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# Why Is No One Getting A Weave Of An Afro: Examining Culture, Economy, And Domestic Human Hair Consumption By African American Women

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WHY IS NO ONE GETTING A WEAVE OF AN AFRO: EXAMINING CULTURE,  
ECONOMY, AND DOMESTIC HUMAN HAIR CONSUMPTION BY AFRICAN  
AMERICAN WOMEN

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
Sam Houston State University, 2016

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## ABSTRACT

The market for human hair, in the form of wigs and hair weaves, has grown exponentially, with African American women comprising a significant portion of consumers in the United States. Similar to other markets, the structure and patterns of hair consumption by African American women is the result of a variety of historical and geographical factors. In this thesis I investigate the role of African American women in the global human hair trade, and consider the implications of contemporary discourses around ‘good’ and ‘black’ hair in order to better understand trade in human hair. In particular, I use a combination of interviews with African American women – exploring what I term hair journeys – with observations in beauty salons and document analysis as a way of connecting the dynamic spaces of production and consumption in the human hair trade.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mary told me about her hair journey in a Starbucks on a hot Sunday afternoon after her church service in August 2017. As a Black woman, she told me, “professionally, you have to worry about your hair, personally, you have to worry about your hair, whether it’s like dating or just for you or working out.” As Mary, an African American woman in her mid-twenties, described it, hair becomes wrapped up into the key social experiences of all women. However, for Black women, having kinky and curly locks has long been a source of tension, and the conversation surrounding black hair is often rooted in popular discourses that deem black hair unacceptable and unpolished. Common biases view natural black hair as unprofessional or less beautiful, especially when compared to fine straight hair. This view is pervasive. A report by NPR (2017) used data from the “Good Hair Study” that indicates there is still implicit bias against black hair that comes from both whites *and* blacks. In general, it is more likely that lighter skinned Black women with looser curls and finer hair are celebrated because their hair is seen as more desirable or pleasant. In short, they have “good” hair.

Celebrating good hair comes at a cost. Over the years, the representation of kinky and curly hair textures in the media has been associated with Black rights advocates or someone who can be seen as militant. Further, various television series, movies, and commercials depict darker skinned Black women as unaccepting of their natural hair texture, preferring to either straighten their hair or wear wigs and weaves. Portrayals of Black hair in the media reassert the stigma assigned to Black hair, affecting the way in

which Black women are *allowed* to wear their hair in either the workplace or in their personal life. Recently, however, “naturalistas”, that is, women who wear their hair in ways that are unaltered, have begun taking back what it means to have Black hair and are starting to be represented in higher numbers in the media, thus influencing the Black beauty market.

Yet the Black beauty market represents a multi-billion dollar industry that remains largely predicated on helping women attain what has historically been viewed as good hair. In general, there are two types of consumers that define the Black beauty market: the consumer who buys into natural hair care, and the consumer who spends their money on human hair extensions for the purpose of weaving and wigs, many of which are made from human hair. This second market is the primary focus of this thesis. The United States is one of the largest global consumers of human hair, with African American women comprising a significant part of the group of human hair consumers (Berry, 2008). My research investigates why this is the case. In particular, in this thesis I examine why a market for human hair exists in African American communities, and further, what cultural, social and economic processes influence the geographies of the human hair trade both domestically and globally.

The question of identity is central to the human hair trade, and is therefore central to this thesis. Through processes of racism and exclusion, African American women have long been forced to conform to the dominate perceptions of beauty through various methods, but most frequently through the modification of their hair. Widespread hair

modification has given rise not only to a demand for raw hair typically sourced from India, but also, as I demonstrate in this thesis, a thriving domestic economy of hair importers, stylists, and African American female entrepreneurs.

In the remainder of this introduction I will provide additional background on some previous work on Black hair. I then provide an overview of my theoretical approach (which are further developed in each chapter), which draws on scholarship in economic geography on commodity chains as well as research on the cultural and social networks that drive the consumption of commodities. I then end with a brief description of the chapters that comprise this thesis.

### *Black Hair*

Much of the previous scholarship on hair examines the cultural and societal dynamics that play a part in the construction of the identity of Black Americans, and particularly women (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Caldwell 1991). In this work, interviews and ethnographic work with African American women provide important insights into the ways in which hair can be a personal and emotional aspect of their lives. This work demonstrates the deep relationship Black women have with their hair, and more importantly, how this relationship is reflected and influenced by the day to day reality of their lives.

Black hair – because of the physical characteristics that defines it - has long been an important historical actor. Carney (2001), for example, captures stories of slave women hiding rice grains in their hair that they would later cultivate as rice crops in the Americas. In another account, Byrd & Tharps (2001) trace the history of Black hair from African roots to the early 2000s and assess the cultural and political dynamics that shape



the way people perceive Black hair in society. For example, in Africa, Black hair was used as a marker for tribal status. As Europeans enslaved Africans, their capturers often shaved their head for sanitary measures, but in doing so stripped Africans of their tribal status. Over time, Black hair grew increasingly subordinate to White textured hair. In the Americas, as racial mixing arose and new mixed textures of hair proliferated, a continuum of what good hair is developed. What Byrd & Tharps' (2001) work makes clear is the way in which historic incidents shape contemporary perceptions of Black hair. In addition, these historic experiences with Black hair are central to the ways in which Blacks learned to manage their locks during periods of enslavement and in the years of segregation that followed.

Harris & Johnson (2001) provide a collection of hair stories that tells the tale of what hair means to Black women, men, and for society. This work encapsulates the diversity in the relationships that Black women (and men) have with their hair, often described as a love-hate tug of war, each of the personal accounts highlight some of the internal conflict that is experienced by Black individuals. Harris & Johnson use qualitative approaches to investigate personal perceptions of Black hair as well as to highlight the cultural contexts by which hair is shaped in African American communities, most often in relation to dominant perceptions of Eurocentric beauty. In this thesis I draw on interviews from a group of Black women to better understand the black beauty economy and the global human hair trade.

In another study, King & Niabaly (2013) follow 12 African and African American women who vary in their hair care to understand the motivations behind the way in which each woman chose to get the styles they wear. They find that family, peers, health, hair

management, and ethnicity influenced hair choices. As the chapters that follow show, many of the same conclusions emerge from my own interviews.

In sum, the perceptions of natural hair by Black women is in many ways contingent upon the way White people have disapproved of Black hair, which in large part stems from the capture and colonization of their African ancestors. In addition, hair has become ritualized in the Black community. This ritualization has put a cultural emphasis on Black hair that ties hair to identity. Hair therefore is a conscious component of the everyday for Black women that affects both personal and professional experiences, and that influences the way that women chose to style their hair.

### *The geography of commodities*

More than simply a product that is produced or consumed, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1994) suggest that commodities, in their final state, are a product of both human and non-human actors connected across space. Geographic studies of commodity chains aim to trace the processes by which commodities acquire value as they move through space, thereby aiming to unveil the conditions of production, labor, and exploitation at each stop. The interest among critical geographers in studying commodity chains originates in part from attempts to understand what Marx calls the commodity fetish. Commodity fetishism is the idea that the conditions of production and labor become masked by the exchange process and consumption of commodities. Masking production thereby allows commodities to exist without knowledge of the social relations that are consistently reproduced by the consumption of a product (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991).

In introducing the concept of the commodity fetish, Marx first suggests that a commodity is composed of two types of values, a use value and an exchange value. The use value is the usefulness of a commodity, the value that exists before it gets looped into a process of exchange. The exchange value, on the other hand, emerges as the product acquires monetary significance through its literal exchange. While the use value of the commodity remains clear after the exchange, what becomes an illusion at the point of exchange are the conditions of production and labor that created the commodity. Where the commodity fetish obscures the conditions of labor and treatment of the environment, a commodity chain analysis attempts to explore and critically assess these conditions (Bair, 2008; Cook et al., 2004).

There are numerous examples of commodity chain research. Mintz (1985), for example, conducted an empirical study of sugar that illuminated the very conditions of production and labor that helped produce and sustain the sugar economy. It was through an investigation of the production and labor that Mintz analyzed the social conditions that influenced the sugar trade, which in turn revealed various conditions of power and cultural shifts that have structured sugar's role in modern day society. Mintz's work is most significant for my thesis in the way it links conditions of production and consumption, as his work assesses the implications sugar had on culture by continuing the analysis beyond the point of purchase. In Mintz's account, sugar had already existed as a product for high-class individuals and was then globalized in order to produce larger amounts for global consumption, reflecting a shift in the cultures of consumption around sweetness. The global human hair trade, too, exists as a part of a larger narrative, as it is a

global commodity whose exchange and meaning is in part produced through historical and contemporary contexts of hair in African American communities.

In another example of commodity chain research, Cook et al. (2004) analyze the commodity chain of the papaya and its movements across the globe. Their analysis highlights the key points of trade through a series of brief occurrences that structure the overlapping and larger narrative of how the papaya moves. Through Cook et al.'s commodity centered analysis it become apparent that the papaya connects “those unknowing of each other through international trade” (Cook et al., 2004, pg. 1). Cook et al.'s work helps in thinking through social processes that chug the papaya chain along, demystifying and connecting the global connections between those actors involved in producing the papaya commodity chain.

What both Mintz and Cook et al.'s analysis highlights are the insights gained through a detailed study of commodities. While both Mintz and Cook et al. focus on food, their core ideas and questions are a frame for my research. In short, who is producing the hair that enters the human hair trade? What kinds of social relations frame this production? How do these social relations construct a consumer identity, and for who? And how does consumer identity feedback into the commodity chain and shape the conditions of production?

In addition to analyzing and linking the social conditions of consumption and production at each site in a commodity chain, it is also important to understand the dynamics within a particular chain. Understanding these dynamics requires an examination of the relationship between actors and the activities that connect them (Bair,

2008). That is to say, we need to uncover and assess the power and agency that moves along the chain as the commodity itself moves.

The focus of my research is to illuminate some of the social and geographic processes of labor, production, and consumption that exist along the global trade of human hair. As the previous section describes, some of this work has already occurred. Yet as Bair (2008, pg. 19) states, “the most careful operationalization of the chain concept and the most rigorous empirical analysis will yield only a partial perspective on the dynamics of production and exchange.” This holds true for three empirical studies that focus specifically on the global human hair trade (Berry 2008; Nahavandi, 2016; Tarlo 2016).

Berry’s (2008) work researches the transnational trade of human hair, and is one of the very few studies that have analyzed the conditions of production and labor in the human hair trade. In this account, Berry connects first world consumers with third world producers by tracing a Rome, Italy-based company called Great Lengths International that distributes 100 percent human hair extensions to 50 different countries. Berry’s research digs into the origins of human hair, and follows it as it is shipped from the floor of Indian hair temples, as she calls them, to processing factories in China hair is stripped of its black color and dyed to various lighter shades (blondes, browns, etc.). However, while Berry works to unveil the trade of what she terms the ‘zombie commodity’, her work stops short of examining why a market for human hair exists, and particularly, an investigation of the market in the United States. While Berry (2008, p. 67) states that “A large portion [of women] are black, particularly in North America, where extensions are used to braid or glue into various African American hairstyles,” much of her analysis is

devoted to the consumption of hair by mainly white Europeans, and therefore does not address the social and historical contexts in which African American women consume human hair.

In a second key analysis of the human hair trade, Nahavandi (2016) argues that human hair, extracted from the Global South, should be perceived as a resource. She examines the demand for hair, noting that human hair is being used for the production of wigs, and emphasizes the marginal difference in price collected by those producing the hair and those consuming the hair. In her chapter on the transnational hair trade, Nahavandi argues that the consumption of human hair is exploitive to Indian women who are the source of supply. The price of hair in the market is multiple times the rate at which Indian women are paid, if they are paid at all, for their hair. In addressing the culture of black hair, Nahavandi notably cites an advertisement from Kacolema, a hair wig company, which states: “If people of color decide to use hair relaxers, for example, then serious health implications can result such as permanent hair damage. If people of color decide to go natural, then they are subject to being stereotyped as too left of center politically, socially or both. We empower our clients to escape this dilemma by being the best at our craft and offering a healthy medium” (Kacolema, 2013). While this insight illuminates some of the cultural reasons African American’s consume human hair, Nahavandi (2016) does not detail and provide literature that supports the claims made by Kacolema. Nahavandi, like Berry, hints at the significance of human hair for African American women, but in this short chapter fails to expand on what social and historical processes have led to this ideology of hair.

Finally, Tarlo (2016) provides an ethnographic analysis of the global trade of human hair, traveling to understand the journey hair takes as a global commodity. Her work touches on unique aspects of the commodity trade that had yet to have been accounted in detail. Illuminating the individual cultural dynamics that hair globally embodies, Tarlo brings forward the “secret life” hair lives through the various avenues hair dominates as a commodity for gifts, cosmetics, extensions and others. In her work, Tarlo seeks to understand the global hair chain by immersing herself into the networks that move the chain along. Tarlo (2016) shares stories of her encounters, some in which she visits factories that process human hair and witnesses the manual work of the trade, while others speak with merchants of the trade to understand some of the reasoning behind the business. In addition Tarlo provides a history of the buying and selling of human hair as well as a background on the uses and value of hair in certain cultures, one of them being Black hair. In sum, Tarlo’s (2016) research works well at uncovering harvesting and manufacturing details of the trade that are important to understanding, in part, my examination of consumption of human hair by Black Americans.

### *Research Questions*

In this thesis, I seek to answer, at least in part, the following research questions in order to assess African American women’s role in the human hair trade, the social and dynamics that are within the trade, and the link between consumption and production of the hair trade:

1. What factors influence the way African American women choose to style their hair?
2. How do African American entrepreneurs in the hair industry fit into the overall commodity chain?

## *Methods*

This thesis draws on data obtained by interviews, observations, and secondary source data conducted from July to December 2017. The interview data comes from 15 semi-structured interviews I conducted with African American women in Columbia, South Carolina. Participant population was sampled from women who are affiliated with the University of South Carolina either as employees or as undergraduate or graduate students. Participants were selected through a convenience sampling method, and were aware of the basic interests of my research before consenting to interviews. These interviews focused on how African American women define their identity in relation to hair and hair weaves, thus highlighting the themes and structures that construct identities. Further, these interviews helped me to develop a deeper understanding of the complexities typical to the formation of identities, and to understand the connections between physical appearance, race, identity, and notions of beauty that may be manipulated by hair weaves and wigs. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and were conducted at the location of the participants choosing, most often in public settings like coffee shops around the University campus. This environment was conducive to the ambiance of the interview, which was relaxed and conversational. It is important to note that class and education play a large part in the identity of these women. The social lens through which they construct their views and interpret the world is based upon their class status, which is also influenced by education levels. Given the population sample, my research is limited by the lack of diversity in class and social status amongst these participants.



In addition to the interviews, I draw on data from observations I conducted at the Bronner Brothers International Beauty Show in Atlanta, Georgia. Bronner Brothers is the largest domestic beauty show in the United States. Founded by Black Americans, the international beauty show hosts hundreds of entrepreneurs of the Black beauty business in Atlanta, Georgia. These observations provided insight into questions around the commodity chain of human hair, and particularly the crucial question of why African American women play a large part in the composition of the human hair trade in North America. Observation data was also used to understand Black beauty entrepreneurship in relation to recent cultural economic geography scholarship.

Lastly, I draw on secondary data drawn from industry databases (IBISWorld, Passport, and Business Monitor International) in order to perform in-depth research of companies that are a part of the human hair trade. Additional data is derived from global trade databases (e.g., UN Comtrade Database) to analyze human hair trade statistics and to reconstruct, at least in part, the global flows of the hair trade.

### *Chapter Outlines*

My research investigates the global human hair trade with a particular focus on the consumption of human hair, and with the goal of illuminating questions of identity, spaces of belonging, and ethnic entrepreneurship that surround the consumption end of the global human hair trade. This empirical analysis detangles the bundle of social relations that shape the consumption of an unruly and certainly tangled up resource.

Chapter One draws on previous research on the hair commodity chain while also using secondary data sources to reconstruct the broad contours of the human hair commodity chain. Here I provide an overview of the hair trade, highlighting the industry

and its key players. I then scale the focus down to look at domestic examples of the hair trade, highlighting themes of informality and invisibility that shape the industry.

The second chapter centers on the observations recorded at the Bronner Brothers International Beauty Show in order to highlight both Black beauty entrepreneurship and scholarship on cultural economy. In this chapter I examine the ways in which production networks are produced as a part of a cultural commonsense, and how the proliferation of the Black beauty market has been sustained through this by using the international hair show as an example.

Chapter Three provides insights into the way hair structures the identity of Blacks. In this chapter I use 15 semi-structured interviews with African American women to understand how these women understand their identity and life through hair in what I call hair journeys. Key findings in this chapter are the temporal structure of participant's hair journeys. This temporal structure help understand how participants' consciousness about their hair evolves throughout their lives.

In the conclusion I end with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of my research and additionally, what can be done to further the research on understanding social perceptions of Black hair.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE HUMAN HAIR TRADE

Faith began crafting and selling wigs made of human hair for women across the United States and the world in 2016. When asked how she began her business she replied:

I posted a video, on Facebook, of one of the wigs I made myself and it went viral. I had 76 shares in a matter of minutes and over 100 in a day. I started to get direct messages from people asking about my wigs, asking if I would make them one.

This quote from Faith highlights the market for human hair and how the trade is moving from its traditional storefront space to an online market that depends on advertising on social media accounts like *Facebook* and *Instagram*. The majority of the human hair trade, however, remains a decidedly a mass market. As of 2017, 38.4 percent of wig and hairpiece manufactured in the United States were constructed from human hair, rather than from blended material (human and animal hair) or synthetic wigs and hairpieces (Peters, 2017). This makeup of 38.4 percent of the market for wigs and hairpieces is a larger percentage because human hair wigs are more expensive to produce and sell at a higher market value.

Popular and in demand, human hair has become largely a commodity shaped by aesthetics and purchased for the intention of extension services and for the production of wigs. Consumption is driven by human behavior and factors that shape human thought. Advertisements take into consideration specific social demographics to market certain

products to different types of consumers. These dynamics of market and trade are apparent in all types of commodities. As they are shaped by the cultural, political, and social processes that make up the world, commodities become a necessity for specific individuals whether we examine where our food or clothes come from. Today, there is a growing consciousness to know where your things come from, especially when it involves your physical consumption like food (Mardsen & Arce, 1993; Guthman, 2003).

As such, commodities are more than just merely a material or a good and not unlike humans, commodities have social lives. There is a beginning and an end to the life of a commodity, and this life cycle is narrated through a commodity chain analysis. Commodity chains are connected through various segments and along the chain, these points are shaped by social, political, and economic relationships that are maintained as the production of the chain moves. I outline the commodity chain of the human hair industry below after giving an overview of the global hair industry.

#### *The Hair Industry: An Overview*

From 2012 to 2017, the wig and hairpiece manufacturing industry generated a total of \$473.6 million USD domestically, with 38.4% of this generated from human hair wigs and hairpieces alone. Human hair wigs are an expensive commodity, as human hair is considered better quality than synthetic fibered wigs because it can be altered with hair dyes and hair tools. Prices for wigs made from human hair in the United States range from \$200 USD to over \$1000 USD depending on volume, length, and style. The primary source of the raw human hair used for the wigs is China and India, with this hair the most commonly sought out types of human hair due to their higher supply and their quality. 64.5% of hair is imported into the United States from China. According to data collected

by the United Nations, in 2016 China exported \$76,608,316 USD, India exported \$236,808,929 USD, while the United States imported \$51,138,918 USD worth of human hair (see Figure 1.1). Though the data acquired from the UN does not trace where the hair was imported from or exported to, it can be safely assumed that a majority of the hair exported from India proceeds to China and Hong Kong for processing before ultimately arriving in the United States, and to a lesser extent Europe, for final consumption (“Market Research Hair Trade”, 2011; Peters, 2017; UNCOMTRADE World Merchandise Exports and Imports Statistics, 2017; Varmundy, 2011).

Top 5 Human Hair Exporters	Trade Value USD	Top 5 Human hair importers	Trade Value USD
1. India	\$236,808,929	1. China	\$193,966,021
2. China	\$76,608,316	2. Hong Kong	\$59,866,558
3. Hong Kong	\$61,164,847	3. United States	\$51,138,918
4. Austria	\$31,963,448	4. Indonesia	\$45,781,964
5. Italy	28,590,437	5. United Kingdom	\$27,040,261

**Figure 1.1.** *Top 5 importers and exporters of commodity code 6703.* (Human hair, dressed, thinned, bleached or otherwise worked; wool or other animal hair or other textile materials, prepared for use in making wigs or the like) Data retrieved from UNCOMTRADE Database, January 2018

Data from the IBISWorld an online database that produces market reports for a number of different industries, on the wig and hairpiece manufacturing industry in the United States, written by Ingrid Peters (2017), defines the industry’s purpose as the manufacture of hairpieces for both aesthetic and medical reasons. For the purpose of this thesis, I am interested in examining the market for human hair for aesthetic reasons. Peters (2017) identifies four factors that are currently important drivers of the industry.

The first is import penetration into the manufacturing sector, that is, the amount of demand for a particular product that is fulfilled by imports, calculated as a ratio. The second factor is the per capita disposable income of people in the location of consumption. In short, as disposable income increases, consumers are more likely to purchase personal care products, including extensions and wigs made from human hair. The third factor driving the industry is the trade weighted index, which considers the exchange rates in the importing and exporting countries. Finally, Peters (2017) identifies the median age of the population as being a driving factor in the human hair market, as aging populations often have health conditions that may generate hair loss and thus necessitating hairpieces.

The primary points of consumption for wigs and hairpieces are pharmacies and drugstores, for costume wigs and hairpieces for resale, hair and nail resale and extension services, hair loss treatment and removal, bought and resold by hair loss treatment centers, and lastly, at beauty, cosmetics, and fragrance stores, purchasing hair for resale. Beauty, cosmetics, and fragrance stores make up 22.3% of the hair care industry (Peters, 2017).

As previously mentioned, manufacturing for human hair largely occurs abroad, and largely in China and Hong Kong. As such, the human hair trade is an increasingly global industry, in part driven by the availability of ample resources (raw hair) in India, and the presence of low cost labor in China. Due to the low skill labor this industry requires, foreign manufactures are able to source low cost labor to produce wigs and hairpieces for US consumption.

Though human hair wigs are sourced primarily from China and India, there is competition between companies that sell the wigs. The competition is based on price, quality, current trends, and marketing. Based on revenue, companies that sell higher quality hair do better on the market compared to lower quality hair. Additionally, companies who associate their products with celebrities do better than those who do not. Celebrity partnerships help to establish credibility with consumers, making the company more reputable and well known. Furthermore, companies have the advantage in the industry if they are in sync with the emerging styles that are determined by social aspects of their consumer pool (Peters, 2017).

Due to the presumably nonhazardous and toxic nature of hair extraction and distribution, the wig and hairpiece industry has minor regulation standards outside of the criteria established by US wage laws. As a result of several high profile robberies occurring within the industry, there may be an increase in regulation of the trade, specifically for Remy (Indian) hair. Manufactures are seeking measures to prevent robberies to this degree in the future (Peters, 2017).

#### *Hair Trade: From Temple to Market*

Tracing a commodity's movement globally requires many steps. First you must understand where the raw material derives from. In the human hair trade there is a demand for 'Remy' hair, that is, hair of Indian origin that is 100% human and still has the hair cuticles attached. This makes Remy hair the most raw and most natural, and as a result, the most valuable in the hair industry. The reputation of Remy hair has made India by far the world's leading exporter of raw human hair.

Within the category of Remy hair are three types of hair harvested from India: temple hair, village hair, and barber hair. Temple hair is the most abundant, valuable, and is regarded as highest in quality. However, as described below, the origins of temple hair is somewhat unusual in the world of raw materials. Village hair is collected from the homes of Indians who collect the hair from brushes and combs, and is considered lower quality than temple hair. Barber hair, collected from the sweepings from the floors of barbershops, is another low quality hair type.

Temple hair is extracted from the heads of Indian peoples, but importantly, its extraction is not for the purpose of providing hair for the human hair trade. In Hindu religion, tonsuring is form of sacrifice to the gods that involves head shaving. The Tonsure ceremony is an act of self-sacrifice, offering hair as a gift during a five-minute hair removal process that takes place in tonsure halls located within Hindu temples. However, in many cases the hair is collected and auctioned off to various parts of the world. While data on these auctions and trade are limited, the Balaji Temple in Tirumala, the second busiest temple in the world, collects massive amounts of hair each week that, when auctioned, are reported to produce a weekly average income of \$10,000 (Jagannathan & Panchanatham, 2018). The temple administration at the Balaji Temple manages the hair auctions, and the rights to the temple hair are sold to a manufacturer that hires supervisors and sweepers to retrieve and store the hair in locked safes (Tarlo, 2016). According to an interview done by Chris Rock in his documentary *Good Hair* (2009), one hair trade expert reported that temple hair is worth more than gold.

It is crucial to note here that because hair is sacrificed voluntarily at tonsure ceremonies, women receive no compensation for providing the raw material for the



human hair trade. In fact, tonsure *costs* women 10 rupees. It is reported that women engaging in tonsure do not know where their hair goes after the ceremony nor how much the hair is worth, thus highlighting the important role of unpaid labor at the very origins of this global chain. As popular and abundant as temple hair is, the presence of lower grades of human hair are evidence that the hair collected from these temples cannot solely satisfy the demands of the hair trade. Even more, there are reports that women's hair has been cut off in their sleep, in effect stolen from their bodies and inserted into the circuits of the global hair trade (Rock & Stilson, 2009).

After extraction, human hair is auctioned off to the highest bidder and processed in factories across the globe. In India there are thousands of hair processors, with the city of Chennai recognized as one of the largest hubs for processing and manufacturing hair. The second largest export of Indian temple hair is to China, due to the large number of processing industries that exist there (Jagannathan & Panchanatham, 2018). It is important to note that China is the number one exporter of human hair partly from their business with India and partly due to the manufacturing and processing of Chinese human hair. There are, however, perceived quality differences in Indian and Chinese hair. Indian hair has the reputation of being void of chemical alteration and resembles European hair in texture, thus making it the most desirable. In hair processing factories the hair is separated and combed out, with pests and unwanted strands picked out. The hair is then washed and sewn into bundles and packaged. Each bundle is made up of hair fibers from many different heads but through processing is homogenized and noted only for its weight in kilograms.

Processed bundles of hair are shipped globally to businesses for resale, but in many cases, still needs further processing into weaves and wigs. Much of this happens in California, with Chris Rock declaring Los Angeles as the “weave capital of the world” (Rock & Stilson, 2009) and Indian exporters reporting that Hollywood is one of the biggest consumers of human hair (Jagannathan & Panchanatham, 2018). Data from the United States supports this. In the US wig and hairpiece manufacturing industry, 19.8% of manufacturing establishments are concentrated in the western part of the country, with 14.9% of all these establishments located in California alone (Peters, 2017). California’s access to both large seaports and a large consumer population makes this region ideal for hair imports. Socially, there may also be some business relationships, familial ties, and high rates of demand that encourage hair manufacturing establishments to concentrate in this area.

Once hair has been shipped and handled for resale in the US, consumers purchase the hair from domestic websites, stores, and hair service companies, like salons. Human hair is purchased by individuals who will use the hair in a variety of ways. Some purchase the hair in order to have the bundles installed by licensed hair technicians, while other purchase with the intention of installing the hair themselves. Others purchase hair bundles for the purpose of creating wigs/weaves for a third party, or purchase the hair for resale in a salon. After bundles have been sewn into a wig or onto the heads of consumers as weaves, the hair is maintained by the consumer of the hair service, living out the remainder of its commodified life as an accessory.

*Fragmentation, Informality, & Invisibility*

While the forgoing presents a relatively smoothly operating supply chain, the human hair trade in actual operation can be described as fragmented at best. There is no single dominant player within the wig and hairpiece industry that has a significant amount of control of the revenue (Peters, 2017). Major portions of the raw materials are imported to the United States where the wig manufacturing and weave services are performed domestically despite far higher labor costs. The supply chain is also marked by informality, what Tarlo (2016) describes as the notion of invisibility in her analysis on the human hair trade. Informality and invisibility is evident starting with the process of raw material extraction. Hair is collected from temples without providing compensation to those who provided their hair. Once the hair is collected there is no formal data on how much the hair is auctioned for nor who specifically it is being auctioned to. In Tarlo's (2016) study, an Indian hair manufacturer expresses his invisibility within the trade, detailing his experiences in the business and how he is merely a background actor in the larger scheme of things. This actor has no direct interaction with the way in which hair is sold abroad; he is simply a pawn in a larger game of chess.

Not only is the hair wrapped up in the informalities of production and trade, but also as is described in more detail in Chapter Two, the consumption of human hair is immersed into informal markets such as the hair service industry. There are various unlicensed consumers of human hair that perform these hair services from their home. Faith, an unlicensed hair technician whose story opens this chapter, owns her own business making and installing wigs and weaves for her customers both domestically and globally. Faith purchases hair bundles from a vendor based out of Atlanta, Georgia (USA):

The process for my product is simple; I have a consultation with clients either over the phone or in person, depending on their location. This is the time we discuss what kinds of texture, length, color...all of what they want in their hair. I then get head measurements, they make a deposit on their wig, which is what I use to purchase the hair from my vendor. They ship what hair is need (between 3-5 business days) and I make the wigs. I will send them videos and pictures throughout the process and when it's done I send them their wig.

Faith performs all the work of manufacturing a wig far from a factory setting. In her apartment she assembles the wigs, moisturizes and braids hair, and installs the wigs for her local customers. As an unlicensed technician, Faith is limited in a series of ways. She has to charge less than a licensed technician, and it affects her ability to work in a salon. Being unlicensed decreases her opportunities as a business owner in this line of work by not being able to provide "how to classes", or as described in Chapter Two, to take these classes from experts in the field because these classes are usually only open to licensed individuals. Faith is likely indicative of many other individuals around the globe and in particular the United States that performs these services from their home.

The informality of the industry and low barrier to entry is further highlighted by the various self-starter books and blogs detailing the secrets of the hair trade and how to monopolize on the multimillion-dollar hair importation industry that, as told by the authors of these blogs and books, has been cornered by primarily Asian immigrants to the United States. An example is Alix Moore, a Black woman entrepreneur, and author of *The Truth about the Human Hair Industry - Wake Up Black America!* a self-help book dedicated to Black individuals who are committed to "making a difference in the hair

industry” (2013). Describing herself as “the first African American female human hair manufacturer in the US” (Moore, 2013, p. 297), Moore opened first store in 1995 in Los Angeles, California. Moore recounts her struggles in the human hair industry in order to provide insights into the struggles African Americans face in starting up business in the beauty product industry due to the intercultural networks that help Asian immigrants to corner the market of the beauty trade. Moore laments that although black women make up the largest group of consumers within the black hair industry, they are highly underrepresented behind the scenes making decisions about product development.

Moore’s personal account of her life in the human hair trade reveals some details about the human hair industry, specifically about finding and securing a supplier. In Moore’s account, it is very difficult to find a supplier and build their trust, and in the book, never reveals her supplier’s identity. This furthers the notion of invisibility that the merchants along the trade feel and encounter. So, as Moore pushes the argument that African Americans need to find ways to penetrate the Black beauty market, she at the same time conceals her own network of trade with her supplier.

#### *Advertising Discourses: An Analysis*

Guthman (2002) argues that a key element of commodity marketing is making the consumer see themselves using or buying a product, in effect making the consumer what they buy. In terms of the online human hair market, however, it is not only that the consumer relates to and can identify with the product. Rather, key in product marketing is the way in which hair advertisements unveil the hidden part of the trade, most notably where the product originates and those producing the product.

Knowledge of hair production is an important driver of the digital market for human hair, which is based not only a price, but also quality. In the hair market, length, the absence of chemical treatment, and its ability to mimic European texture are target marketing points. For example, manufactures emphasize the fact that Remy hair is obtained from a religious site, and it is also marketed as “ethically sourced” or “organic” to enhance its value on the western market (Tarlo, 2016 pg. 65).

The use of these terms carries across much of the human hair marketing language, operating as devices of communication that are imperative to building trust between the product and consumer (Guthman, 2002). In an account centered on organic food, Guthman (2002) describes the purchase of organic foods as telling of consumer identity, and allows others to infer that those who buy organic care more about the environment and their health. This identity is constructed due to the way in which organic foods are marketed. The relevance to food with human hair is in the language that is used to sell the hair.

While the physical market for human hair also exists as a traditional storefront, the sale of human hair has made its way onto the web through social media outlets. This new method of product marketing has developed a series of tangled digital and physical networks, operating as an infrastructure – that is, as matter than enables the movement of other matter (Larkin, 2013). Social media outlets like *Instagram* enable the global movement of hair, expanding the market for hair while at the same time revealing a before concealed social infrastructure that blanketed the production of human hair along the commodity chain. For example, Figure 1.2 depicts what sources refer to as “bundles of hair” that will later be used to either make a wig or be sewn into women’s hair to be

worn as a weave. As noted, these bundles are considered raw hair, meaning it is 100% real human hair. In another example, Figure 1.3 depicts the global human hair commodity chain. In this image socialite and entrepreneur Miracle Watts is posing with individuals who have cut their hair to produce the raw hair product for Watts' company, *The Miracle Tresses*.



**Figure 1.2.** *Pure Indian Hair Bundles.* Post from Pure Indian Hair Instagram page. Retrieved from *Instagram* March 2017.



♥ 5,499 likes

**miraclewatts00** Today was great!  
I took a trip to India to make sure that the quality of hair you receive OCTOBER 15th from [#TheMiracleTresses](#) is nothing but THE BEST && TRUE PURE && RAW INDIAN HAIR.  
[#TheMiracleTresses](#)

**Figure 1.3.** *Miracle Tresses*. Post from Miracle Watts Instagram page. Retrieved from *Instagram* March 2017.

Both of these posts use the word raw to describe the hair as unprocessed and unaltered chemically. However, even though Figures 1.2 & 1.3 use the same platform to speak the same message, there are differences in the way in which one may interpret or make meaning of each post. Figure 1.3 aims to communicate hair as a pure entity: “True, pure and raw Indian hair”, as Miracle Watts describes her product. In the image we see



Watts clothed fully in black sitting with a group of Indian women. While it is unclear if these women have just donated their hair from the trade or are workers in the distribution center, the post sends a powerful message by allowing consumers to validate claims that the hair is true, pure and raw.

These are just several of the thousands of posts similar to Figures 1.2 & 1.3 in which the identity of the producers is revealed and is perceived as authentication of the material aspects of the hair, as well as validating the legitimacy of the US-based distributor. This authentication is verified by the visualization provided in *Instagram* posts, and reveals anxieties about the portrayal of hair. The language used to market human hair (natural, raw, 100%) affects consumers in a similar way the language used to sell raw and organic foods. Consuming the hair that is marketed as natural, raw, and pure expresses anxieties about how real the hair will be perceived. Social anxieties about how *to* look contribute to how the human hair *needs to* look in order to gain certain treatment and opportunities.

Though the players that move the human hair trade along are not always visible, the trade is very much real. There are a few stops along the chain as the hair moves globally, arriving in the United States where it then becomes tussled into a very different cultural ambience than where it once was a part of. In the chapter that follows I examine the Bronner Brothers International Beauty Show as an example of the hair trade in a domestic backdrop. Additionally, in this chapter, I show how cultural, economic, and racial networks work together to successfully sustain this beauty show.

## CHAPTER 2

### BRONNER BROTHERS

The market for human hair is overwhelmingly targeted at Black Americans, who make up a vast percentage of the consumption of human hair in the United States (Berry, 2008). However, the human hair trade should be viewed as a recent iteration in the long history of products marketed at African American women. The Black beauty market was first cornered by white-owned companies that marketed skin-bleaching and hair care products to African Americans in advertisements portraying Black women as inferior and unattractive. These advertisements were typically accompanied by guarantees of the product's ability to fix the “problem” presented by black hair and skin (Gill, 2010).

Gill (2010) explores Black beauty entrepreneurship by Black women from the twentieth to early twenty-first centuries, examining the ways in which the beauty industry was a major player in the construction of identity for Black women. These economic advancements through entrepreneurship in the beauty industry created a platform for Black females to “assert leadership in their communities and in the larger political arena” (Gill, 2010 pg. 2). Not only did successful Black women entrepreneurs help shape the political arena during these times, but they also used beauty spaces such as salons as a network for the spread and expansion of political knowledge to clientele and customers. What Gill highlights in *Beauty Shop Politics* is the heavily overlooked history of Black female entrepreneurship. The historical analysis of African American beauty worker identity has been examined in terms of a hard labor worker or an entrepreneurial business

leader. Gill situates together this historically adversarial identity by “problematize[ing] some of the terms used to discuss key concepts and define differing constituencies in business history” (2010, pg. 4).

Gill’s (2010) work therefore serves as a foundation for conceptualizing the identity of Black female entrepreneurship in the beauty industry. Gill (2010) notes that it was the work of Black men to first attempt to produce beauty products for African Americans. For example, Overton Hygienic Company, a pharmaceutical and cosmetics company established by Anthony Overton in 1898, produced a brown face powder for African Americans. Though Overton did not produce a hair product, his product contributed to the shift in advertisement imagery used to market products to Black women. It was instead the work of two African American women that helped to lay a foundation in Black beauty hair care within the United States. The most popular narrative conveyed in research on black beauty business examines Madame CJ Walker’s introduction of the hot comb to the black beauty market, which made it easier for African Americans to maintain their hair in a presentable manner. It was in fact Madame CJ Walker and Annie Turnbo’s hair care products that “diversified the black beauty industry to include not only selling the products, but also the selling of beauty, independence, and financial success” (Gill, 2010, p. 19). Walker and Turnbo’s success helped to pave the way for black beauty business in the United States within the African American community.

In this chapter I investigate the Black beauty market using the Bronner Brothers International Hair Show to illustrate the ways in which the extensive production network of human hair is contingent upon the existence of a cultural commonsense that Black

women's hair is in need of alteration. In this chapter I draw on scholarship from cultural economic geography on racial enclave economies to highlight how the realization of value and exchange in markets is interwoven with racial and gendered discourses around good hair.

Nearly 35 years after Madame C.J. Walker traveled the U.S teaching women how to sell her products (Gill, 2010; Rooks, 1996), the original Bronner Brothers, Nathanael and Arthur, along with their sister Emma Bronner, began their business in 1947 by teaching aspiring cosmetologists in Atlanta, Georgia at a local YMCA. The stated purpose of their business was three-fold: to improve the beauty industry, to educate, and notably, to empower Blacks. Their meetings at the local YMCA grew and led to the development of the first Bronner Brothers International Beauty Show with 300 attendees. Over time, the show has moved to larger venues due to the increase in attendees and is now hosted annually at the Georgia World Congress Center and reports over 30,000 attendees. It claims to be the largest multi-cultural beauty event in the United States (Bronner Bros, 2018; Kiley, 2017).

The Bronner Brothers International Beauty Show is typically held in August each year and hosts hundreds of vendors. The show has also become a popular networking opportunity for beauty students and business owners. The convention is also widely known for its hair competitions, with the most popular event being the annual hair battle. In the hair battle, select celebrity stylists compete in front of celebrity stylist judges for bragging rights, entry into next year's battle, and a cash prize. While the show is advertised as a convention for educating licensed beauty professionals only, "unlicensed"

consumers are allowed into the convention though they do not have access to some of the events and pricing specials that are designated for licensed professionals.

It was important to investigate the consumer space of the Bronner Brothers show in order to illustrate the ways in which networks of consumption emerge not just as a result of a spatial optimization exercise, but rather as a result of dominant cultural and social expectations and norms of what good hair is for African American women. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century economic geographers have shifted their approaches in order to better understand the role of culture in economic processes.

Economic geography as a “spatial economic phenomena” first began with an approach that Barnes (2001, pg. 546) describes as, “the belief that the central task of theorizing is to develop abstract vocabularies that mirror an external and independent reality.” This approach to economic geography is associated with what Barnes has termed the *first wave theory* in which scholars used “representational maps” (e.g., Von Thünen’s concentric model, Weber’s locational triangle, and Christaller’s central place hierarchy) to describe and explain the locations and distribution of economic activity across space (Barnes, 2001 pg. 554). The late 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, saw a shift towards what Barnes (2001) terms *new wave theory*, a set of approaches that turn away fixed meanings and definitions of economic activity in the world and opens up room for new interpretations. Reassessing the role of culture in economic activity is central to this shift.

While the relationship between economy and culture has long been of interest, Barnes argues that new wave theories changed how geographers began to understand economic processes *through* cultural ones. This new conceptualization links markets, the prototypical economic space, with geographer’s understandings of place, traditionally

thought of as a cultural space (James, Martin, and Sunley 2006). In short, scholars have shifted their research to understanding economic practices as ones that are not purely economic in nature, but rather tangled up in cultural ones and especially around matters of gender, race, and class.

The links between cultural and economic processes are particularly evident in the realm of consumption. James et al. (2006, p. 11), for example, discuss the emergence of “cultural industries”, what they describe as the production and consumption of physical commodities and services by specific cultures that are “deliberately inscribed with particular cultural meanings, lifestyle associations, emotional values or symbolic content.” The link between culture and commodity consumption is particularly evident in food networks. Guthman’s (2003) work on the organic food industry, and in particular salad mix, suggests that the success of this industry has been rooted in social and political processes from its beginning. The organic food industry has proliferated and thrived based off of social anxieties about ethics in food that are specific to a very distinctive racial and economic class that emerged with the ‘yuppies’ (Guthman, 2003), the group of young individuals who merged upward social mobility, consumerism, politics, and culture in San Francisco during the 1960s. Organic salad mix, a niche product in the 1960s, was considered a specialty food that was accessible by the privileged (Guthman, 2003), an association of class and food that highlights the very aspects of cultural economy that James et al. (2006) identify.

There are similarities in the way the organic food industry continues to prosper from class-based social anxieties and the ways in which the Bronner Brothers International Hair Show prospers from race-based anxieties around hair. The hair show is

therefore an important example of the type of cultural industry that emerges from the economic and social networks that have forced the production and consumption of cultural symbolic physical commodities and services by this specific racial group.

*Bronner Brothers convention*

The Bronner Brothers convention was held from Saturday to Monday, August 19 to 22, 2017. I attended the beauty show on Saturday and Sunday. As I entered the Georgia World Congress Center that Saturday morning, I traveled down the escalators leading to a rather large area for registration and checked into the event. The path from the registration area to the convention floor doors was lined with promotions of the show, a schedule of all events, and food vendors. I waited in line to have my bag checked, recorder in hand, and was waved through to enter the convention hall. As the cool air hit my face and hip-hop music filled my ears, I saw that the convention had just opened, and several people were setting up their booths. As I walked through the rows of vendors, tables and booths were full of various types of hair products, health and beauty products, salon and barber tools, hair extensions, clothing, and magazines. There were also booths for service companies like *AT&T*, which sponsored several hair competitions. Occupying the booths were business owners and representatives eager to promote their products and foster business relationships with both other companies and customers – including me.

As I moved across the convention floor browsing various products and services available for this specific economy, I began to observe the demographics of individuals selling products, buying products, and others that were there to socialize and observe the scene. While the composition of patrons was almost exclusively African American, there were some stark dynamics in gender and race that highlight a unique dynamic of the

Black beauty industry. In the next section I will discuss these racial and gender dynamics within the larger literature that considers gendered and racial economic geographies.

### *Racial enclave economies*

One purpose of attending the hair show was to examine how beauty products, ranging from Madame CJ Walker's hot comb to the beauty products marketed to African Americans at events like the Bronner Brothers beauty show, become part of African American identities and the creation of what Wingfield (2009) refers to as a racial enclave economy. A racial enclave economy is like an ethnic enclave economy where the makeup of the economy, including owners, customers, and employees, is primarily fellow minority group members. The businesses in an ethnic and/or racial enclave economy may be located in a concentrated area. Unlike an ethnic enclave economy, however, racial enclave economies are rooted in the recognition of the "role of systemic gendered racism as a preeminent factor shaping the experiences of minority entrepreneurs" (Wingfield, 2009, pg. 20). Wingfield (2009) argues that African American women who do business in the beauty industry have encountered systemic gendered racism that has necessitated the creation of a space for this racial enclave economy to emerge.

Based on imagery from past shows, I expected there to be predominantly African American women at the Bronner Brothers convention, both as stylists and to be running businesses selling hair products, hair tools for beauty shops, and hair extensions. When I arrived on the convention floor, however, I was surprised at the patron makeup. As expected, in booths and walking the floor were both African American female and male participants. While many booths were set up for beauty products marketed for women's



hair care, many also had products for barbering. This is not entirely surprising. Similar to the beauty shop, barbershops hold an important cultural and communal value in the Black community. In purely spatial terms, barbershops and beauty shops share the same building but may be divided by a boundary.

More unexpected was the significant number of Asians attending the show, and the working relationship between Asian and African American workers. At some of the hair extension booths, there was an Asian individual, male or female, taking inventory and counting money, but the ones promoting, selling hair, or interacting with customers were Black men and women. As the face of the company, African American men and women shared a common hair culture with potential consumers. Yet as is described in Chapter One, production networks originating in Asia, and particularly China, play a significant part in the transformation of raw human hair into hair weaves and wigs. Not surprisingly, then, Asian hair entrepreneurs are found at trade shows and in beauty supply stores that sell beauty accessories specifically marketed to the Black community.

Lee (1999) has examined the Asian immigrant entrepreneur experience in the United States and notes their domination of African American markets. While the large number of Asians in African American markets is linked to factors like low rent and higher profitability rates, Lee also points to the importance of intra-cultural networks of supply that are accessible strictly by Asian immigrants. These intra-cultural networks make it more challenging for African Americans to tap into their own market – like that of human hair - as Asian immigrants have cultural ties and often direct access to products that are sold in the United States (Lee, 1999). While Lee finds that the lack of access to production networks and the disparities of social and economic capital leave African

Americans at a disadvantage in the retail beauty market, Black's have shown dominance in areas of service, like hair care (Lee, 1999).

Lee (1999, pg. 1404) outlines that hair care services thrive on “coethnic tastes and preferences”, and thus require little start-up money. These hair care services are considered labor-intensive markets that Asian immigrants do not care to enter, some because the license requirements take time and money, while others do not wish to “do black hair” (Lee, 1999, pg. 1404). Thus, while Asians played an important role in the behind the scenes labor at the show, the composition of the hairstylists at the Bronner Brothers show was largely African American.

It is worth noting that the Bronner Brothers business is aspirational for many African American hair entrepreneurs. While the Bronner Brothers business was created to teach cosmetologists the trade, as their capital grew they were able to penetrate the beauty supply market and now offer a few popular lines of black hair care. Yet as the next section demonstrates, it is important to note that the realization of value in the African American hair industry is in many ways contingent upon the cultural discourses of good hair put forth by the dominant white culture.

*Taming the unruly:*

As I moved through the convention floor, booth owners and workers noticed me observing their products and often initiated conversations with me about their products, assuming I was there as a patron to buy or sell my own goods. Immediately notable in these conversations, and literally plastered all over the booths, were phrases like “all natural”, “virgin hair”, and “100% real” – marketing language used to advertise and grasp the attention of potential consumers. Yet despite the importance of hair weaves and wigs

being natural, at root of the entire show is the notion that products and stylists are needed to able to tame unruly Black hair. Nowhere is this more evident than at one of the most anticipated events each day: the hair battle.

The hair battle is a contest that pits stylists against each other to demonstrate their abilities in front of a panel of celebrity stylists and crowds. At the 2017 convention, the Hair Battle event began at 8:00 pm with four contestants ready for battle. The event was to take place in a boxing ring, marking the event as one of conquest and combat, with the winner possessing the greatest ability to tame the hair of their models.

Not simply a hair cut, the hair battle is a collection of performances from the contestants, with themes to each performance. The first contestant used a circus theme, and featured models dressed intricately as circus animals and characters. In this performance, a lion – played by a model - crawled out with an “untamed mane”, and it was the job of the ringmaster – the stylist - to tame this lion’s mane and thus expose the lion’s face. After taming the lion’s mane, the first contestant then cut her own hair, in effect taking control of her own body and identity through hair.

The second contestant, a biracial woman of Chinese and African American heritage performed a show called *The Revenge of the Black Orchard*. In this performance the stylist entered the stage as men preformed a traditional Chinese New Year dragon dance within the crowd. Then, the contestant performed as a ninja, demonstrating her abilities to combat or fight the rebellious hair strands of her opponents. The selection of orchids in the performances title is no accident: orchids in Chinese culture are first associated with elegance, but secondly with virtue and refinement (Welch, 2013). In addition, the color black is often associated with power and prestige. Taken together,

*black orchid*, followed by the term *revenge*, highlights notions of control, dominance, and grace in the management of hair.

The third contestant was the only male stylist entered in the battle. His performance stood out from the others for the lack of visuals and props that were present in the other three contestant's performances. This minimalist approach demanded the crowd to focus on the abilities of the contestant, which demonstrates dominance over the crowd and judges. However, clothed in all white, contestant three cut and styled hair while suspended in the air. Such a feat is meant not only to demonstrate a mastery of cutting - "I cut hair so well, watch me do it upside down" - it demonstrates a supremacy over hair.

Lastly, contestant four's performance was themed as a Brazilian carnival. Carnival is known for its vibrant colors, lively music, citywide parade, and intricate embellished costumes. Making her entrance riding on a camel, contestant four immediately demonstrated power over nature - including hair - through the process of domestication. Brazilian Carnival stems from a European Catholic food festival, denoting the start of 40 days of Lent, but the mix of Portuguese and African cultures had transformed the food fest into an effervescent festival.

The hair battle was a performance of each of the contestant's ability to cut and style hair. Judges based score off of creativity and ability to create styles using the short time offered. After each contestant performed, there were comments and scoring. After all contestants performed, all of the contestants came on stage and the winner, contestant three, was announced.

What was notable in each of the performances, and was evident in the way that patrons interacted with the goods for sale on the convention floor, was how Black hair is shot through with ideas of the relationship between society and nature and particularly the need to tame an unruly natural substance. Mardsen and Arce (1993) have pointed to the important role that the ability to manipulate nature is essential to the way commodities are produced, in their case, food. However, the production of good hair also requires the manipulation of nature. The ability for a hair product on display at the convention to maintain or tame the hair suggests a need to dominate the natural texture that is produced by African Americans. This desire for manageability stems from social contexts that have deemed black hair unruly, and that straight hair is necessary for acceptance and success. While I explore these themes further in the chapter that follows, my time as a research participant inside of the tradeshow, and particularly with *Deserv* hair care products, made this clear.

*Deserv hair care: Valuing products*

While I initially sought to interview hair weave entrepreneurs at the Bronner Brother show, prolonged interactions with business owners at their booths were slightly difficult to accomplish because they were trying to sell or promote their products. However, as I walked around one woman greeted me and began to ask me questions about my hair. Taking advantage of the opportunity to have a conversation, I began to express interest in her product to see if I would be able to possibly interview her. As we chatted, the woman pointed to the models and their stylists to tell me about the product and its success. The product for sale was a hair smoothing system called *Deserv* that was comprised of four separate products: a shampoo, conditioner, a heat protectant spray, and

a hair repairing elixir. This company's booth was one that did hair demonstrations of their products as a marketing ploy, and in the chairs were two women having their hair straightened.

During our conversation, the owner of the brand walked over and introduced herself. The woman I had engaged in conversation with first mentioned I was in school conducting research and the owner asked if I wanted to be a hair model for her product. According to the Bronner Brothers website, I knew that there were development and demonstration classes for students and business owners that I do not have access to, but as a hair model I would be able to sit in as a participant, so I accepted her offer. I set my things down and she walked me over to have my hair washed. The owner performed the hair washing herself while explaining the benefits of her product to me. After the wash we walked back over to the booth where I met the celebrity stylists, one who worked in Atlanta and the other in New York City.

The Atlanta stylist sat me down and we spoke about my research and her business in Georgia. Throughout our conversation, patrons walked by the booth to view the demonstrations taking place. During one interaction, a potential customer inquired about the product's ability to work on curly hair. The spokeswoman pointed to me and began to talk about the benefits of the product, highlighting my hair's *transformation*. The patron interrupted the spokeswoman and said, "I know it will work on *her* hair, she's got good hair, but what about hair like mine?" She proceeded to point to her natural hair that was kinkier and coarser in texture than mine.

Before long, we were asked to move into a room to prepare for a demonstration class. The demonstration was essentially a class to promote and learn about the product

that the owner created. A power point presentation titled, *Desrv Professional hair care products, Desrv smoothing and strengthening amino treatment system* described how the product would simulate growth in damaged hair and scalps. As I sat in front of a room of approximately 15 individuals, the spokeswoman discussed the history of the product and its benefits. The big selling point that she was trying to convey was the product's composition of amino acids that helped to achieve a fine and refined straightened look. Using buzz phrases like "amino acid", "revert", and "non chemical" is what grasped the attention of the audience. As the spokeswoman went on, a white South African woman asked, "why not just use a perm?" The response, "perms have been out, this product just came out. We have options now." The product, explained the spokeswoman, is meant to provide the straightening results of a perm, but to not have the same permanent damaging properties of a perm.

Desrv seeks to market the product using language that highlights a product's ability to *tame* hair alongside the demonstration of it *actually* taming the hair, and therefore seeking to increase the value of the product itself. After the stylist finished with my hair, I was asked to walk around the room so that the audience could touch my hair to feel its texture, in effect validating the product's ability to work. The presenter described my hair as "laid" straightened hair, that is, having the ability to lie flat on a persons head. Such a look was described as "being polished". However, the case of *Desrv* is evidence that many Black beauty products find value only in as much as they are able to 'lay' the most kinky curly hair textures.

The Bronner Brothers convention is a demonstration of how cultural and social facets influence economic processes, specifically in the Black beauty industry. There is a

long history of racial discrimination that has created the space and structures for a racially independent beauty convention. This history, along with an examination of previous hair discourse, will be examined in the following chapter as an examination of the ways in which Black hair is tied up in Black cultural identity.



## CHAPTER 3

### BEAUTY IN THE STRUGGLE

Hair has long served as a marker for racial differentiation. Historically, slaves in the United States who lived in a close proximity to whites engaged in practices that altered their hair to mirror that of whites, a reflection of the belief that hair that resembled that of a white person's reduced a slave's "blackness" and could translate into better jobs or opportunities for freedom (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Historic hair alteration methods in order to achieve a straight and unkinked look included wig wearing and the use of oils to soften hair and prepare it for straightening (Byrd et al., 2001). By the nineteenth century, practices of mimicking white hair had coalesced into an ideology of what "good" hair was. Good hair, in short, is hair that represents the dominant white standard of beauty of hair: long, silky, and fine (Bellinger, 2007). The less kinky and curly hair was, the less it was perceived as unattractive and inferior.

After emancipation, Byrd et al. (2001) claim that hair, even more than skin color, emerged as the telling feature of Negro status. Straight hair often meant greater advancement in economic opportunity and social benefit, and if hair exhibited any kind of kink or wave, the Negro would be unable to pass as white. As a result, free Blacks continued to alter their hair to appear less 'African,' to fit the dominant white perspective, and to gain access to the 'American Dream.' Today, the popularity of long straight hair among African American women persists, and curly kinky hair is often perceived as too ethnic or too Black (Byrd et al., 2001).

Black hair has long been at the forefront of Black symbolism and imagery, and was very clearly part of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. During this period, Blacks expressed their heritage through their “*hair-itage*” (Johnson, 2009), with the Black Power movement flooding the media with images of big afros and curly locks, promoting a very Afrocentric image. This image of Black power and natural hair provided a space for empowered Blacks to express their cultural identity through hair. This re-appropriation of hair was important in constructing a positive and powerful movement for Blacks.

Wearing natural hair became popularized and combated the image of what beauty was for African Americans. Now, Blacks, and especially women, can feel unashamed about walking down the street with their curly, kinky, and coarse hair. However, big afros and natural hair became associated with this Black Power movement, and thus became associated with Black resistance to conformation in White America. In contemporary times, having an afro or wearing natural hair may still be interpreted by some as being political or even militant (Banks, 2000; Patton, 2006).

Despite the gains made during the Black Power movement of the 1960s, recent events show that African American women likely experience a greater sense of acceptance when they display hair that is “beautiful” and “good,” that stigma traditionally attached to ethnic or natural hair persist, and that these discourses in turn can negatively impact African American women’s rate of acceptance and success. For example, Gabby Douglas, an African American female Olympic gold medal gymnast, sported her natural hair during the 2012 and 2016 Olympic games. Douglas was scrutinized via *Twitter* about her hair during the gymnastic events, with some tweeters viewing her hair as unkempt (Wilson, 2016). What is striking about the uproar against Gabby Douglas’ hair is that no

other gymnast's hair was seen as a problem. In another recent incident, television talk show host Bill O'Reilly scrutinized Congresswoman Maxine Waters, an African American. As Congresswoman Waters spoke adamantly about America's current political state, Mr. O'Reilly responded to her speech with, "I didn't hear a word she said. I was looking at the James Brown wig" (Estepa, 2017). Although this comment was not directed towards Congresswoman Water's natural hair, it provides stark evidence of the public discourse that still emerges around African American women and hair.

For women like Douglas and Waters, hair is an avenue for public conversation that often becomes controversial. The various platforms by which African American women receive resistance targeted at their hair highlights the contemporary contexts by which hair shapes the perception of African American women. For African American women it can be difficult to hide the color of their skin or the curves of their body, but concealing the texture of their hair is an attainable task.

The persistence of discourses of good hair throughout American history is evidence of the continued societal pressures to look a certain way and to obtain the image of what beauty is from the prominent white perspective (Patton, 2006). Appearance in a social setting is a determining factor of what one thinks about a person, how they will go about judging their character, and how they will rank their place or role in society (Webster & Driskell, 1983). As in the early nineteenth century, possessing good hair today can help an African American woman attain greater status in Western society, which in turn can mean both economic gain and gain in opportunity. It is important to note, however, that gain for African American women often simply means achieving the

same number of advancements already given to white women in Western society (Caldwell, 1991).

Traditionally, and more contemporarily, the method of achieving good hair has been to perm, that is, to chemically alter hair in order to loosen kinks and makes it more manageable and easier to straighten, their hair. Perming has side effects that are detrimental to the health of the scalp. In some cases, leaving the perm on too long can burn the scalp, causing alopecia that results in hair loss, and in the most extreme cases, can lead to baldness. Continual perming of hair can also cause problems like dandruff. In any case, while altering hair with chemicals high in pH is not healthy for our bodies in excess, this method has long been utilized as a means of attaining manageable and unruly hair (Banks, 2000).

Popular amongst natural hair concealing methods is weaving of hair and wig wearing. These methods, amongst others, are known as a protective style, that is, styles that protect the natural hair from damage that external environmental factors can cause. Hair weaving is a practice that has many methods, but the result is hair extensions attached to the head of natural hair for the purpose of elongating and concealing natural hair. One of the most popular methods of weaving is known as the sew-in method where the extension, or weave, hair is literally sewn onto a women's head. When having a sew-in done, women have to go through a series of step to achieve this particular protective style.

Weaves can take upwards of 5 hours to install depending on the hair texture of the client as well as the complexity of the style. First, the hair is prepped with wash and conditioner. The hair then has to be dried and blown out, and then braided to the scalp.

The intricacies of the braid depend on the thickness of the hair and the style of sew-in the client chooses. This style is typically contingent upon the type of hair part the client requests. These hair parts include right or left side parts or a part separated down the middle of the scalp. Once the hair is braided to the scalp, the weave is literally sewn into the braid with a curved needle and thick thread using the weft that has been sewn onto the bundle of hair by the manufacturer. Lastly, after the weave has been sewn in, the hair is cut and styled, if desired, to give the weave a more natural fitting look.

In the following section I bring in literature that serves as a frame for my interview data that highlights the way in which Black women interpret their belonging and identity through their hair and lived experience.

### *Belonging and identity*

The intersection of race, class, and gender are influential to questions of status and discrimination (Collins, 2000; Davis, 1981; Grollman, 2012). The matter of intersectionality is important to understanding how African American women have been perceived throughout time, and to distinguish what factors have influenced this perception. Collins (2000), for example, discusses the structured power that keeps Black women subordinate over time, noting the exclusion from jobs, schools, and other opportunities due to the intersection of gender, class, and race.

Literature on the power of hair proposes that there are historical implications as to why hair plays a large role in the lives of contemporary African American women. Previous research lends insight on the discourses around African American women's hair, and how hair is related to issues of social, political and economic inferiority (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Caldwell 1991;). Byrd et al (2001) discusses the significance

of hair to Africans and how the importance of hair has evolved through time leading to the present day discussion. Hair became a large part in determining status and class, thus asserting the hegemonic perception of beauty so widely accepted across the United States. Blacks who possessed hair that was less kinky and closer to texture and style of a white person's often meant greater opportunity (Patton, 2006). Hair worked in conjunction with colorism in determining socioeconomic opportunities (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Caldwell 1991). As this ideology evolved through time, there were African American persons who opposed straightening their hair because it meant they were ashamed of their hair and therefore ashamed of being Black (Patton, 2006). The aforementioned introduction of Madame CJ Walker's hot comb and hair care products in 1905 "challenged the predominant nineteenth century belief that Black beauty was ugly" (Patton, 2006, p. 29). Following Patton's research, there are other works that analyze the damaging effects of these standards on African American women and how these standards marginalize and oppress women (see for example: Carr, 2013; Robinson, 2011).

Caldwell (1991), for example, highlights that there are "stereotypical images about womanhood determined by race," and that these images do not allow for women of color to have a choice in their own image of beauty. In this same vein, Whitney Bellinger (2007) discusses the history of "Black Hairstyles" and why women style their hair in particular ways. In her work, Bellinger finds that African American women alter the texture and look of their hair through chemical treatments for reasons that are practical: ease of styling and maintenance of their hair. For example, some women prefer to chemically straighten their hair so they do not have to maintain the kinks and curls of

their natural hair. Other women, however, choose not to alter the texture of their hair in order to fulfill the idea of racial pride. The so-called “hair hierarchy”, which ranges from good to bad hair for African American women, has damaging effects for women by devaluing hair in comparison to Eurocentric beauty aesthetics (Robinson 2011).

As the foregoing shows, hair matters in the African American community, and specifically to Black women. Taking an ethnographic approach, Banks (2000) interviews women from different ages, backgrounds, and life experiences to understand what hair means, and how these women reflect on the political powers of beauty. Key among her findings is how black women conceptualize their world in relation to the political and social structures that are embedded in their lives and surroundings. Banks assesses that these same political and social structures have often made African American women show resistance in expressing their identity through hair. African American women, in the past and today, are subjected to the same systemic racism, and even further, gendered systemic racism. It was not only that these women were Black, but that they were also women. These disparities between black men and black women have led to the construction of a unique worldview and perspective that Banks uses to tell the story of Black hair. Banks concludes that hair in white communities is not ritualized the same way as it is in black communities, and that the notion of changing hairstyles is not perceived as a perception of self-hatred amongst their community.

Hair has and continues to help shape the cultural identity of Blacks. It was the institution of slavery that had first deemed black hair as unattractive and inferior to whites, and as the world evolved, African Americans had to find their place in a society that once legally deemed them property. Questions of identity are central to the study of

marginalized groups because it helps to conceptualize and imagine how these groups may view the world. More broadly, understanding the perceptions of hair amongst African American women can inform the broader topic that this thesis seeks to investigate: the cultural and structural forces that have helped to produce the market for human hair and weaves in the United States context. Thus, identity becomes a central part of assessing hair amongst Black women.

In order to investigate how hair is part of identity, I interviewed 15 Black women to explore themes of belonging, identity, and exclusion through a focus on their individual hair journeys. The purpose of the hair journey is to understand in detail hair's role in participant's lives, and directly, how their hair is literally entangled with life. Hair journeys also express the way black hair is enmeshed in a societal context, especially how these woman view themselves in society through their hair, or conversely, how society views these women because of their hair. In each of the interviews, participants began their story at the time they were children and continued through their current stage in adulthood. In what follows, I draw on this interview data to describe a typical hair journey, as well as to point to important divergences from this journey. At each stage in the journey, I highlight the ways in which participants slowly take control over their hair from parents, attempt to contend with and understand the intricacies of their hair, and the societal pressures women feel as they seek to make their hair conform to societal pressures and expectations.

### *Hair in adolescence*

My interviews have demonstrated that participant's hair care at an early age is rooted in familial influences, largely determined by what the parent can manage in the



participants' adolescence. This is not a phenomenon specific to the Black community, as it is typical for parents to be responsible for maintaining a child's appearance and hygiene, but due to the amount of maintenance that perms warrant, it takes more effort to keep up with the texture of black hair. Most of the participants have had perms—a chemical alteration of hair that loosens kinks and makes it more manageable and easier to straighten—at a young age because it was easier to manage in the home and also suited to fit the lifestyle of young children.

From northern North Carolina Ashley, a business student, described the point at which her hair became too much to manage and her mother allowed her to get a perm,

My hair was really, really thick and it was a lot to manage and mom was tired of it... she [mom] used to do bows and barrettes and I had a whole head full of barrettes and stuff... Yeah, I wanted it to be straight, but also think for managing it, it also would've been easier for me to get a perm.

Many women had very similar experiences. Perms were a trend during the late 90s and into the 2000s, so getting a perm was a part of how parents knew how to manage hair.

Participants recalled seeing people around them with perms, which normalized the use of perms. Mary, a soft spoken woman from Colorado, shared her account which highlights the significance of the parent's role in hair management, as well as how parental difficulties could lead to significant hair care challenges. In her early years, Mary stated that “when I had to get my hair washed and I didn't really have an issues with my hair at that age just because it was taken care of it was always done I had no problems.”

However, Mary recalls:

The issues came when my parents got divorced [and] because of that my mom was deep into her depression ... she was still taking care of us but you know my hair wasn't getting washed as frequently and all those things so it broke off really bad, and I was like in the 4th grade so I wasn't at the age to do my own hair.

The difficulties in Mary's family life made it challenging for her mother to keep up with the demands of permed hair<sup>1</sup>. This experience has, throughout her interview, shaped Mary's experience with her hair. Mary became self-conscious about her hair and its health, which, as I describe in subsequent sections, over time has resulted in various shifts in the ways she styled her hair.

It is important to note that perms were not only about difficulties that came with the management of hair, but also some underlying notions of conformity. This was not lost on several of the women I spoke to. For example, Sonia, a mixed race woman from central South Carolina recalled that as a child, "I had really long curly hair. It was waist length, it was really curly, it was typical mixed kid hair." While Sonia's mother said she permed it because it was too hard to manage, Sonia also believed there were deeper reasons for her decision. Sonia alleged that her mother was aligning herself with the imposed Eurocentric beauty standards that deemed straight and sleek hair as beautiful and acceptable. As she told me,

My mom has always had weird issues with Eurocentric beauty standards that she has projected on to me, so she permed my hair and she hot combed my hair every week and when I was a baby she would press my nostrils to make it straighter because she didn't want my nose to be big...it was so weird.

Not every participant started off with perms. Michelle is a doctoral student from Ohio working on a degree in psychology. She expressed to me that she has never had a perm because her mother would not allow it, but that she did go to a salon regularly to have her hair pressed. Unlike a perm, pressed hair allows the hair to revert back to its natural state and does not require the use of chemical alteration as a method for

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<sup>1</sup> Perm maintenance varies from person to person. It is typical for an individual to have their new hair growth touched up with a perm every 5-6 weeks with bi weekly washes and styles.

straightening. Zoey, a recent graduate from an all-woman historically black college (HBCU), shares a mutual experience with Michelle. She told me that she has always had long hair and was not allowed to straighten it until grade seven.

Although perms were not the staple in every participant's home, there are links amongst the women in terms of cultural and familial influences. During adolescence, for example, most participants experienced a sense of anxiety around fitting in, or have felt like their hair played a part in making them stand out against their peers. Mary, the participant whose mother was not able to keep up her hair after divorce, wanted her hair to look like her friends. She recalled,

My best friend ... was Hispanic ... and I also had another friend, she was biracial... They had this long thick [hair] and then my friend ... had all this curly hair and I was like "ugh"! I was going through hair puffs, and my parents just got divorced, so I was like super conscious about it ... because why isn't my hair all long, thick, you know, what going on?

Mary, at a young age compared herself to her friends and was very conscious about the differences in her hair. Although other participants did not have an extreme change in their home at this age that affected their hair care, many of the participants did experience the feeling of being different because of their hair. Michelle, the woman with the pressed hair, was involved in sports at school. Often time team activities called for uniformity in attire and, and at times, hairstyles. As Michelle recalled,

Let's say the whole team wants to wear our hair in a bun one day, it's like, I can't get my hair in a bun. Or let's say everyone wants to wear their hair half up, half down. I can't get my hair half up, half down. Like, that's when you notice the little things of like, wait, I'm different in this way.

Beyond simply feeling different, many participants recalled being teased and tormented because of their hair. Kimmie is a woman in her late twenties from a city in central Georgia. As a child Kimmie only wore pigtails because it was the easiest style her mother could achieve at the time. She recalled a time she wanted to attend her school dance, but

also wanted to have her hair straight for the occasion because her peers had repeatedly asked if she was going to wear pigtails to the dance. After coming home crying, she convinced her mom to allow her to perm her hair. However, her mother had to go behind her grandmother's back, as her grandmother was very resistant to the idea. Kimmie, in the midst of a laugh says her grandma told her mother, "No, don't do it, don't do it". She continues her story,

Well, after I came home crying that day, she [her mother] was like, 'All right, we're going to get you a perm.' So, we went and I went to the dance, and I had curls and my Grandma was so mad, but I was so happy.

Participants were not only teased by peers. Indeed, in a few participants journey's, there were moments when adults made comments towards young participants about their hair which contributed to making them feel uncomfortable or out of place. Ashley, the business student who, as she recalled it, had "a whole head full of barrettes and stuff," remembered the time her teacher said, "Oh my God, never seen anybody wear their hair like that!" Simone, a doctoral student with sister locks<sup>2</sup>, told the story of a time when her dentist, who she believed reacted this way because he did not want to perform pro-bono dental work, told her,

I don't like when you come here, because your hair is greasy...and you make my chair greasy. When you come in here, you need to have a plastic bag or something on your head and you tell your mother you can't come back here with your hair.

Simone's experience was more directly a result of what she described as, "one of those hair trauma moments that he was just really nasty to me because of my hair," and it is something she says she will never forget. Participants described these encounters as *demeaning* and *dramatic*, and were often followed by participants' comments and questions of why it seems like a big deal for Black women to change their hair, but not

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<sup>2</sup> Sister locks are a smaller, thinner version of a traditional dreadlock

such large deal when their white female counterparts change up their look. In many of my conversations, participants noted the frequency with which non-black people, both male and female, approached Black women and made public displays and loud comments about their changed hairstyles.

These trends would continue as interview participants started to take control of their hair choices after a childhood in which parent's held the greatest responsibility for hair care. As I describe in the section that follows, moving to new locations has opened up the opportunity to provide a shift in consciousness about hair.

### *Hair in adulthood*

A majority of the interview participants have been to college or are currently pursuing either a bachelor's degree or a post-secondary degree. It is notable that during this period many of the women have experienced a significant shift in their hair consciousness, often in relation to understanding how much time and money has been allocated to their hair care. In many cases, participants now have to allocate *their own* time and money, which has changed the way they care for their hair. Michelle, for example, highlights how she moved away from press and curls and began to learn how to care and wear her hair in its natural state. Michelle described this experience as something that was forced upon her out of necessity. Her biweekly salon trips as a kid living at home turned into yearly trips for a trim. This shift was driven in part by the realization that making routine biweekly trips to salons costs money that she did not have as a college student.

Judy, a current employee at the University of South Carolina from central South Carolina with a short curly pixie cut, shared a similar experience. Judy's transition into a

new location meant a transition back to her natural hair. She recalled that once she got to college, “I just got tired of relaxing my hair, to be honest.” She continued, “I got tired of having to depend on a stylist to do it. So, I let it grow out . . . it’s not like I had a whole lot of time to take care of myself anyway.” Judy and Michelle’s narratives represent a common theme that many other participants expressed when it came to the college transition and hair care. Seeking out a new stylist presented a challenge, as it would presumably for any other race. However, from the interviews emerged a theme of hair health that is also linked to the growing popularity of natural styles. Social media has dubbed the growth of the community of persons who wear natural hair, and the increased availability and popularity of hair products for textured hair, as the “Natural Hair Movement.”

The Natural Hair Movement has proliferated in part due to the widespread use of media platforms. As Jackie, a student from Ohio who only had perms up until college, expressed, “I see more women who are in mainstream media that are embracing their natural hair”. Jackie goes on to explain how she views hair as more than just something that is a part of her, rather she views hair as an accessory, as a statement implying, “If I want to wear my natural, and I want to give a big fuck you to the European ideal that beauty has to be straight hair, or curly, or whatever.” Jackie is excited about the ability for Black women to embrace natural hair and enthusiastically said,

I think that the movement has given people the confidence to be who they are, to try something different without feeling like their hair is unprofessional or, I don't know, somehow unkempt or anything other than wearing your natural hair.

Denise, a woman from Mississippi, described people in the Natural Hair Movement as a community:

I think now just the freedom to be able to express yourself through your hair, whatever your hair look likes, whatever your hair texture is, just seems like generally people within the community are more welcoming to different textures and shapes and different things like that.

The natural hair movement provides a space for visual representation and as a community of acceptance of hair regardless of the texture of length. The movement is used not only as a means of representation of Black women celebrating their natural textures, but also as a means for advertising. Even though the natural hair movement is about embracing your hair and its natural ability to allow the participants to be who they are, there are still issues with the movement that participants have addressed, particularly those linked to ‘colorism’ and the idea of ‘texturism.’

Colorism in the Black community is not a new phenomenon. The notion of colorism divides the African American community into a spectrum of skin colors, implying that lighter colored skin is more accepted than darker toned skin, on the opposite side of the color spectrum. Not unlike colorism, texturism creates a division between African American’s hair texture, with looser curled textures on the end of the spectrum that society and some African Americans deem acceptable, and kinkier thick textures being considered on the other end and not as acceptable. The concept of texturism is related in part to the notion or expression of good hair. When asked about the natural hair movement and their opinions on how the movement affects contemporary society, participants often expressed that the negatives that arise from the movement come from the favoring of these looser acceptable textures over the kinkier thicker textures.

For example, when Whitney explained how she manipulates her social media accounts to increase the representation of darker skinned women with kinky hair, she noted,

For me you have to be very conscious of the natural hair community for example, when you're on YouTube. It is harder to find someone who fits the mode of what I look because that's what helps me but its hard.

Whitney finds it challenging to find women that look like her on platforms like *YouTube* that women use to view reviews and hair care tips. She finds that within the natural hair movement there is an emphasis on women with lighter skinned tones and looser textures, so it becomes challenging to find herself in the media. Despite having described the natural hair movement as a community, Denise also had some comments on the some of the negative aspects of the movement,

Now where the negative comes in is outside of the community, so the people who are giving the hair samples and doing the commercials are not as open to different textures and different shades and that kind of just perpetuates this whole thing that we have of like colorism.

Denise furthered her argument,

The idea of colorism, that can start divisions within and I think typically the community does a good job about pushing those types of things out but I've seen where there have been questions of like if mixed women are starting to take over the natural hair movement and things like that. Which just perpetuates the division and I think there are valid questions, I think we just have to learn how to navigate those things a lot better to support each other.

Denise and Whitney agree that the individuals being promoted by companies are often those who fit the socially *acceptable* standard of hair, which in turn plays on the notion of colorism due to the historical conception that lighter skinned women, mixed race women, have better or good hair.

Michelle, the psychology student who has never had her hair permed, had an insight about the negative aspects of the natural hair movement that I believe highlights



some issues of classism that are inherently linked to the historical notion of colorism. As we discussed this topic outside of the local Starbucks she stated,

So first I have heard criticism that women who are really on the natural hair movement look down upon those who aren't natural, because I do agree that there are some voices within the natural hair movement that ... it's almost like an elitist thing, like, 'Oh, I'm going natural, look at me' type of thing. Which I think is counterproductive, because I feel like that's what's been done to us all this time.

Michelle also had some remarks regarding colorism and texturism,

In terms of colorism and texturism, yeah. I definitely, definitely, definitely see that. Because it's like, now we're going natural, but there's still this emphasis on this looser curl pattern that traditionally people who are multiracial would have, and not women who are only black. And so yeah, I feel like I see that everywhere. I think that's in the media, like music videos and magazines and like, that's the ideal. So even women who wear a weave but want it to look more natural will do a looser curl pattern.

She ends her critique with,

Like, no one's getting a weave or an afro. You know what I mean? And I think that there's a reason for that, and I think it's because we're not fully to the other side yet of acceptance. We're somewhere in the middle right now. Which I think, I mean, progress is good, right? But we can't stop there. So I think we have to push beyond that.

While Whitney, Denise, and Michelle are women that range in skin tone and hair texture, it is important to note that each of them has highlighted the issues of colorism and texturism as problems within the natural hair community as a whole.

It is important to note that the natural hair movement does not completely remove the need for hair care products. Similar to the range of products and treatments available to Black women to straighten or perm their hair, a range of hair care products have emerged that are meant to enhance and nourish the curly textures of hair for all races. Many of these are situated in discourses of health. Throughout the interviews there are moments when participants express the importance of health. Health was important in terms of having healthy hair, a concern for women of any race, but there was also a link

between having healthy hair and having a healthy body. Since perms are composed of chemicals that break down the proteins in the hair causing breakage and in some cases a burnt scalp, they are not conducive to the healthy lifestyle that interviewees spoke about. Kimmie, the woman who permed her hair after being teased about a school dance, stopped getting perms after she heard from a mortician that told her that when the deceased are Black women, it is not uncommon for them to have a green scalp as a reaction to the chemicals from perms. Kimmie exclaimed, “I was like ‘Okay, this can't be good for you’”.

Twenty one year old Alycia, who works as an assistant to a dermatologist, explained to me, “a lot of black women who come in with baldness is because of scarring, like having perms multiple years and it causes scarring in your scalp and that can cause you to have baldness”. Being exposed to some of the dangers of perms on a regular basis, Alycia uttered calmly,

I definitely started spacing out my relaxers more. I don't get them very often... I really don't like putting all those chemicals in your head, and I've seen what it actually does. Like people, when you are bald and you just see all this scarring from where they got burned.

Having linked the bad side effects of perms to unhealthiness of the body, hair health is important to participants, as well as finding a stylist that would cater to the needs of a woman with natural hair. Since finding a stylist proved challenging in the transition to college and other locations, and natural hair care became readily available in popular consumer spaces, at-home styling was the best alternative for participants.

Some participants also experimented with what are known as protective styles. Protective styles are hairstyles that allow women to have natural hair, but it is fashioned in such a way that it conceals the hair. Protective styles are typically found in the form of

braids or twists, and may involve adding extensions to the hair in order to achieve elongated hair for prolonged periods of time. In her experience, Mary, from Colorado, involved the transition out of the use of extensions for Senegalese twists<sup>3</sup> because the frizz that originated as a result of a new humid climate became a problem that she now had to consider in her new role as a college student.

College did more than simply shift the financial responsibility for hair care onto participants. Rather, college acted as a learning and social space that provided the opportunity for participants to experiment with their hair. It is important to note that most participants attended, at some point in time, a predominantly white institution (PWI) for either college or graduate school. When at these PWI's, most of the women expressed a desire to seek out other students who were Black and shared similar interests and cultures. This Black space became a means of comfort of expression, familiarity, and a shared knowledge system that is indeed expressive of the learning and social space that a college space provides.

The majority of participants do not have permed hair currently, and nearly all began to transition out of perms in college. Those that still have perms, such as 21-year-old Alycia, note that, “getting older, especially when I got to college, I was like, everybody's going natural, I'll hop on this train one day.” Alycia is one of the few participants that continues to perm her hair, but she expressed in her interview that since arriving at college she has developed greater knowledge about her hair, and has learned from her friends what managing natural hair is like. Gaining familiarity and knowledge

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<sup>3</sup> Also known as “rope twists” is a protective style that originated in Senegal, Africa. The twists are achieved by twisting natural hair with hair extensions in two strands.

about the natural aspects of Black hair is giving Alycia a chance to develop what she describes as a “deeper appreciation for it [hair].”

While college campuses represent a Black space for knowledge exchange around hair, it is linked to other channels of life such as on social media platforms and social spaces like salons. I spoke to Whitney, a current Ph.D. student, in a crowded and noisy nook of a campus coffee shop. In a statement that displays the importance of social media to hair care, she brought up the ways in which she manipulates her various social media applications to display content that is more in tune to her preferences. Lowering her cup she expressed that “for a very long time and still consistently now, when there’s women on social media they all look like me, there is like a strict restriction on my social media, they’re all dark skin women.” For Whitney there is a strong association with the tone of a Black person’s skin and the texture of hair. In the latter portion of her interview, Whitney noted that for her, hair is inextricably linked to complexion; she has always linked the coarseness of her hair to the dark complexion of her skin. This speaks to the initial discussion of the link between colorism and texturism in the Black community. To combat the fact that her hair is “less on the acceptable side of natural hair,” Whitney has opted to transform her social media timelines into a black space, “transitioning or working on how [she] interpreted dark skin women with kinky hair.”

What emerges from these accounts is an inherent spatial component to how Black women choose to wear their hair. In her work, Secor (2015) assesses how questions of urban mobility shape the choice of Islamic women to either wear or not wear a veil. Like hair, veiling is wrapped up in social and historical contexts that are perpetuated through the use and non-usage of veils by Islamic women in Istanbul. Described as an “embodied

spatial practice” (Secor 2015, 19), veiling is a negotiation of choice within the city, and these negotiations challenge the social and political powers that attempt to control the use of veils by banning them in Muslim majority public spaces. This choice is reflective of the specific politico-religious structures that are placed upon Islamic women in Istanbul, and veiling allows differential access to space in the city. Similarly, the experience of social space influences how women choose to wear their hair, but for Black women in particular, these choices are shaped by contemporary and historical contexts that deem Black hair inferior to Eurocentric beauty ideals.

When immersed in a Black space, Black women are faced with the choice and freedom of expression whereas in a space perceived as non-safe spaces (i.e. the workplace), Black women’s choice is pressured by the idea of conformity to Eurocentric beauty standards in order to gain opportunity and to be seen beyond the hair that grows from their scalp. As a form of covering, hair wigs and weaves take on the same meaning of the veil. Although not directly controlled by the same social contexts, the notion of spatial negotiations of choice are apparent in both gendered examples.

Furthering the Black space surface area, Whitney’s use of social media highlights the importance of representation. This is not only physical representation similar on a college campus, but also representation in the media. Representation in the media has become an essential driver of the natural hair movement that has opened a positive space for the acceptance of natural hair by society and self, such as with Whitney. Social media platforms serve as a digital infrastructure for the transportation of knowledge and imagery that makes contributions to the cultural aspects of various communities such as those with imagery of Black women and Black hair. Byrd & Tharps (2001:14), for

example, describe Black beauty parlors and barbershops as “sanctified spaces” that serve as sites for both “community and aesthetic interaction.” In some ways, social media has supplanted, or at least supported, the cultural role that salons have traditionally played in the African American community.

All participants have gone into a beauty shop at least once in their lifetime. Salons whose clientele consist of majority Black patrons and Black beauticians are different culturally than what some participants have experienced in a salon whose clientele and stylists are predominately White. When asked about salon experiences she may have had, Michelle recalled a time she needed a trim and did not have access to the black beauty shop. She explains how in her experience Black stylists who happen to work in White salons are “usually in the back or sort of secluded off from everyone else”. Though she found being secluded in the back of a salon unusual, she described how she did not mind being off to the back of the salon with her stylist because she and her stylist were still able to “create that sort of black beauty shop feel” in their own corner of the otherwise *white* salon. This narrative is a rich example of the ability for Black space to transpire when necessary. These examples of Black spaces narrated by Whitney and Michelle illuminate their significance to the constitution of Black hair.

Though college served as a space for self-expression and self-awareness, participants have also had to experience some moments where being natural or expressing their natural hair was talked about amongst peers and even professionals such as professors. When Denise transitioned into college she began her natural journey after years of perms. During her freshmen year, Denise recalled being one of a few individuals who had been on the natural journey that did not straighten their hair but instead wore it

“out”<sup>4</sup>. Still struggling to understand her hair, Denise remembered walking by other students and hearing whispers of people make fun of her because of her hair. The lack of natural hair representation on her college campus caused her to be ridiculed because of how she chose to wear her hair. Denise opted to move away from hairstyles that were deemed socially acceptable and proper, and as a result was mocked for wearing her hair the way it grows out of her scalp. When asked what changed in her thinking about her hair and feeling judged for her hair, she paused for a moment, adjusted herself in her seat and asserted confidently,

I just remember there coming a point where I was kind of like...I loved my hair, I loved myself, and I'm going to wear it out, and if people don't like it they can not sit behind me. They can not sit behind me in class, they can not touch my hair, like they can stay away from me, but my hair is my hair.

Denise's response references a time in class where her professor claimed he could not see a student raising their hand because Denise's hair was blocking the professor's view.

Denise described the event as uncomfortable and embarrassing for her especially after the professor asked her after class to wear her hair differently the next time as to not cause any more distractions.

Denise's experience occurred in late 2013. Ashley described to me the reactions she received from peers and a mentor when she walked into the Business school revealing her first protective style to her peers and mentors in the fall of 2017. Having just moved to a new area, Ashley was surrounded by new people in her master's program. When I asked to be taken through her hair journey she began with,

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<sup>4</sup> Wearing natural hair 'out' refers to wearing it outside of a protective style. In this state, natural hair is worn without the constriction of braids or ponytails. The hair is just worn in its free and natural state.

The first thing for me has always been professional appearance, 'cause I'm going into business. I'm going to be in somebody's corporate office one day and if the first thing they see is my hair, I don't know how I will be perceived.

With the worry of negative perceptions on her mind, Ashley walked into her advisors office and was greeted with what she described as an extremely *dramatic* reaction to her new style. She said to me,

I walked in and she was like, 'Oh my god, Ashley! Oh my god! I didn't know who you were!' She like laughed in my face and made this big, 'Girl! Oh my god didn't even know who you were!'

However, later that same day, Ashley received a text message from a friend who said he really loved her hair. In contemplating these events, Ashley sighed and expressed to me, "You get mixed reactions, and it also changes how you feel about it, too." Having already felt uncomfortable and less confident with her hairstyle herself, Ashley says she was scared of how people would react. The fear in part stems from the unknown comments she would receive because some members of society typically interpret protective styles, like her twists, as ethnic.

After her interview Denise and I began to talk about when we thought the shift in accepting and understanding our hair occurred in our lives, exchanging a few anecdotes about my own incidents around hair. Near the end of that conversation, Denise mentioned black space as a means of understanding hair but also in facilitating education in understanding oneself and one's own hair - how you can be yourself and wear your hair how you wish to. As she expressed,

I think the shift comes too with education. First of all you're in the space to where you're allowed to do that because if you have a job that is like 'oh well your box braids are unprofessional' or something like that, no matter how you feel about your natural hair, you're not in a space where you can embrace that, but then we're also in a space where we learn about how the world sees our hair.



Denise believes that in college, the social and educational environment allows Black women and men the freedom of not having to strictly conform to the standards of professionalism that society has created and accepted. Having this freedom, combined with being in a space that flows with knowledge, students learn how the world perceives black hair. Denise conveyed this knowledge as a sense of *enlightenment*.

Most hair journeys were a narrative about the trials and tribulations of hair care and knowing what it means to be black, be a woman, and to have hair that has historically been perceived as *ugly* or *unruly*. Michelle had this to say when I asked her opinion on the emergence of the natural hair movement:

We're the only women, people, whatever, whose natural hair is considered 'unprofessional', historically, which is crazy, because it comes out of your head, so how could it be unprofessional? But I love that we're starting to break down those barriers.

Black hair has been and still is immersed in various conversations. It can be a very casual conversation amongst friends or family as it is for many other racial groups. Black hair can also be a very political conversation, as was the case in September 2016, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit ruled it legal to refuse to hire someone if they have dreadlocks, a hair style that is popular amongst the Black community (*Equal Employment Opportunity Commission v. Catastrophe Management Solutions*, 2016).

Although there remains plenty of negativity linked to Black hair, participants still managed to celebrate its versatility. Michelle's explanation highlights this aspect well:

I love that we're celebrating our own natural hair and not feeling like it constantly has to be straightened or has to be pulled back in braids really tight or whatever. Cause I think that's the most beautiful thing about our hair is that we can literally do anything; we can literally span the entire gamut of hairstyles.

Sporting her second big chop—a term coined by the Black community to define cutting off a substantial amount of hair in order to regrow the hair back healthy—Jackie spoke

about the times growing up she knew nothing more of her hair than it needing to be relaxed<sup>5</sup>. Her entire life as a child and young adult every Black woman that she knew had relaxed hair. It was not until Jackie got to college that she bore witness to anything other than relaxed hair. In college she was able to experiment with and experience new styles.

Though she was not ready to go natural or do a big chop then, Jackie noted,

I guess that was my first foray into being black positive and accepting yourself as you are rather than conforming to these unnatural standards, not that women who are relaxed are trying to be white or whatever. That was the first time that I saw hair as more than just something that's on top of your head. It can be a statement. That really fascinated me.

Taking back the meaning of Black hair and turning it into a positive is just one message that one can gain from these hair journeys. In finding what regimen fits a budget, a lifestyle, and is expressive, participants have associated self-love and black positivity with an appreciation for their hair. Jackie's narration of how she internalizes what Black hair means for her and how she outwardly expresses that meaning through her hair speaks to the experiences of veiling that Secor (2015) highlights in her work in Istanbul.

Additionally, there is scholarship that examines veiling practices in terms of fashion consumerism. Gokarıksel and Secor (2012) assess the practice of veiling-fashion and how this practice becomes wrapped up in ethics and more specifically, the governing of self. In their work, Gokarıksel and Secor (2012) highlight that the participation in veiling-fashion is not simply just choosing to wear this specific form of dress, but that veiling-fashion becomes a tied up in spatial self governing. Women challenge their socio political contexts by participating in veiling-fashion, but at the same time work within the boundaries by shifting the way a headscarf may be worn in certain spaces. This notion of Black women taking back the meaning of Black hair relates to veiling-fashion in Turkey.

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<sup>5</sup> Relaxed is another term for perm. When you perm your hair it *relaxes* your curls.

The comparison is linked by both group's acknowledgment of the social and political powers that have shaped and constructed the meaning of black hair and headscarves. The acknowledgement of these powers in addition to the choice to choose to wear a headscarf in Turkey or wear a protective style or their natural hair illuminates the power of choice.

Although participants have expressed tones of positivity and understanding of their hair as a Black woman, there are a few participants that have expressed a sense of anxiety associated with their hair in the workplace. This anxiety is presented as not knowing how people will perceive them in the work place or how they will be represented in the workplace. Ashley, the business student who received unwarranted remarks from her advisor, is just one example of the anxiety that some Black women face. For those participants that have expressed a sense of anxiety about hair in the work place have noted that the change in hair for Black women can be perceived as a *dramatic* event that participants feel is not the case for their White counterparts.

Mary, who has moved from Colorado to various states up and down the East coast, has settled in South Carolina and is working on her Doctorate in Bio Medical Science. When we discussed why she chooses certain hairstyles, she said, "I just want a style that looks good. That's what my focus is...a style that looks good, that's functional, that's easy, and that is presentable for when I go to work." She continued, "I don't want people questioning me if I'm suitable for the job because I'm already Black and then I got this hairstyle that shows...whatever."

Like Whitney, Mary believes her hair may be another reason to be discriminated against in the workplace. As a minority in her program, Mary explained,

When I go out to seminars I'm like the only Black person in the room. There are different cultures there, but Black people are the only culture whose hair defies

gravity every other culture's hair is the same it might be thick, it might be black, it might be long, it might be whatever, but as far as the texture is concerned and the treatment in terms of taking care of it all of it is all the same. None of them can relate to me in how hard it is for me to do my hair.

Mary's account highlights the difficulties that some Black women may experience in terms of their hair in the workplace. From feeling they may be set aside because they do not fit the image of a professional to having coworkers and peers that do not experience or understand the intricacies of Black hair, many participants expressed the feeling of exclusion.

During my interview with Whitney, the woman who manipulated her social media to include women of color that look like her, she described to me that when she worked as a barista, she did not experience any problems that related to her hair other than the fact that she had problems fitting her hair into the uniform cap. Unprompted, she followed that story with, "I do foresee issues whenever I get these applications and start to get these call backs. I have already decided that I'm going to get a wig and its going to be like bone straight". Whitney believes that when she starts to apply for professional jobs after graduation that her hair may play a factor in an employer's decision to hire her. She went on,

I don't want any questions... because I feel like there's layers too. I can't change the color of my skin, I can't lighten the color of my skin, so the only thing I can change is my hair. So, I will wear wigs but after I get that job...the nappies will be coming back out.

Whitney is one participant that believes the color of her skin is tied to the kinkiness of her hair and if she is discriminated against because of her skin color, her hair may play a part in that discrimination as well. So, Whitney chose to play it safe within the system of bias by deciding to wear a straight haired wig. It is in this context that the market for hair weaves has emerged as a multi-million dollar industry.

## CONCLUSION

When examining discourses on hair, what you find is that there are societal pressures that have influenced the way in which African American women should wear their hair. Tying that together with the cultural economy of such an unruly resource, what surfaces are the ways in which identity links together with consumption. This connection is important to understanding not only the consumption of hair by Black women, but also the Black beauty market itself. The link between identity and consumption is tied up in external forces of power that have made Eurocentric beauty ideals the standard for Black women to subscribe to and achieve. Human hair is a contemporary and popular avenue for achieving hairstyles that conform to this dominant beauty ideal. It is the style that does the conforming, but it is the personal choice of women to adopt the meaning of that choice.

Wig wearing and hair weaving, amongst many methods, are ways in which African American women achieve a hairstyle that conceals the natural texture of their hair. My research has sought to investigate the global human hair trade with a particular focus on the consumption of human hair, by illuminating questions of identity, spaces of belonging, and ethnic entrepreneurship that surround the consumption end of the global human hair trade. This exploratory empirical analysis is an attempt to detangle the bundle of social conditions that shape the consumption of an unruly and certainly tangled up resource. My contributions to the recent literature of the transnational hair trade are threefold: first, this study connects the historical contexts of hair in African American

communities with the contemporary uses and ideologies of hair that exist due to historical frameworks. Second, my research establishes a geographical framework for the study of the human hair trade. I situate the analysis of the human hair trade inside of a cultural economy discourse, and explore the contexts by which consumers chose to consume. Further, I consider the specifics of how niche economies, like Black beauty, are maintained and sustained by societal and cultural powers. Additionally, I provide a context of the spatial negotiations that arise in the examination of choice as it pertains to choosing a particular style and how this choice challenges, both intentionally and unintentionally, the dominant Eurocentric beauty idea. Lastly, this study begins to consider the role of social media networks in facilitating the shift in social thought and acceptance of Black hair due.

This examination is limited by the constraints of time, resources, and the informalities that characterize the human hair trade. The hair journeys of these 15 women are not representative of an entire population, but they do provide some insights into the present social climate of Black hair. These insights are representative of a specific class of women, Black, college educated, and middle class. This specific class of woman limits my research in that Black women who live under differing conditions (i.e. lower social status) may interpret the world and are governed by different experiences. Additionally, to travel across the globe in pursuit of the realities of the human hair trade would be tremendously beneficial to future works, but the trade's global network operates in part because of the invisibility of the actors that work within the human hair trade.

What future research should examine, in terms of the human hair trade, are questions of labor along the trade. How do we evaluate labor when humans produce the

raw material? To further investigate Black hair, we need to evaluate how beauty is interpreted in society. The focus of Black hair exists as juxtaposition against Eurocentric beauty, so should researchers only evaluate the perceptions of Black hair from the Black community? I think that in order to further the acceptance of Black hair, those that oppose it should first seek to understand Black hair. The conversation around Black hair is changing, by seeking to diversify images in the media, providing hair care in mainstream consumer spaces, and by bringing acceptance to Black hair by women choosing to wear their hair out, not solely with the intention of giving a “fuck you to the European ideal that beauty has to be straight hair, or curly, or whatever” but wearing their hair out because it was what they were born with, have managed their entire lives, and have the right to wear natural. As Michelle, a woman from Ohio, expressed, “progress is good, right? But we can't stop there. So I think we have to push beyond that.” It will not only be the work of African American women to push the conversation, but also the work of those manipulated by the Eurocentric standard of beauty to accept the conversation to more forward, to push beyond labeled standards of beauty.

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