man and woman.”¹¹⁵ In other words, braids are a particularly significant African hairstyle in that they offer a medium in which African bodies are read intra-culturally. For example, Kwame can “easily identify”¹¹⁶ where an African woman comes from by “looking at the hair,”¹¹⁷ stating that braids are a factor in this process of reading and locating African women within the African diaspora.

In a Foucauldian sense, Kwame then enacts the “normative gaze”¹¹⁸ and becomes the arbiter of cultural knowledge in the assessment of what constitutes a gendered and racialised subject. Kwame’s claim that he can “easily identify”¹¹⁹ an African woman’s provenance through her hairstyle speaks to the way in which the visibility or “*sight* of hair serves as the ambiguous vector of the power relations through which the gendered subject is constituted.”¹²⁰ Put another way, Kwame’s

¹¹² Ibid., 87.

¹¹³ Shonae, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, December 5, 2012.

¹¹⁴ Victoria Sherrow, *Encyclopedia of Hair: A Cultural History*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2006), 13.

¹¹⁵ Herreman and Sieber, 26.

¹¹⁶ Kwame, interview.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ See: Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977).

¹¹⁹ Kwame, interview.

¹²⁰ Geraldine Biddle-Perry, “Hair, Gender and Looking,” in *Hair: Styling, Culture and Fashion*, eds. Geraldine Biddle-Perry and Sarah Cheang, 97-109. (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 99.

ability to read an African woman through her hair affirms the manner in which African femaleness is “produced by systems of power and knowledge, and the codes of looking that embody, protect and sustain them.”¹²¹ This process reveals the “classification and performative expression that the *sight* of hair offers to men and women,”¹²² and its role in the simultaneous identification of gender and race.

Braids are a hairstyle that interpellates African-Australian women both literally and discursively, “[producing] racialised modes of gender normativity”¹²³ constructed intra-racially. To utilise Judith Butler’s notion of “cultural intelligibility,”¹²⁴ braids become a way of framing and identifying African women and, more specifically, their country or tribal provenance. I return to Shonae’s assumption that, “everybody knows that braided hair is African hair,”¹²⁵ to emphasise that braids are constructed as, and presumed to be, a normative hairstyle for African women that is both produced and reproduced “within particular racial and cultural frames.”¹²⁶ In other words, braids operate within a broader “normative framework that conditions who can be recognized as a legitimate subject.”¹²⁷ Braids are then made meaningful in African culture as a set of critical spatial, legitimating and essentialising referents that become appropriated in the diaspora. In the African-Australian diaspora, braids continue to denote an “Afrocentric look”¹²⁸ — Amelia’s words — by virtue of their status as a recognizably ‘African’ hairstyle. For Amelia, it is a hairstyle that she “respects a lot”¹²⁹ because it is the continuation of an African tradition. Hillary went even further to suggest that braids are an essential African tradition, to the extent that they offer young girls and women hair freedom.

¹²¹ Ibid., 103.

¹²² Ibid., 97.

¹²³ Devon W. Carbado, “Colorblind Intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 38, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 817.

¹²⁴ Expanding upon Judith Butler’s discussion in: *Undoing Gender*, (New York : Routledge, 2004), 117-127; and, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9-28.

¹²⁵ Shonae, interview.

¹²⁶ Moya Lloyd, *Judith Butler: From Norms to Politics* (Cambridge and Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2007), 33.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Amelia, interview.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

For Hillary, being asked to remove¹³⁰ braids was akin to “telling a Muslim woman to take off her burqa.”¹³¹ Hillary’s conflation of the burqa and braids reveals the manner in which she views braids as a critical part of African cultural dress. As Hillary continues, “culturally our mums and dads braided their hair with cotton ... that’s what we’ve known.”¹³² This age-old tradition that is reproduced and maintained within African families has made braids one of the most significant hairstyles in the African-Australian community, colloquially perceived intra-culturally as a marker of racialised and gendered ‘authenticity.’

Hair braiding is legitimised in the African-Australian community because it adheres to an intra-cultural beauty regime that expects African women to have “neat and tidy”¹³³ hair. As Mariane Ferme explains, braiding not only neatens up ‘messy’ Afro-textured hair, it also serves “the purposes of concealment as well as of elaboration;”¹³⁴ two highly valued elements in female Afro-diasporic hairstyling. In the African-Australian community, Amelia states that braids are appreciated because they are “not curly” and “not Afro” hair.¹³⁵ In other words, braids are valorised because they contain, manage and conceal Afro-textured hair, therefore abiding to the “anti-naturalist”¹³⁶ aesthetic that underscores the boundaries of African femininity. Within this African hair schema, William Siegmann explains that disheveled or unprocessed hair:

¹³⁰ Hillary’s daughters have been asked to remove their braids for school and I was also asked to remove my braids when I attended a Sydney high school because it was deemed an “inappropriate hairstyle.” Both Hillary’s daughters and myself were subject to the disciplining of white school officials because of our hair. Inter-racial pathologies of black hair is explored later in Chapter 3: “Branding, Touching and the Labour of Racialisation.”

¹³¹ Hillary, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, February 2, 2013.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Kwame, interview.

¹³⁴ Mariane Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2001), 57.

¹³⁵ Amelia, interview.

¹³⁶ Wilson, 13.

Is symbolic of being in a state of disharmony with society ... [signaling] their alienation from cultural norms and social integration by leaving their hair unattended.”¹³⁷

Braids are then not only a racialised and gendered hairstyle they are also, according to Ferme, “a marker of socialization, as opposed to madness, or ‘lack of sense.’”¹³⁸ In this way, the concealment of the frizz and curls of Afro-textured hair in tight plaits comes to signify what Shonae and Kwame describe as recognisably African hair. It is read and located as African female hair within diaspora because it is abundant hair but only appropriate insofar as it is processed hair without the addition of hair dye. As Hillary states, processed hair — be it braids, weaves or relaxer — is “socially accepted”¹³⁹ in the African-Australian community because it is “what [they’ve] always known.”¹⁴⁰ For Hillary, processed hair in the African-Australian community reveals deeper African values or, as Hillary put it, “the African mentality”¹⁴¹ which emphasises doing hair “how everybody does it.”¹⁴² In this way, braids are validated intra-culturally because they operate within the boundaries of how everybody does it, and more specifically, how everybody has done it.

In contrast, ‘natural’ hair — meaning hair that is not chemically processed and worn in its Afro-textured state — unsettles “the African mentality”¹⁴³ and is paradoxically situated as an ‘unnatural’ expression of African femininity. As Shonae explains, the perception of ‘natural’ hair in the African-Australian community is that:

¹³⁷ William Siegmann, “Women's Hair and Soweï Masks in Southern Sierra Leone and Western Liberia,” in *Hair in African Art and Culture*, eds. Frank Herreman and Roy Sieber, 71-78. (Munich: Prestel Books, 2000), 72.

¹³⁸ Ferme, 57.

¹³⁹ Hillary, interview.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

It doesn't look nice, you look crazy, you look like you haven't done anything, you don't look like you could be going to school, going to work with your hair like that.¹⁴⁴

As Shonae suggests, 'natural' hair does not adhere to the African-Australian standard of beauty, which promotes highly stylized hair. Afro-textured hair worn as it grows out of the scalp is radicalised as an aberration of African femaleness. Shonae also observes that 'natural' hair is taken to mean "that you're a hooligan with your hair curly and big."¹⁴⁵ Put another way, 'natural' hair is conflated with notions of an undisciplined self and is a subject of internalised racialisation.

'Appropriate' African femaleness is marked by hair that has been 'done.' Intra-racially, beauty is defined according to an additive model where the more the hair is braided, woven or relaxed, the more an African woman comes to be read as beautiful, feminine and stable. This explicit psychologisation of 'natural' hair means that it is a carefully considered hairstyle by African-Australian women; it is not worn flippantly, and is understood as a departure from the intra-cultural way of doing African women's hair.

Wearing 'natural' hair speaks to, and resists, the intra-cultural tradition that circumscribes beauty as inextricably linked to artificial and laborious hairstyling. In this way, wearing 'natural' hair becomes the embodiment of a transgressive black female aesthetic in the African-Australian diaspora. Hillary understood and recognised the negative connotations of 'natural' hair within the African-Australian community and felt that she "should be ready for the backlash"¹⁴⁶ if and when she decides to wear her hair 'naturally.' As Althea Prince observes, "the black woman's natural hair falls low on the scale of beauty."¹⁴⁷ On this intra-racial scale, Amelia and Shonae state that weaves are viewed as "tame" and "acceptable," while 'natural' hair continues to be derided as "crazy," or, worn by "hooligans."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Shonae, interview.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Hillary, interview.

¹⁴⁷ Althea Prince, *The Politics of Black Women's Hair*, (Ontario: Insomniac Press, 2009), 15.

¹⁴⁸ Amelia and Shonae, interview.

Hillary was resistant to stereotyping ‘natural’ hair but at the same time found it difficult *not* to do so because Afro-textured hair carries such culturally ingrained connotations. Hillary found the intra-cultural negotiation of appropriate hair to be “very confusing” leaving her feeling that “nothing I do is good enough.”¹⁴⁹ On the one hand Hillary felt that she was “a very proud African woman”¹⁵⁰ but on the other hand felt “guilty” that she did not wear her hair ‘naturally,’ as though ‘natural’ hair is the absolute expression of cultural pride.¹⁵¹

I found these conversations on ‘natural’ hair to be some of the most contradictory and confronting moments of the interviews. For instance, Hillary stated that in the African-Australian community children born in Australia or who have grown up in Australia are referred to as “white kids” and “tend to get away with a lot,”¹⁵² such as wearing their hair ‘naturally.’ As Amelia explained, ‘natural’ hair is more commonly worn amongst “‘mixed-race’ girls and women but you won’t see it with the full-African.”¹⁵³ Hillary also pointed out that ‘natural’ hair is “very acceptable and attractive”¹⁵⁴ to her daughter’s age group — the 15-24 year old demographic — “because they are confident in their skin and they are not moulded” to traditional African practices and are, what Hillary called, “white kids.”¹⁵⁵ Put simply, ‘natural’ hair comes to signify an ‘inauthentic’ African woman whose hair is *not*, as Elroy put it, done in “the typical African way.”¹⁵⁶

‘Natural’ hair then holds the peculiar status of being viewed as a pseudo-Western mode of stylization in the African-Australian community rather than an ‘authentically’ African hairstyle. Wearing an Afro in the African-Australian community is not, according to Amelia, associated with the politicised connotations of black pride that it might carry in an African-American context because, for Amelia, “that’s not our culture.”¹⁵⁷ As the excerpt below shows, Amelia depoliticised ‘natural’ hair in an Australian context but also admitted that she chooses to wear her

¹⁴⁹ Hillary, interview.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Amelia, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Hillary, interview.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Elroy, interview.

¹⁵⁷ Amelia, interview.

hair ‘naturally’ “for the same reason why a lot of African-American women would do it.”¹⁵⁸ Amelia describes the significance of wearing her hair ‘naturally’ in this way:

I want to express my identity and show myself as a strong woman in the fact that I am accepting who I am ... So for myself, I do feel like I would fall into that category but it’s not necessarily to support a cause, it’s more my own personal beliefs.¹⁵⁹

The contradictory meanings of ‘natural’ hair for Amelia are clear. ‘Natural’ hair does not mean political hair but at the same time, Amelia wears her hair ‘naturally’ for the “same reason” African-American women do, with the presumption being that African-American women wear their hair ‘naturally’ for political reasons. And yet, Amelia readily avoids politicising her own ‘natural’ hair or, in her words, viewing it as “[supporting] a cause.”¹⁶⁰ Amelia concedes to “falling into that [political] category” but quickly resists it as soon as she names it — “it’s more my own personal beliefs.”¹⁶¹ ‘Natural’ hair for Amelia has contradictory meanings that operate simultaneously. For Amelia, ‘natural’ hair is at once apolitical, political and personal; and, ultimately repoliticised in an Australian context.

Contrary to Amelia, Nadine does not readily wear her ‘natural’ hair, particularly in the workplace, stating that she has always gone for job interviews with “very white looking hair.”¹⁶² For Nadine, the process of achieving “white looking hair” involves “straightening it the day before to make it look like it’s very neat.”¹⁶³ The implication is that ‘natural’ hair is not only “unprofessional” but is also too black for the workplace, requiring the management and taming of a straightening iron, weave or relaxer. Further that Nadine admits she would “feel stupid”¹⁶⁴ wearing her hair ‘naturally’ in the workplace reveals her own personal devaluation of Afro-textured hair.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Nadine, interview by Ameisa Meima Konneh, Sydney, December 12, 2012.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

While Nadine thinks, “you *can* wear an Afro beautifully,”¹⁶⁵ in reality it is still not a style that she feels comfortable wearing because when it is out “‘naturally’ people always come up and touch it.”¹⁶⁶ So, *not* wearing ‘natural’ hair comes to be a way Nadine counteracts the assumed tactility of ‘natural’ hair. Straightened hair in the workplace is a strategic method Nadine employs to reinforce boundaries. Such a position speaks to Susan Bordo’s argument of “the *practical* difficulties involved in the political struggle to empower ‘difference.’”¹⁶⁷ In other words, ‘difference’ can be beautiful or celebrated in theory. However, in the case of Nadine, the everyday lived experience of ‘difference’ suggests that it still requires concealment to avoid being made a spectacle of. While Nadine’s workplace would not prohibit Afro-textured hair, she has decided that it is beyond the boundaries of a ‘professional’ identity.

That being said, I am not suggesting that Nadine’s position presumes she wishes to be white. Instead, I find it useful to situate Nadine’s simultaneous self-regulation of ‘natural’ hair and acknowledgement of its beauty as closely related to Bordo’s argument of “cognitive dissonance.”¹⁶⁸ Expanding upon Bordo’s claim, I suggest that Nadine is *constantly* aware of her black ‘difference’ and understands that it can be accepted, or even celebrated, but is not willing to test its limits, particularly in the workplace. Nadine’s position complicates the argument that black women who straighten their hair imitate whiteness, revealing that black female hairstyling in its ‘natural’ and processed forms, can and should be explored as being on a continuum as opposed to a fixed binary model.

The everyday lived experience of being an African-Australian woman is buoyed by contradictions as Amelia, Shonae, Kwame, Hillary and Nadine clearly show. In this way, African hair practices of weaving, braiding and going ‘natural’ can be oppressive *and* empowering; labored *and* relaxed; private *and* public; and, personal, apolitical *and* political.

The interviewees were negotiating conflicting meanings of the iconography of hair that did not easily fit into neat categories of straightened hair as an explicit

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and The Body*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1993), 263.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 264.

simulation of whiteness or ‘natural’ hair as an absolute political style. Was there a unified interpretation of hair amongst the interview participants? Definitely not, and instead of combing out these contradictions, the following chapter continues to recognise this entanglement as a reflection of the heterogeneity and labour of African-Australian identities.

Chapter Three: Branding, Touching and the Labour of Racialisation

In this chapter I examine the time, money and cultural labour that goes into hair in the African-Australian community, situating this as the explicit and implicit labour of racialisation. I begin by contextualising the history of the black hair care industry and the idea that the black hair care industry is exploitative rather than empowering for Afro-diasporic people. Using the interview material, I argue that the current transnationalism of the black hair care industry complicates this viewpoint. This chapter also explores the interview participants' aversion to inter-racial hair touching, expanding upon what Elizabeth V. Spelman describes as "the shadow work"¹⁶⁹ demanded of black people to do the work of 'racial' identity. Utilising the scholarship of Frantz Fanon, this chapter concludes with the argument that inter-racial hair touching is an action that pathologises black 'difference,' ignoring the fact that the interviewees only want their 'difference' registered insofar as it is not made a spectacle in the hands of curious white 'others.'

Madam C.J. Walker, formerly known as Sarah Breedlove, was the first self-made American millionaire. She also happened to be African-American. Breedlove was born four years after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1867 to former slaves in Delta, Louisiana. According to A'Leila Bundles, Walker's great-great granddaughter, "Sarah was just another black baby destined for drudgery and ignorance."¹⁷⁰ It seemed that Walker's fate was sealed but during the mid-1890s while working as a washerwoman in St. Louis, she began going bald. Instead of accepting her tufts of broken hair, Walker started experimenting with different concoctions to promote hair growth. As Bundles notes it led "to a solution, not just for her hair but for her life ... [making her] excruciatingly aware of the importance others placed on hair."¹⁷¹

In the development of a substance that would alleviate scalp disease and produce healthy African-American hair, Walker marketed her product and "herself as a healer with a direct link to Africa."¹⁷² While antebellum slavery exploited

¹⁶⁹ Spelman, 211.

¹⁷⁰ A'Leila Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*, (New York: Schribner, 2001), 25.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 59-61.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 60.

Africanness — particularly hair texture and skin-colour — as a tool in which the economic, social and cultural prosperity of African-Americans could be suppressed, Walker pioneered products that encouraged cultural pride and offered ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of Afro-textured hair.

By 1905 Walker established her company, The Madam C.J. Walker Manufacturing Co., with the belief that “enhancing the appearance of black women would lead, in part, to their economic and social ascent.”¹⁷³ In many ways it did, not simply because Walker’s products straightened the hair of black men and women but more importantly, her wealth had a significant impact on the African-American community. Walker was “[o]ne of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s (NAACP) major benefactors,”¹⁷⁴ a powerful advocate of desegregation and a symbol of the immense potential, intellect and innovation of African-Americans. The wealth that was generated within the African-American community during the early twentieth-century ensured the advancement of African-Americans because of the demand for products that addressed their specific hair needs. However, this prosperity has faltered currently as non-blacks began acquiring black hair businesses.

Today, African-Americans spend \$81.6 million per annum on chemical products¹⁷⁵ — namely relaxers — and purchase 83% of hair care products in the \$308.6 million “ethnic personal care market.”¹⁷⁶ African-Americans constitute 12% of the American population and yet purchase 80% of hair care products.¹⁷⁷ However, these profits do not trickle into the African-American community, with an overwhelming number of large multinationals including Revlon and L’Oreal “acquiring companies that cater to the special hair care needs of African-Americans.”¹⁷⁸ Aron Ranen contends that there has, and continues to be, a “Korean

¹⁷³ Derek T. Dingle, “Madame C. J. Walker: Breaking New Ground This daughter of slaves built a haircare empire and created a model for financial empowerment,” *Black Enterprise Magazine* 35, no. 7, (February 2005): 20.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Karen Bitz, “The Ethnic Hair Care Market,” *Household and Personal Products Industry*, November 9, 2005, <http://www.happi.com/articles/2000/04/the-ethnic-hair-care-market>.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Good Hair*, DVD, directed by Jeff Stilson, (2009; Santa Monica, California: Lionsgate, 2010).

¹⁷⁸ Bitz, “The Ethnic Hair Care Market.”

takeover”¹⁷⁹ of the black hair care industry. Ranen’s documentary, *Black Hair: the Korean Takeover of the Black Haircare Industry*, outlines how Korean-Americans have been able to take control of 80%¹⁸⁰ of the distribution of African-American hair care products. According to Ranen, this monopolisation of the industry by Korean-Americans has its roots in the 1960s, developing out of a trade relationship between the Korean and United States Government. In short, the Korean Government banned the export of raw hair that was used to produce wigs and for their part:

The United States Government banned the import of any wig that contained hair from China. This ban on Chinese wigs virtually locked in the wig business for these South Korean merchants.¹⁸¹

Ranen contends that these prohibitions are the origins of the Korean infiltration of the African-American hair market. The film’s thesis on who has the right to profit from the black hair market is all too simple: Korean-Americans should not and African-Americans should. Reverend Al Sharpton, the African-American Baptist Minister and civil rights activist, is an advocate of this position, declaring that the non-black presence in the industry amounts to “economic retardation.”¹⁸² Sharpton elaborates by asserting that “you get up and comb your oppression and exploitation every morning”¹⁸³ and then questions, “how are you going to sleep right, when you’re wearing exploitation all the time?”¹⁸⁴ For Sharpton there is “a real grassroots need to recapture the fact that we can’t control something as close to us as the hair on our head.”¹⁸⁵ In response to this, black manufacturers of hair products established the Black Owned Beauty Supply Association (BOBSA) in 2004 to address the growing demand for a pan-African hair industry. BOBSA aims to:

¹⁷⁹ *Black Hair: the Korean Takeover of the Black Haircare Industry*, DVD, directed by Aron Ranen, (2005; Santa Monica, California: Third Wave Media, 2006).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² *Good Hair*.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

[Provide] African American's the platform to demonstrate competitive leadership in the \$9 billion dollar Black Hair Care and Cosmetic Industry nationwide and internationally.¹⁸⁶

BOBSA claims that the current state of the black hair care industry constitutes economic exploitation. However, from my interviews with Hillary, Nadine and Lynda I came to learn that each of these women readily purchases hair care products from North America and Britain. Nadine went as far to say that, "in Australia, for the average black woman, it's hard to find the appropriate products,"¹⁸⁷ which is why she prefers to buy from the US. The increasingly transnational black hair care industry has given Afro-diasporic women outside the Black Atlantic access to products that were previously unavailable to them in Australia. Does that mean the political economy of black hair is empowering or exploitative? Or rather, is it an industry which, like most, is simultaneously empowering and exploitative? Currently, there is not enough research into the black hair care industry *vis-à-vis* African-Australian consumers to respond to this in full. Instead, the next section explores the implications of spending up to fourteen hours and hundreds of dollars on a braided or woven hairstyle in the African-Australian community, and why it is not uncommon to do so. This section recognises the fact that the labour of hair is not limited to physical time and financial costs but also that it requires psychological labour to 'do' hair and resist white pathologisation and exoticisation of blackness.

Building on the work of Elizabeth V. Spelman, this section explores the temporal and financial components of hair styling as imbricated with the unseen, psychological labour of African-Australian hair and identity. It focuses on the ways in which the interview subjects deploy these explicit and implicit forms of labour as individual and collective mechanisms of identity construction and, as a means of fitting in and standing out appropriately, in other words, on their terms. In this way, I situate doing hair as a form of cultural performativity that calls upon African-Australian girls and women to bear a significant burden of representation and assimilation, intra- and inter-racially.

¹⁸⁶ Black Owned Beauty Supply Association (BOBSA), "About BOBSA," *BOBSA.org*, February 24, 2013, <http://bobsa.org/about-bobsa>.

¹⁸⁷ Nadine, interview.

Afro textured hair is not commonly worn and is unaccepted in the African-Australian community. The negative labeling of unprocessed African hair is akin to internalised racialisation, or what Spelman describes as “branding.”¹⁸⁸ Citing Robert Miles, Spelman explains that “branding” is a:

Representational process whereby social significance is attached to certain biological (usually phenotypical) human features, on the basis of which those people possessing those characteristics are designated as a distinct collectivity.¹⁸⁹

Within this paradigm, Afro-textured hair as a phenotype of Africanness is subject to processes of intra-racialisation. The “branding” of Afro textured hair makes it; “markable for certain kinds of treatment and not others,”¹⁹⁰ which, more often than not, situates unprocessed African hair as a ‘problem.’ On the other hand, processed hair enjoys the unbranded status of being ‘good’ hair and is deemed appropriate in the public sphere. In this excerpt Amelia explains the way in which laboured hair has become synonymous with ‘good’ hair:

For the majority [of Africans] weaves and straightening ... all those things apart from the natural are considered ‘good’ hair ... A lot of the African-Australians just think ‘good’ hair is managing it and ... having it not curly, not Afro, not un-relaxed.¹⁹¹

Weaves as a form of hair management not only involves money spent on the labour of a hairdresser — usually six to eight hours — but also necessitates spending upwards of \$200.00 to buy human or synthetic hair extensions. The time spent sourcing appropriate products from the now global hair market is part of the explicit labour of hair, which is constantly imbricated with the implicit labour of cultural identity. In the context of an inter-racial Australia where, according to Hillary, “there aren’t many [Africans] here,”¹⁹² hairstyling takes on an even greater sense of

¹⁸⁸ Spelman, 202.

¹⁸⁹ Robert Miles, *Racism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 71.

¹⁹⁰ Spelman, 202.

¹⁹¹ Amelia, interview.

¹⁹² Hillary, interview.

importance in the presentation of the self.¹⁹³ For Hillary, ensuring that her two high-school aged daughters' hair is perfectly styled is a critical aspect in conforming interracially. Hillary understands that being African-Australian means that her daughters stand out from a predominately white Australian society but wants to ensure they will only do so for the right reasons. This is Hillary's reasoning as to why she is "so pedantic about how they [her daughters] look."¹⁹⁴

Hillary does not want her daughters to be negatively "branded"¹⁹⁵ and shamed by processes of racialisation, in turn, she works to constantly maintain her daughters hair as a way to protect them from being racially marked for the wrong reasons. During our interview, Hillary explained that when sending her daughter to a private school in Sydney, parents of other children told her daughter that she must only be able to attend because she was "on a scholarship for poor and disadvantaged children."¹⁹⁶ This assumption exacted upon Hillary's daughter affected Hillary to the point that while other "parents bought second-hand uniforms," she "deliberately bought new uniforms."¹⁹⁷ Hillary's concern about how her daughters and the broader African-Australian community would be "branded"¹⁹⁸ if they were to wear second-hand uniforms speaks to point eighteen of Peggy McIntosh's list of white privilege. According to McIntosh, white people can:

Swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.¹⁹⁹

Hillary and her daughters do not have access to such privileges by virtue of their Africanness, or rather, their Ghanaian-ness. Hillary emphasises and commits to,

¹⁹³ See: Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (New York: Overlook Press, 1973).

¹⁹⁴ Hillary, interview.

¹⁹⁵ Spelman, 202.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, eds. Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, 95-105. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 98.

the labour of hair and the presentation of her daughters in order to manage inter-racial perceptions of blackness. In this excerpt Hillary explains that:

I don't want them [my daughters] to stand out for the *wrong* reasons ...
What is excusable to a white person is not excusable to a black person ...
That's a fact of life.²⁰⁰

For Hillary, laboured modes of hair stylization allow her to manage the visibility and inter-racialisation of her daughters' blackness in Australia, ensuring that the "fact" of double standards does not negatively impact upon her daughters. Hillary also wants her daughters to be positively "branded"²⁰¹ so that they come to be a source of pride for the African-Australian community. Hillary's attention to regulating instances of pride and shame, suggests that hairstyling in the African-Australian community is simultaneously concerned with inter-racial "brandings" of blackness, as well as attending to 'solving' the so-called 'problem' of black hair intra-rationally. This attempt to micro-manage inter-racial relationships is part of what Spelman describes as the invisible labour involved in the maintenance of "the social fabric."²⁰²

The labour of hair for Hillary is then a means of negotiating difference, conformity and visibility in Australia. Examining this invisible labour in relation to Spelman's argument on "the distribution of labour along racial lines"²⁰³ uncovers the often-imperceptible everydayness of 'race' work. According to Spelman, the labour of 'racial' identity is linked to "elements of social reproductive work"²⁰⁴ that reproduces "ways of coding bodies as embodiments of natural types of humans: those superior by nature and those inferior by nature."²⁰⁵ Spelman situates this codification of bodies as "shadow work"²⁰⁶ insofar as it is work that "cannot be recognised as such."²⁰⁷ In this way, Hillary not only engages with the explicit labour of hair but also

²⁰⁰ Hillary, interview.

²⁰¹ Spelman, 202.

²⁰² Ibid., 208.

²⁰³ Ibid., 209.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 210.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 211.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

with Spelman's description of "social reproductive shadow work,"²⁰⁸ which is, "the work exacted of blacks to shore up the notion of innate white superiority."²⁰⁹

The management of her daughters' hair not only situates hair as a means of individual identity construction — "I don't want them to stand out for the *wrong* reasons"²¹⁰ — but also implies that hairstyling has broader cultural implications. Hillary's daughters are situated as speakers for, and representatives of, African-Australian subjectivities as a whole, which is, of course, an unbalanced burden. The "shadow work"²¹¹ of Afro-diasporic hair and identity then functions within Spelman's notion of a "racial economy."²¹² In this system, African-Australian girls and women are constantly called upon to maintain culture through their adherence to 'appropriate' forms of hairstyling, their bodies and its management. Within this economy there are intra-racial pressures to buy into laborious hairstyling practices — to have 'good' hair — while simultaneously having to broker, what Amelia describes as, the constant thoughts "at the back of your head"²¹³ as to how your hair will be appraised inter-racially.

Like Hillary, Nadine invests considerably in hairstyling as a means of 'appropriate' workplace comportment. Nadine's woven and braided hairstyles have taken "anywhere from 10-14 hours to do" and cost up to \$700.00.²¹⁴ This explicit labour is performed by Nadine to produce what she describes as, "very white looking hair" that "looks like it's very neat and manageable"²¹⁵ in the workplace. In doing so, Nadine states that, "people don't even notice" her hair in the workplace because "it's always tied back and straightened ... there's no volume."²¹⁶ Nadine works hard to eliminate her hair being marked by processes of racialisation in the workplace,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 210.

²¹⁰ Hillary, interview.

²¹¹ Spelman, 209.

²¹² Ibid., 213.

²¹³ Amelia, interview.

²¹⁴ Nadine, interview.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

confirming Spelman's argument that "the idea of innate white superiority is in several senses quite a piece of work."²¹⁷

On the other hand, African-Australian men, more often than not, shave their heads eliminating these complex modes of stylization. Kwame and Elroy both wore closely cropped hairstyles but have very firm views on how African-Australian girls and women should style their hair. For instance, Kwame states that African-Australian men "don't bother about hair"²¹⁸ but instead, requires African-Australian women to have 'good' hair. According to Kwame, African-Australian female hair "has to be neat and tidy,"²¹⁹ which comes to mean hair that is done and 'beautified' by the addition of extensions or the work of a straightening iron. Both Kwame and Elroy approve of straightened hairstyles but object to African-Australian hair practices that use hair dye. Elroy states that dyed African hair is "too artificial,"²²⁰ while Kwame feels it stands out too much. The implication is, that African-Australian girls and women should work towards ensuring that their hair not only 'beautifies' them but also, in the words of Elroy, "blends in."²²¹ In this way, hair continues to reveal itself as a gendered discourse that implicitly asks and expects African-Australian girls and women to delicately maintain culture in a way that does not draw too much attention to their blackness.

'Appropriate' cultural expression then requires a certain level of deracialisation so that African-Australian girls and women do not, as Hillary states, "stand out for the *wrong* reasons."²²² In this way, doing African-Australian hair is a "regulatory practice"²²³ that contains and prescribes the limits of visibility, femaleness, femininity, and Africanness. These components are part of the intra-racial burden exacted upon African-Australian girls and women. This emphasis on African-Australian women doing aesthetics on behalf of African culture means that inter-racially, African-Australian women are often subjected to unsolicited hair touching.

²¹⁷ Spelman, 205.

²¹⁸ Kwame, interview.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Elroy, interview.

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Hillary, interview.

²²³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16-18.

There was one subject that all participants agreed upon: annoyance at inter-racial hair touching. Whether it was in the street, workplace or a social gathering, inter-racial hair touching is frustrating for Amelia, Shonae, Hillary, Nadine and Lynda. Amelia goes so far as to say that hair touching is a “degrading” experience:

When it’s in front of everyone, it’s just a big spectacle ... It makes you feel degraded because it makes you feel that all you’re good for is your hair.²²⁴

For Amelia hair touching makes a spectacle of ‘difference’ and detaches her hair from her body. In this excerpt, Amelia recounts an instance in which a stranger began touching her hair:

She didn’t even ask, she just said ‘your hair!’ and dug her hands into my hair, she was not even doing it softly ... I didn’t know how to handle the situation.²²⁵

Amelia’s comments reveal the arbitrariness of hair touching, where you just never know when or where someone is going to dig their hands into your hair. Expanding upon the work of Fanon, the black body “is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty,”²²⁶ where you might not know where or when you are going to have your hair touched but you are certain it is going to happen. This “certain uncertainty”²²⁷ is part of the intricate everydayness of black experience ensuring that hair touching is a complex situation to negotiate. The question of hair touching makes demands of African-Australian women to decide whether or not to react or accept this personal imposition. It is something that Hillary admits to struggling with. In the excerpt below, Hillary describes the internal conflict she goes through when strangers want to touch her hair:

It depends on the tone or how the person sounds, you can tell if the person is genuinely curious or just plain rude. In that instance I pick my answer,

²²⁴ Amelia, interview.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 111.

²²⁷ Ibid.

whether I bite back or just let it be because I really can't be bothered saying no.²²⁸

This internal struggle exacted upon Hillary constitutes psychological labour. Put simply, the moment a person asks, “can I touch your hair?” or, worse, starts touching it without permission, is the moment when African-Australian women have to make a decision: are they going to voice their discomfort? Or, will they “let it be” because it is too much work to say no? These inner questions and choices that have to be negotiated are yet another part of the invisible labour of racial identity; something that Hillary has to deal with “all the time.”²²⁹ Hillary finds this imposition confusing, stating:

I still don't get the fact that if you went up to them and touched their hair, they would say, ‘go away you freak!’ So what makes them think it's ok to touch a complete stranger's hair?²³⁰

Hillary's comments reveal the manner in which hair touching exposes the racial double standard of accessibility to ‘normative’ white and ‘different’ black bodies. Despite Hillary having woven hair (that for all intents and purposes looks white), she is still the subject of hair touching. The fact that Hillary's hair continues to be an object of curiosity in spite of its straight texture reveals the manner in which blackness as a category is *always* marked. The act of hair touching is the instance in which the labour of doing hair — the work taken to conform inter-racially — comes undone. It is the realisation that whether your hair is straightened or not, your black body remains and continues to be ‘othered’ by virtue of its non-whiteness. Hair touching is also the moment in which your black ‘otherness’ is guiltlessly exposed in what Nadine views as “a massive faux pas” that is “*always* done by white people.”²³¹ In this way, the maintenance of, and participation in, the “racial economy”²³² is

²²⁸ Hillary, interview.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Nadine, interview.

²³² Spelman, 213.

exhausting for Afro-diasporic women. As Amelia explains in the following excerpt, the “racial economy”²³³ renders African-Australian girls and women:

*Slaves to [their] hair ... whether it’s through yourself or other people. It’s like society is actually dragging your hair around, grabbing to and fro, pulling it but with no strings.*²³⁴

Amelia’s comments are powerful in emphasising that the maintenance of the “racial economy”²³⁵ is not only influenced by personal modes of hairstyling but is also burdened by societal expectations on the availability of Afro-diasporic hair to be touched, pulled, and grabbed without recourse for white people. The excerpt from Lynda below shows that hair touching is, at once, unproblematic for a white person, and yet, a source of irritation for Lynda:

*At work they want to disturb you and touch your hair. I say, ‘I don’t like it, don’t touch my hair!’ ... They come and say, ‘Oh your hair’s like cotton wool!’ It makes me annoyed.*²³⁶

Afro-diasporic women such as Hillary, Amelia, Nadine, and Lynda are left to feel the anxiety, annoyance, and frustration of inter-racial hair touching while those doing the touching are, for the most part, unaffected. White people are given access to black ‘difference’ through hair touching, without having to experience the responsibility of everyday instances of racialisation. Alternatively, Afro-diasporic hair practices that demand the ‘taming’ of women’s hair reinforce the notion of black inferiority by constantly asking women to *invest* in whiteness, as though “the social tender of white currency”²³⁷ will yield a return that is unachievable when dealing in the currency of blackness. As stated, African-Australians do not have access to, what Peggy McIntosh describes as, “the invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, compass, [and] emergency gear.”²³⁸ According to Richard Dyer, these are the “assets”²³⁹ of

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Amelia, interview.

²³⁵ Spelman, 213.

²³⁶ Lynda, interview.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ McIntosh, 95.

²³⁹ Richard Dyer, *White*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 9.

white privilege. Dyer states that these “assets” are, of course, invisible and, “part and parcel of the sense that whiteness is nothing in particular, that white culture and identity have, as it were, no content.”²⁴⁰

The desire to touch black hair exposes the unmarked *and* untouchable nature of whiteness as a social category and its simultaneous ‘othering’ of blackness. In doing this, Dyer argues that the “power” of whiteness “resides in [its] invisible properties”²⁴¹ in which, power is “maintained by being unseen.”²⁴² ‘Difference,’ as it relates to black hair, is then interpreted as an available entity because of its visibility. Building upon the work of Fanon, hair touching becomes part of “the burden of ... corporeal malediction.”²⁴³ Fanon writes of this burden in the twentieth century where he was made to feel his ‘difference’ as he walked down the street to screams of, “look a nigger!”²⁴⁴ The racist epithet directed at Fanon ensured that he “[became] aware of [his] uniform”²⁴⁵ and was interpellated as the subject proper; “expected to behave like a black man — or at least like a nigger.”²⁴⁶ Shifting Fanon’s argument to the context of hair in the twenty-first century, I suggest that hair touching is not only “the burden of ... corporeal malediction,”²⁴⁷ but is also, the action of articulating and interpellating ‘difference’ *vis-à-vis* the black female body.

Nadine has chosen to disrupt the canon that interpellates her hair as ‘different’ by straightening it as an act of subversion, protection, *and* conformity. Here, Nadine explains how she perceives straightened African hair as a detraction from inter-racial hair touching:

I straighten [my hair] the day before ... [because] when I have my hair out and it’s ‘natural’ people always come up and touch it and I just feel, why are you in my space?²⁴⁸

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 45.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Fanon, 111.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 114.

²⁴⁵ Ibid..

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 111.

²⁴⁸ Nadine, interview.

Nadine is constantly deploying explicit and implicit forms of labour in an attempt to eliminate the visibility of her ‘different’ hair, particularly in the workplace. Further, Nadine explains in the quotation below, that her aversion to hair touching is related to, and removed from, the idea that the labour of hairstyling can come *undone* from the touch of a curious white hand:

I don’t *just* not like it because I think, ‘they’re going to ruin my hairstyle’ but *because* I think they’re going to ruin my hairstyle!²⁴⁹

For Nadine, hairstyling is connected to maintaining an ‘appropriate’ cultural identity. Hair touching is then the undoing of Nadine’s explicit and implicit mode of labour; or, as Shonae, states, when African hair is straightened you do not want it touched “because obviously you can feel the unnaturalness in there.”²⁵⁰ Therefore, the objection to hair touching is threefold for Afro-diasporic women: you do not want your ‘difference’ made a spectacle of; you also do not want your hairstyle ruined by hair touching because you may have spent up to fourteen hours doing it; and, you do not want it touched because it will reveal the “unnaturalness”²⁵¹ of straightened African hair, thus undoing the invisible labour of ‘race’ work.

Hair touching is, without question, one of the most intricate inter-racial situations to negotiate. However, it is clear that the female interviewees deploy strategies of resistance, acceptance, and detraction from inter-racial hair touching. For instance, Amelia admits to feeling “degraded” by hair touching but tries to “laugh it off.”²⁵² Hillary decides in the moment whether or not to resist or accept the question of, “can I touch your hair?”²⁵³ Nadine spends up to fourteen hours straightening her hair in the hope that it will detract from hair touching in the workplace.²⁵⁴ Lynda resists hair touching, telling her co-workers to “stop it” and “shut up” when they exclaim that her hair feels like “cotton wool.”²⁵⁵

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Shonae, interview.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Amelia, interview.

²⁵³ Hillary, interview.

²⁵⁴ Nadine, interview.

²⁵⁵ Lynda, interview.

While these strategies have different intentions they are similar in that each action requires and demands, the work of Afro-diasporic women. Extending upon Spelman's argument, I contend that the "shadow work"²⁵⁶ involved in the negotiation of inter-racial hair touching reveals the manner in which labour, as it relates to Afro-diasporic women, intersects with both 'race' and gender. I have experienced the gendered and 'raced' nature of inter-racial hair touching on an almost daily basis, particularly when I styled my hair into a large Afro. For instance, a casual walk with my dad who, just like me, looks 'different,' has often been interrupted by someone asking to touch my hair, not his. Like Hillary, I have asked myself that same question, "what makes you think it's ok to touch a complete stranger's hair?"²⁵⁷ I have even questioned what stops women like Hillary, Amelia, Nadine and I from saying, "hey, please, don't touch my hair." However, I stop there because these should not just be the questions Afro-diasporic women ask themselves. In fact, these should also be the questions that white people ask of themselves.

A question that hair touchers — for lack of a better term — should begin to ask is: why do I want to touch this woman's hair? And more specifically, why do I feel the need to interrupt this woman at work, at university, or at the local supermarket with the question, "can I touch your hair?" 'Race' work should not be the sole responsibility of non-white groups; this labour should be shared. I have devoted this space to inter-racial hair touching to give voice to the interview participants' frustrations and as a means of naming and drawing attention to this *unconscious* everyday act. In turn, this chapter encourages an inter-racial dialogue that aims to shift the responsibility of doing 'race' onto white people.

²⁵⁶ Spelman, 209.

²⁵⁷ Hillary, interview.

Conclusion: Risking it all for Hair

I entered this project with, I admit, prejudicial views on what I might find out about the politics of hair in African-Australian experience. After watching Chris Rock's film *Good Hair*, I became determined to 'uncover' the extent to which, I thought, black women attempted to whiten themselves through their hair. I created a 'natural' hair blog with passionate entries on why we, as black women, need to go 'natural.' I was sure that the interviews would confirm my ideas. However, from my first interview with Amelia in which she comfortably described herself as "half-caste," I realised that this project was going to be anything but simple. The interviews were confronting in that my beliefs were constantly tested, contradicted and stretched to the point where I had to concede that my opinion on 'natural' hair simply did not make the same sense for those who I was interviewing. The women and men I spoke to about 'natural' hair, for instance, did not necessarily see it as part of a solution to white hegemony, but to my surprise, as a deviation from Africanness. Hair straightening was not seen necessarily as a way of imitating whiteness but as a way of avoiding the white gaze, something which confirms but also eludes a hegemonic white gaze. In short, the interviews often confounded my beliefs and forced me to interrogate the prejudices I held about the meanings of African hairstyles. Bruno Latour emphasises the importance of the interviewer having "as many prejudices [and] biases as possible"²⁵⁸ in order to:

[P]ut them at risk in the setting and provide occasions of manipulation for the entities to show their mettle. It is not passion, nor theories, nor preconceptions that are in themselves bad, they only become so when they do not provide occasions for the phenomena to differ.²⁵⁹

While I approached the interviews with preconceptions, I was also open to the diverse opinions of the interview participants. The personal and cultural responsibility I felt in accounting for, and representing, the paradoxes of the data collected, respectfully and accurately, cannot be emphasised enough. The major

²⁵⁸ Bruno Latour, "How to talk about the body: the Normative Dimension of Science Studies," *Body & Society* 10, no. 2/3 (June 2004): 219.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

challenge of this project was not only “[providing] occasions for the phenomena to differ”²⁶⁰ during the interview process but also, ensuring that I created space for these different voices without silencing them. The interview material gathered did not align with my initial expectations of this project and so I had to constantly resist the temptation to straighten out the kinks in the participants’ responses to maintain the integrity of the project. I had to detail the contradictions and differences in viewpoints just as they emerged. Even though Amelia, Nadine, Hillary, Elroy, Kwame, Shonae, and Lynda, have opinions that are, for the most part, different (and sometimes opposite) to my own, I learnt that in risking my personal views, the dynamic voices within the African-Australian community could be revealed.

The interview material attests to the heterogeneity of daily life, as an African-Australian in Sydney, where contradictions abound. This dissension means that the data collected does not fit neatly into the frameworks of hooks and Mercer. The interview participants have shown that neither theorist completely encompasses African-Australian experiences. Instead, hair in the African-Australian community is revealed as simultaneously psychologised *and* depsychologised; ‘good’ *and* ‘bad’; ‘authentic’ *and* ‘inauthentic;’ and, ‘natural’ *and* ‘unnatural.’ These contradictions necessitate continued discussion on the complexities of African-Australian hair and identity. The varied hair stories from Nadine, Hillary, Amelia, Lynda, Kwame, and Elroy have complicated and broadened the debate surrounding Afro-diasporic hair, problematising current academic and socio-cultural discourses from the US and Britain. The inclusion of these deeply personal hair stories provides a space in which African-Australian stories are represented, recognised, and valued as a meaningful contribution to the growing field of African Studies in Australia. This thesis has re-centred African-Australian experiences, revealing a community of conflicting voices that ought to be heard. In some ways, the conversation has only just begun.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. I am interested in how you identify or define yourself? Are there labels that you feel are more appropriate?
2. What are your earliest hair memories?
3. Has your hair played a significant role in your life, how so?
4. Thinking back on your early experiences with your hair, are they positive or negative? Why/why not?
5. What hairstyles have you had over the years?
6. What hairstyle do you currently have? Why?
7. Is there a hairstyle that stands out for you? One that might be a favourite of yours or was problematic, a painful process, hard to maintain etc?
8. Do you feel like you were perceived differently when you wore a particular hairstyle?
9. Have you experienced discrimination that you feel can be attributed to your hair or a particular style you were wearing?
10. Do you feel that particular hairstyles are more political than others? Do you make a conscious social/political choice or is it more about creative expression?
11. Have you ever felt pressure to wear your hair in a particular style? If so, where have you felt that pressure? (intra/inter-racially, friends, family, workplace, school etc)?
12. Do you feel your hair contributes to your sense of identity? Why/why not?

13. Do you believe that certain hairstyles are privileged within the African-Australian community?
14. What have been your experiences of hair within the African-Australian community?
15. What have been your hair experiences outside of the African-Australian community?
16. Have you experienced strangers coming up and wanting to touch your hair? If so, how has that made you feel?
17. What have been your hair experiences in the workplace? Positive/negative?
18. Have you seen the film *Good Hair*?
19. If so, did you see any connections between the conversations in the African-American community and those within the African-Australian community?
20. Is there such a thing as 'good' hair? If so, what do you consider 'good' hair?
21. Do you believe that this idea of 'good' hair is present in the African-Australian community?
22. In *Good Hair*, Chris Rock asks African-American men if they're allowed to touch their partner's hair during sex and the women are asked whether they allow their partner to touch their hair or if they go swimming or shower. Nia Long makes a comment that she felt showering could be more intimate than sex because it's a big deal to get her hair wet. So have you experienced that or can you relate to that?
23. Have you heard of the Natural Hair Movement in the USA?
24. Do you think there is a Natural Hair Movement in Australia?
25. What are your thoughts on 'natural' hair, weaves, and relaxers?

26. Have you noticed a change in hairstyles and attitudes within the African-Australian community?