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## Black Women and Identity: What's hair got to do with it?

*Cheryl Thompson*

When it comes to hair, all women can relate. Whether you are white, black or Asian we all agonize over how to wear it; toss and turn about what colour it should be; and, cringe at the thought of cutting it too short. Dermatological research (see Browne, 2006; Loussouarn and Rawadi et al., 2005; McMichael, 2003; 2007; Wolfram, 2003) has shown that we are all born with approximately 150,000 hair follicles on the scalp but when it comes down to it, not all hair is created the same. Visually, black hair is thicker, curlier, and often frizzier as compared to Caucasian and Asian hair. And, from a grooming standpoint, it is also more sensitive to excessive manipulation, requiring a different set of styling techniques.

For me, hair has always been a constant battle. Sure, as a child it was long and healthy, but after over a decade of using a chemical straightener, it grew increasingly damaged – a tale that rings true for millions of black women – and I became tired of repeating the “process” every six to eight weeks. Why am I doing this, I wondered? What does my thick, curly, frizzy hair actually look like? And, is there a way I can take care of my hair without using a chemical, a hot comb, or having to wear a wig? Fortunately, both my sisters have worn their hair natural for several years, so I have seen firsthand how to care for that style, but so many women are not as lucky. And so last January, I sought to share my story with whoever would listen, and that is when my hair journey and that of Strictly Roots (SR) [1]owner, Ruth Smith, collided.

One gloomy morning in February, 2008, I walked into SR, a natural hair care studio – which means no measures are taken to alter the natural state of black hair – located in Toronto. Open since 2002, I had been a client of SR for months; however, this morning was different. As I entered the shop, Ruth was on the phone doing an interview about an article that was published in the *Toronto Star*, entitled, “Why Do Black Women Fear the ‘Fro?’” [2] which I had written a few weeks prior. As I waited (and eavesdropped), I realized that that article had just opened a Pandora’s box on the whole black hair issue. And, it *is* an issue. Outside of the black community, most people are totally baffled by the discussion. “Who knew?”, some of my non-black friends said in response to “the ‘fro’”. While black hair might seem like fun to outsiders, given the plethora of styling options at a woman’s disposal, beneath each style there is a deeply personal hair story and a lot of scalp damage that for some is irreversible. When you consider the history of black hair, its complexity becomes clear.

In 15<sup>th</sup> century Africa, hairstyles were used to indicate a person's marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth and rank within the community (see Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Mercer, 1994; Patton, 2006; Rooks, 1996). Once enslaved, hair became more a matter of the labour one was forced to do. For instance, field slaves often hid their hair, whereas house slaves had to wear wigs similar to their slave owners, who also adorned wigs during this period. In the early 1900s, Madam C.J. Walker received a patent for developing the “hot comb” also known as a “pressing comb”. This device was the first of its kind to be marketed by a black woman to other black women, and it completely changed the hair game. Once the straightened hair was exposed to moisture, however, it would revert back to its original state. In the 1960s, George E. Johnson’s chemical straightener, also known as a “relaxer” [3] was promoted as a less damaging product to the hair and scalp; it was a more convenient way to straighten hair since it could be applied at home and it was more permanent – only requiring re-application every two to

three months. Today, it is estimated that 70% to 80% of black women chemically straighten their hair. In the 1980s, weaves raised the black beauty bar even higher to hair that is not just straight, but also very long (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Tate, 2007). Hair weaving is a process by which synthetic or real human hair is sewn into one's own hair. Celebrities like Janet Jackson, Diana Ross, Tyra Banks and Naomi Campbell have openly admitted to wearing weaves. There are many different ways to wear a weave. A woman may braid her hair and then sew "tracks" (strips of hair) onto the braided hair, or using a bonding method, tracks can be glued to the hair at the root. Braid extensions are similarly a method where synthetic hair is braided into a person's own hair, thereby creating the elusion of long hair with braids that can stay in for a long period of time. In her book, *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women*, Noliwe Rooks (1996) recalls a memory from her childhood that underscores the relationship between hair and identity for black women. She writes, "When I went South for the summer, my grandmother could not get me to Miss Ruby's beauty parlor and a straightening comb fast enough....She reasoned that because no one was ever going to mistake me for having anything other than African ancestry due to the dark color of my skin ...straightening my hair would give me an advantage in the world. It was one less battle that would have to be fought," (p. 3-4).

For young black girls, hair is not just something to play with, it is something that is laden with messages, and it has the power to dictate how others treat you, and in turn, how you feel about yourself. As Rooks (1996) affirms, "Hair in 1976 spoke to racial identity politics as well as bonding between African American women. Its style could lead to acceptance or rejection from certain groups and social classes, and its styling could provide the possibility of a career" (p. 5-6). While this quote is an historical one, the issues revealed throughout this article are eerily current. Prior to examining these tensions, it is imperative that the topic is placed in context with prior works from scholars who have explored it from ethnographic standpoints (Banks, 2000; Jacobs-Huey, 2006; Tate, 2007), and with those who have provided varying perspectives on hair alteration, ritual, and community through textual analysis of media texts, advertisements, and case law (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Caldwell, 1991; Patton, 2006; Rooks, 1996).

In her study, Ingrid Banks (2000) used interviews and focus-group methods to explore how black women and girls of diverse ages and socioeconomic class feel about their hair choices, and in turn, their identities, community, gender, sexuality, and cultural authenticity. Anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey (2006) took a slightly different ethnographic approach to her study by examining the role of language in negotiating the social meaning of hair for African American women. As she explains, "black hair as a window into African American women's ethnic and gender identities, and black hair as a linguistic and cultural engagement with these identities ... presents opportunities for learning and change, thus offering insights into the discursive and corporeal dynamics of African American women's being and becoming [4]" (p. 4-5). Similar to Jacobs-Huey, in this article, I present a cross-section of black hair, and am concerned with women's everyday conversations about hair care, but my intent is to extend the discussion beyond black women's lives, the beauty parlor, and "kitchen beauticians" [5] to the wider black hair care industry and the external pressures (e.g. from the media and in the workplace). Further, while in *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair In America*, Ayana D. Byrd and Lori I. Tharps (2001) provide a detailed survey of black hair from its historical roots to the business and politicization of black hair, and they describe the ritualistic nature of black hair, and how "straightening" serves as a rite of passage for most young black girls from childhood into adolescence and womanhood (see p. 137-152), I attempt to move beyond surveying ritual and community to examining the damage that years of hair alteration can cause, as well as the socio-psychological issues that underpin the ritualistic practice of altering one's hair, and it serving as a rite of passage. Ruth's *hairstory* is the perfect tipping off point to the discussion.

Born in Trinidad, Ruth immigrated to Canada in 1970. Soon thereafter, she became very self-conscious about her hair. "My hair was short and it was natural and I begged my mother to buy me a wig," she recalls. "I begged and begged and harassed her until she actually bought me a wig, it was an Afro wig, but still a wig. I remember one day we were playing jump rope in the yard and my wig fell off. I was in grade six or seven and all the kids were laughing at me. Looking back on it now, I would have been laughing, too." Her decision to wear dreadlocks did not happen because of her love of reggae music, or a conversion to Rastafari. A self-dubbed "weave queen," she used to straighten her hair (since age 15) and wear weaves and braids until excessive damage, among other things, led her to rethink her hair choices. "I recognized the fact that the reason I was perming and weaving my hair was because of self-hatred," she says. Self-hatred seems like such a harsh word. Other women wear their hair in various hairstyles, too; short hair, long hair, shaven, dyed, spiked, even wigs and weaves, and no one attributes their hairstyling choices to self-hatred. "I think it would be unfair to say that you can compare another race's hair issues with ours," argues Ruth. "People don't understanding that we have to re-learn how to take care of our hair," says Ruth about the history of hair alteration. It seems almost hard to believe. How is it possible that millions of black women do not know how to care for their hair? And, why do so many feel they have to hide their natural hair? As a professional who sees the end result of years of hair alteration, Ruth believes that women in large part see no option but to alter their hair because of the images we are inundated with of women whose hair is very long, silky, flowing and mostly blonde. In the media, many of the black women who are glorified for their beauty tend to be women who also have long, wavy hair (Patton, p. 39-40, 2006). Further, when you consider that for the past 100 years manufacturers have almost exclusively only promoted the idea that natural black hair needs to be altered, it all begins to make sense. When was the

last time short, curly, kinky black hair was celebrated or promoted as equally as beautiful? As sociologist Ann DuCille notes, “We have yet to see Miss America or Black Miss Universe with an Afro or cornrows or dreadlocks” (cited in Byrd & Tharps, 2001, p. 125). To no surprise, there have been several instances over the past few years where natural black hair has been under attack.

In 2007, when an editor from *Glamour Magazine* spoke to a group of lawyers at the offices of Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton in Manhattan, she affirmed why so many black women hesitate to wear their hair natural. There to offer a “dos and don’ts” of corporate fashion, the editor allegedly showed a slide of a black woman wearing an Afro, which read “Just say no to the ‘fro,” and she said that dreadlocks were “truly dreadful,” and that the office was not a place for such “political” hairstyles. Whether they are casual comments about texture or blatant insults, many black women feel that there is a price to pay for sporting a natural do. Even corporations like MCI Communications and American Airlines have been sued because black women were allegedly fired for wearing their hair in braids or dreadlocks (Caldwell, 1991). “To me, it’s about education,” says Ruth. “It’s about educating people, it’s about educating the government, it’s about educating everybody, it’s not a black power thing, it’s got nothing to do with that. It’s got to do with individual acceptance of self.” When black women straightened their hair during C.J. Walker’s time, it was because they felt they had no choice. “It was the difference between whether you ate or you didn’t,” says Ruth. “When a black woman goes to apply for a job (today) and she doesn’t get that job because her hair is natural you need to take a step back and say something serious is going on here,” she adds.

Janet Campbell, owner of Nanni’s Natural Hair Salon, believes that more women are going natural, despite the possible CLM (career limiting move). A stylist for 14 years, she has been operating a fully-licensed hair salon out of her home in the west end of Toronto for five years. “I’m an optimist,” she says. “I used to see only straight hair and all that but it’s not where I’d like it to be because women are still under the impression that the European way is real beauty,” she adds. Like SR, Nanni’s is not just a place women (and men) go to get their hair done, it is a place where they learn to embrace their true selves, and re-learn that natural hair is normal; relaxed hair is not. “I see positive things for the future. I see more women cutting off their perm [6] hair and going natural, it doesn’t even have to be locs. [7] It just might be even seeing what their natural hair is. I see more people kind of testing and experimenting, and that’s the key,” she says.

“The ethnic market has never really been given a lot of respect and support from manufacturers in that they treat us all like we’re in the US,” asserts Gordon, creative director and co-owner of Ragga Hair Studio and Beauty Store. [8] “Because of the bilingualism requirements on Canadian packaging, it creates a big problem. With the market being very small and so diverse they say, ‘why should I spend the extra three cents on packaging just to accommodate that small market in Canada?’” While Gordon believes that it is not a matter of natural versus relaxed hair, he agrees that too many black women do not know how to care for their natural hair, and the latest trend – lace front wigs – is evidence of that. He states, “I have this friend of mine, she was into the lace front and she wore lace front for a year, now she’s got depigmentation around the first inch of her face all around the hairline from gluing that stuff on in order to look like Tyra Banks. It’s sad.” Lace front wigs are tied individually strand by strand to the hair cuticle to create a hair line that gives the appearance of hair that looks more “real” than a weave. There’s just one problem – they cause more damage than they hide. “I think it’s about getting back to an education and what’s good about black hair,” says Gordon, adding that “black hair is the best hair to have. It could be straight today, kinky tomorrow, and curly the next day.”

It is important to note that there are no race-based statistics in Canada on black hair care, but in the United States, the numbers are staggering. In America, black hair care (non-natural) is an estimated \$1.8 billion to \$15 billion industry. Market research firm Mintel reports that although blacks make up 13 percent of the population, they account for 30 percent of hair care spending. [9] Black hair is such a topic of interest that in 2008, *Ebony Magazine* [10] ran a feature story on the topic. The article was not about natural versus altered hair; instead, it was an attack on Koreans, who have monopolized the distribution and sale of black beauty products, weaves, and braid extensions, controlling approximately 90% of the US market. Aron Ranen’s 2006 documentary, *Black Hair: The Korean Takeover of the Black Hair Care Industry*, also highlights how much of an issue non-black control of the industry is for African Americans. Abena Holder, a Montreal beauty products distributor, attests to the increasing non-black ownership and control of Canada’s black hair care market. “A Korean based out of Toronto has gotten in on [the product that I distribute] and now he’s coming into the Montreal market trying to get the product into stores,” she says. Whether or not Koreans have a right to monopolize the black hair care industry is a moot point because the real issue is, as Ruth asserts, hair alteration. “When you have a Jewish man making a documentary because the black hair care industry is taken over by Koreans you have to understand that there’s a lot more involved in this.... [Koreans] are simply taking advantage of a business opportunity that exists; they are filling a need created by [blacks].” In truth, the black hair care industry’s woes lie in what is underpinning the industry in the first place; that is, a belief that straight, long, flowing hair is a more “acceptable” choice than one’s natural tress. Just as “hair can be a badge of cultural pride, as well as simply an indicator of style ...hair can be used as a medium to maintain the status quo” (Banks, 2000, p. 147).

While black hair care professionals are on the front lines trying to help women save their hair from years of relaxing, wearing weaves, tight braids, and even improper wear of dreadlocks, dermatologists see the end result of it all. Yvette Miller-Monthrope and Renee Beach, for instance, are 20-something dermatology students doing research on black hair. “Just walking in the mall you see so much traction alopecia,” says Renee. Traction alopecia is caused by chronic pulling on the hair follicle. It is a form of scarring that is most noticeable along the hairline. While it is reported in women of many races, traction alopecia is most frequently seen in black women, and very rarely in black men. The unfortunate part of black hair care is the disconnection between one’s styling choices and subsequent hair loss. As Yvette explains: “If you get a scar from traction or from some kind of hair process that causes the hair to be damaged that hair is gone for good but you could have just [non-scarring] hair loss where the hair itself is broken and damaged but the scalp is ok. If the scalp is ok, there is the potential to grow the hair back in a good way.” There is no monolithic hair experience; however, the argument being put forth is that very few black women are even aware of the medical ramifications of altering their hair or wearing wigs. [11]

Dr. Dina Strachan, a New York City board certified dermatologist, whose patients are mostly African-American women, says that the biggest complaints she receives from her patients are a lack of hair growth, breakage, and hair loss. However, the root cause of these complaints is not internal problems, but a lack of what Dr. Strachan calls “gentle hair care.” “A lot of women chemically treat their hair either to change the texture or to colour or both and no matter how good the product is, altering your hair makes it more brittle and fragile,” she says. “Even the gentle relaxers can dry out the hair and cause damage that makes the hair break. You’re altering the structure of the hair and the hair is designed to protect itself and when you straighten it out you change the cuticle.” According to dermatological researcher Amy McMichael (2003), chemical relaxers cause hair shaft dryness, and increased fragility of the hair cuticle, which is why users are required to treat their hair with oils and other products – in most part to lessen the potentially damaging effects of the chemicals on the hair. Further, Dr. Strachan says that there is research to suggest that wearing a weave or tight braids may set off a dermatological condition known as central centrifugal cicatricial alopecia (CCCA) or “hot comb” alopecia (also see McMichael, 2007). CCCA develops at the crown portion of the scalp. The hair loss is in a circular pattern, and the damage occurs to the hair follicles and leads to hair loss that is progressive.

“When you have millions of black women that don’t like the way they look,” says Ruth, and “they can’t feel good leaving their house with their own hair, you have a serious issue.” The issue is actually not about whether a woman weaves or relaxes her hair; it is about why that woman feels she has to weave or relax her hair in the first place, and a lack of knowledge about the long-term effects of such practices. The question that people often pose to Ruth is “Why do you care what another black woman chooses to do with her hair?” Does a black woman, like other women, not have the freedom of choice to wear her hair how she chooses? The mission of natural hair care providers is not to pass judgment on those who are not (yet) similarly minded; it is about sharing their insights on how beautiful natural hair is, despite all the negative messages suggesting that it is not.

For example, Patricia “Deecoily” Gaines, founder of Nappturality.com, the largest natural hair website on the net, receives hundreds of emails a year from black women around the world who are on their own individual hair journey. “It is often a very personal epiphany,” says Gaines. “It took me a long time, a very long time to see this in myself, but when I did, I finally felt free of the chains that had bound me for so long.” Gaines recalls a memory from her childhood, which exemplifies just how much hair is a social-psychological issue for black women:

I remember when I was a teenager overhearing a conversation happening among a group of elder black women. They were talking about black women dating white men. One woman remarked, ‘Well, I wouldn’t want him to find out about my hair (getting it relaxed). I’d have to keep that a secret.’ They all agreed and laughed about it. I have never forgotten that and even today I think about it a lot.

“Napptural” stands for Afro-type hair that is natural, without straightening or relaxing, that is owned and worn out proudly for all to see, not under a wig or a weave. Through her website, Gaines tries to promote a positive image of napptural hair by dispelling what she calls the “3-U myth” – the myth that black hair is ugly, unmanageable and undesirable; the truth that black hair is underestimated, undervalued, and unloved; and, the goal to have black hair recognized as unique, urbane, and utopian. As she concludes:

“I believe the 3-Us represent us caring for and respecting our hair for its beauty without comparison and without denigrating another hair type. Caucasian hair is a beautiful hair type in its own right, and our hair type should be recognized as beautiful in its own right, too.”

It has been the intent of this paper to highlight how hair is an Achilles’ heel for many black women, and ultimately, why it does not (and should not) have to be. No matter what position is taken on the matter – there are always going to be people who believe that hair is just hair – Ruth’s concluding comments solidify the crux of the matter. She states, “When you can look in the mirror and you can see your natural kinky Afro or locs and it’s yours and you can say, ‘you know what, I like that’ and you know why you have to like it, because that’s what it is; when you get to the point, that’s when you start to see your true

beauty.” Black hair is not just about hair; it is about identity. It is about the juxtaposition of hegemonic norms and black subjectivity; as Judith Butler (1990) reminds us, “the body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” (p. 117). Black women have the right to wear their hair however they please; but given the damaging effects of hair alteration, tight braids, and wigs, it is incumbent that hair choices be critically examined within the context of hegemonically defined beauty standards. The challenge for black women, as Shirley Tate (2007) sullenly notes, is realizing “the ways in which we are inextricably immersed within ... essentialism’s identity, and to acknowledge that this bind is one that is not merely prohibitive, but also enabling” (p. 317; also see Kirby, 1997). Hair alteration should be viewed as unequivocally damaging to an individual (and collective) physical, psychological and cultural well-being, or it will continue to be predicated on the belief that nappy, kinky, Afro hair is wrong, and long, straight, (i.e. White and Asian) hair is right.

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1. SR is unique in that it offers a free ½ hour-long consultation for people to come in and talk about their hair. SR’s primary service is dreadlocks. A “loc start” as they call it, will likely run around \$300 and can take anywhere from 6 to 12 hours, subsequent touch-ups (wash, condition, re-twist or interlock) every four to six weeks will run between \$55 and \$95, and usually take about an hour or two, in addition to take-home products (shampoos, scalp treatments, etc.) that range from \$12 to \$20. However, these prices pale in comparison to the wider black hair care market.

2. Available at [www.thestar.com/living/article/298814](http://www.thestar.com/living/article/298814).

3. Other key players in the black hair care industry include Dark & Lovely, which is owned by SoftsheenCarson, which is owned by L’Oreal. Just For Me, TCB Naturals and Motions are owned by AlbertoCulver. Affirm and Keracare are manufactured by Avlon Industries. Vitapointe is created by Sara Lee Household but is licensed to Helen of Troy, who also markets and distributes Gold ‘N Hot, Revlon, Vidal Sassoon and Dr. Scholl’s.

4. Jacobs-Huey (2006) continues, “The terms *being* and *becoming* ... refer to Black women’s self-perceptions as individuals and members of a collective (*being*), as well as their transition into different dispositions, ideological stances (or positions), professional statuses, and phases of life (*becoming*)” (p. 5).
5. Term used to describe women who do hair out of their home on an informal basis.
6. This is a term used to describe black hair that has been “relaxed” or “straightened”.
7. This is an abbreviated term for dreadlocks.
8. An economics graduate of Carleton University, Gordon has an interesting perspective. He held a management position in Revlon’s ethnic hair division for several years, before the company downsized; he subsequently opened Ragga in 1997.
9. While these are US-based figures, it is fair to assume that similar proportional numbers would be applicable in a Canadian context
10. Adrienne, S. (2005, May 1). Guess who sells your weave? Koreans capitalize on Black beauty’s big business. *Ebony Magazine*. Retrieved May 15, 2008, from <http://encyclopedia.com>.
11. Even this argument should not be construed as being “representative” of all black women, as many women chemically relax their hair for years and do not suffer from hair loss or traction alopecia.

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