(De)Tangled: an Exploration of the Hierarchies in the Natural Hair Community

Schillica Howard

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(DE)TANGLED: 
AN EXPLORATION OF THE HIERARCHIES IN THE NATURAL HAIR COMMUNITY

by

SCHILLICA HOWARD

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

Within popular discourse, natural hair is considered to be a source of liberation where Black women can accept and nurture their natural hair texture. My research explores the points of contention in this community and the hierarchies that exist based on length of hair, curl pattern, and texture. By using product content analysis, interviews with Black women with natural hair, and analysis of social media, this thesis brings the ideal aesthetics in the natural hair community to the forefront for closer examination. Findings insist that, in the natural hair community, a curl is more attractive than a kink, longer hair more preferable than short, and that “manageable hair” is vital to Black women’s successful performances of Black femininity. This thesis project attempts to broaden the discourse on Black women and natural hair to encourage new conversations and understand tensions in the natural hair community.

INDEX WORDS: Natural Hair, Aesthetics, Femininity, Black Women
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AN EXPLORATION OF THE HIERARCHIES IN THE NATURAL HAIR COMMUNITY

by

SCHILLICA HOWARD

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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(DE)TANGLED:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE HIERARCHIES IN THE NATURAL HAIR COMMUNITY

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Georgia State University
August 2015
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Rosalind, to whom I owe just about everything.
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So many conversations contributed to this project that I do not know where to start! Of course, I must thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Tiffany King, who added depth and layers to my research. To my thesis committee, Dr. Lia Bascomb and Julie Kubala, I give my thanks for asking the tough questions necessary for this project. My girls, you know who you are, who listened to all of my stress-induced conversations and became my close friends, thank you so much!
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1 INTRODUCTION

Memories of my experiences with my hair trace back to early childhood. Most would say that a twenty-two year old Black woman who has never had a relaxer is hard to find, but that is who I am. Whether long and silky when straightened, or curly, soft, and big in its natural state, I found that my hair has become a sort of ideal to many of the Black women with natural hair. “I want my hair to be big like Layci’s,” said my friend to a room full of Black women with natural hair during our senior year of undergraduate school. I was shocked at how many young women nodded in agreement. It felt odd that, in a room where Black women claimed to embrace the uniqueness of the hair growing from their scalps, they wanted their hair to look like mine. It became clear to me on this day and often afterwards that my hair had qualities in its length, texture, and curl pattern that others considered desirable that manifest as hierarchies in the community. This thesis project regards these hierarchies as worthy of exploration. Attending to these hierarchies can provide insight into what Black women consider to be a desirable aesthetic for natural hair and how that aesthetic can determine the reading of one’s gender and sexuality.

I remember that there was something about my hair that made everyone else agree that they wanted hair like mine while we were sitting in that room three years ago. I argue that Black women who wear their hair naturally create hierarchies that seek both proximity to and distance from Western beauty standards while also producing an ideal Black femininity. My research focuses on the way curl pattern, texture, and length might inform these hierarchies and notions of hetero Black femininity. An examination of hierarchies and performances of femininity is currently absent in the discussions surrounding Black natural hair. My research fills this critical gap in the research on the politics of natural Black hair. Now that more Black women have decided to embrace their natural hair, it is important to discuss these hierarchies because Black women with different textures, curl patterns, and lengths of hair do not have monolithic
experiences with their hair; instead, these aspects of hair can be a cause of tension among Black women. Black hair is another site where intraracial power dynamics can be observed through everyday enactments of power, agency and desire. This research is important because hair is culturally important and holds value in our lives.

Much research has been conducted surrounding the undesirability of Black hair over the centuries.\footnote{Ayana Byrd, and Lori Tharps, \textit{Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America}, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2001), 57.} The common themes in the research are racism, dehumanization, and beauty standards. When enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas, their hair was described as wool, not “real” human hair. This equation with animalistic traits dehumanized the enslaved Africans and subjugated them to an inferior status. Soon, Black people began to feel that their hair should be straight like their master’s hair and that their natural texture was inferior.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 25.} Black people of all genders had to contend with this aesthetic standard however, Black women in particular encounter gendered experiences regarding hair texture, length, and curl pattern. According to Treva Lindsey, “Both enslaved and free black women confronted white cultural dominance and associated beauty norms that degraded and dehumanized black women.”\footnote{Treva Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities: New Negro Womanhood in the Nation’s Capital, 1890-1940.” PhD diss. (Duke University, 2010), 69.} Aesthetics based upon these standards continue today as hierarchies are created and maintained in the natural hair community.
1.1 Literature Review

Many scholars have theorized the politics associated with Black hair. In discussion of hair in general, feminist scholars argue that hair has always been a cultural indicator of femininity. Scholars such as Treva Lindsey, bell hooks, Ayana Byrd, Lori Tharps and many others explore the political contexts of Black hair. Many scholars argue that European standards of hair have been used to dehumanize Black women (see Byrd and Tharps and Lindsey) and hair was also used to make ideological statements. Scholars such as Ralina Joseph and Yaba Blay also explore the way hair has become a signifier of race, specifically Blackness, and femininity over time.

1.1.1 Black Hair History

Black people’s relationship to hair and aesthetics is precocious, as Byrd and Tharps explain in their book *Hair Story*. Various textures and curl patterns existed in pre-colonial West Africa as they do now, and hair styling conveyed various meanings socially, aesthetically, and spiritually.4 For example, in the Mende culture in Sierra Leone, clean, neat hair was of the utmost importance. Plentiful amounts of hair were valued in this culture as well. Various pre-colonial cultures such as the Yoruba, Mende and communities in Ghana and Senegal used hand-carved wooden combs, palm oil, and shea butter to care for hair. People in these communities and nations styled their hair by twisting, plaiting, using red earth (among the Qua-Qua), braiding, cutting, tying, pinning, etc.5 Caring for hair was a duty bestowed only upon those who were deemed worthy.

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4 Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 4-5.

When forcibly brought to the Americas, enslaved Africans did not have the time to care for their hair the way they had pre-enslavement. The Eurocentric standard of beauty permeated the culture. Slave owners saw hair as one of the ways to dehumanize these enslaved Africans. If masters considered the enslaved closer to animals than humans, inhumane treatment would be easier to inflict. Therefore, fluffy, kinky hair was associated with wool which facilitated the process of enslaved Africans being rendered chattel. This view of Black hair as animal like or non-human persists to this day.

Today, many people would consider their hair natural, however for Black women, the term has multiple and complicated meanings. History is dotted with moments where “natural hair” was both highly encouraged and discouraged. Natural hair made various returns to popularity particularly during periods when Blackness was embraced. In the early 1900s, prior to the New Negro Movement, natural hair textures were embraced as Black elites felt that wearing one’s hair in its natural texture represented an elite aesthetic. In this instance, “natural hair” was hair that was unstraightened. Many point to the 1960s and 1970s when the Afro became a vehicle for Black political expression as large numbers of Black men and women wanted to distance themselves from whiteness by rejecting “neat” haircuts for men and straightened styles for women. In order to do so, they grew and picked their hair out into Afros. According to the authors of *Hair Story*, aside from the Afro, the Natural also became popular around the same time. “The Natural” was described as “unstraightened Black hair that was not cut close. It was a

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[Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities”, 70-71.](#) Lindsey does point out, however, that the elite class of Black folks during the early 1900’s was of mixed racial heritage with lighter skin and straighter hair that other Black folks sought to achieve.
less sculpted, less maintained version of the rounded, perfectly actualized Afro.”

Other styles that complimented the natural and unstraightened textures of Black hair became trendy as well. People who sported such styles called each other “naturals” or having “natural hair.” “Naturals” were Black people who did not chemically or thermally straighten their hair.

Natural hair became a profitable business throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and scholars began to take notice. The popularity of the curly perm (Jheri curl) of the 1980s pushed out the Natural, but natural hairstyles reemerged in the 1990s with the rise of neo-soul (Lauryrn Hill, India Arie, Macy Gray, and Erykah Badu) as the genre sought to counter mainstream representations of Blackness. Soon Stanford and other universities began offering classes about Black hair. A class entitled “Black Hair as Culture and History” was an upper level class taught at Stanford University in 1992 by Dr. Kennell Jackson, Jr. that focused on the politics of natural Black hair. The study of aspects of Black natural hair has picked up great speed, and the contemporary “Natural Hair Movement” began in the mid 2000s.

The “Natural Hair Movement” can be defined as the recent push for Black women to wear their natural hair textures. According to Patrice Yursik, a prominent natural hair blogger otherwise known as Afrobella, in her conversation with Bustle Magazine, “The new movement is about freedom and is a beautiful tribute to the ’70s movement and what they were fighting for.

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7 Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 57.
9 "Neo-Soul and the Natural Hair Phenomenon - Ask Me About My Hair (.com).” Ask Me About My Hair. September 10, 2012.
The old movement paved the way…” Indeed, the current Natural Hair Movement is a shift away from ideological stances that manifested themselves with natural hair; instead, the current movement is community formed based solely on having natural hair. The Movement encompasses academic work on Black hair, exploring the versatility of Black hair, connecting with other Black women with natural hair, removing the stigma of natural hair in the workplace, etc. Locating the Movement can be difficult as it heavily relies on virtual and digital spaces such as Youtube hair tutorials, forums for connecting with other Black women for advice, and Tumblr for inspiration. Thus, the digital locations specifically created for hair discussions also separate the Natural Hair Movement from other moments when Black hair textures were embraced. Every Black woman with natural hair may not see herself as a member of the natural hair community. For example, two of my participants stated that they did not feel like members of the community. Kayla explained, “It’s just not that big of a deal to me. I stopped getting relaxers and kept going.” In other words, this participant did not fit the narrative that is often central to the current Natural Hair Movement: a realization that relaxers are bad, cutting one’s relaxed hair, then feeling liberated and connecting with others who have similar experiences.

This narrative appears to establish boundaries around the community; however, I and most of my participants have never had relaxers (and therefore never underwent the “big chop”) but still consider ourselves a part of the community or movement due to our engagement with digital spaces of community. Thus, it is important to realize that the natural hair community, created by the Natural Hair Movement, is an imagined community. According to Benedict

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12 Focus Group, Interview by Schillica Howard, April 10, 2015, transcript.
Anderson, an imagined community is imagined due to the fact that the members will never all know each other on a personal level yet it constitutes a community because of the sense of comradeship that exists.¹³ This rings true for the natural hair community, especially due to its location in digital spaces and the decision to wear one’s natural hair texture. Though Black women do gather in person to discuss and create bonds based upon hair, the planning and origins of these events often spur from online discussions. Digital spaces allow Black women across the world to come together to learn and relearn their hair. These digital and physical spaces constitute the natural hair community.

Describing one’s hair as “natural” in the 21st century also has various meanings depending on the person. One Black woman might refer to herself as having “natural hair” if she has not or no longer uses any chemicals in her hair. Another Black woman might use chemicals to color her hair and still consider herself to have “natural hair.” Black women with locs or who wear their natural hair under wigs and weaves may or may not label themselves as having natural hair or as a member of the natural hair community. Indeed, the natural hair community is broad in definition. The phrase “natural hair” can include Black women with locs, braids, or any other hairstyles that use a Black woman’s naturally occurring hair texture. The natural hair community can include these same women, depending on their usage of digital spaces that are deemed spaces for Black women with natural hair.

For the purposes of my project, I did not include Black women with locs or who wear their hair in braided styles for long periods of time. These members of the natural hair community are imbued with differing meanings within the Black community and among Black

women specifically that fall outside of the range of this study. Therefore, I spoke with Black women with natural hair who mainly wear or have worn their hair in various textures without adding other types of hair. None of my participants, at the time of their interview, had locs or any other types of hair added to their own hair. I excluded women with locs and long-term braided styles to interrogate the aesthetic of loose textures of Black women’s hair. The natural hair community, though, does include Black women with locs and braided hairstyles. Participants in my project were asked to define “natural hair” and many shared the same definition of “natural hair.” In my research, I use the phrase “natural hair” to describe hair that is not currently relaxed. For example, I am a Black woman who has never had a relaxer, who flat irons occasionally, and chemically colors her hair from time to time yet I still consider myself to have “natural hair.” Defining this subset of the Black population and the natural hair movement opens up other areas and avenues of inquiry in a growing field of study. With this project, I will explore the current aesthetic for Black women’s natural hair with the use of hair products that has become highly important in creating this aesthetic.

Many Black women scholars have taken up the topic of Black hair at some point during their careers. Black hair is political: its presence or absence holds bountiful meaning. It can be a signifier of femininity or masculinity, a racial signifier, class signifier, or a link to

14 While the majority of the participants described natural hair as hair that has not been chemically altered with a relaxer, one participant stated that natural hair was the hair that grew from your head. She cited wearing weave, wigs, etc. as not wearing one’s natural hair.

15 See hooks 1993; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Spellers 2003.

spirituality, depending on one’s culture. Hair can identify one’s status in the world or among one’s particular social group. Most of the research done up to this point has focused on Black hair in relation to whiteness. What has not been discussed at length however, are the hierarchies amongst Black women who embrace their natural hair and style it in ways that render their hair texture visible. Discussing Black hair on its own accord and examining the hierarchies within the Natural Hair Movement allow deeper conversations about what Black women desire from their hair and what they want their hair to say about them.

The study of hair is also a large sub-section of research in African American, African Diaspora, and Black Feminist Studies. The discourse on Black women’s hair has been and is being produced from a variety of fields and methodologies. Discourse analysis, visual cultural analysis, interviews, and memoir through blogging are simply a few of the methods scholars use to discuss Black women’s hair. The voices on Black hair gathered in this study are mainly the voices of Black women and men that hail from various parts of the United States. They enter the discourse on Black hair at various points. Their voices and thoughts emerge from scholarly and popular presses, indicating that Black women’s hair is a highly discussed topic inside and outside of academia. This project engages both scholars and individuals outside of academia who voice their opinions on social media. Social media is a valuable space of dialogue for this project due to the way it fosters a community in constant conversation with the past and the present.

1.1.2 Cultural Meanings of Hair

Byrd and Tharps detail the heavy connection between identity and hair to various African societies before enslavement in America. Hair Story provides an in-depth history of Black hair

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17 bell hooks (Feminist Author), Noliwe Rooks (Africana Studies), Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps (Editor and Journalism, respectively)
from the 1400s to the new millennium. Hair was so heavily associated with one’s identity before enslavement that “a person’s surname could be ascertained simply by examining the hair because each clan had its own unique hairstyle.” In Wolof culture, one’s hair could also convey their marital status. A widowed Mende or Senegalese woman left her hair unkempt to demonstrate her grief and to become unattractive to other men. Mende women also took pride in having thick and abundant hair that was braided flat to show off their head shape. Status was displayed through grandiose hairstyles that often included headpieces in other cultures. Hair had important cultural meaning in many African cultures. The significance of hairstyles was not lost when the enslaved Africans landed in America. The meanings became more nuanced as Eurocentric standards of beauty along with privileging of certain types of hair permeated Black culture.

Many Black feminist authors discuss the role of internalized racism in the way that Black women feel about their hair. In Hair Story, Byrd and Tharps describe this internalized racism. They explain that the “New Negro” of the early 1900s did not wear their “nappy” hair as it was seen as savage. Byrd and Tharps offer the explanation that accepting Eurocentric beauty standards was a way for Black people to find protection because “emulat[ing] European standards of beauty, dress, and behavior…” was a way for Black people to be more easily accepted into White society. They clarify, “to gain access to the American dream, one of the first

\begin{itemize}
  \item[18] Byrd and Tharps, Hair Story, 2.
  \item[20] Ibid, 3.
  \item[21] Byrd and Tharps, Hair Story, 26.
  \item[22] Ibid, 26.
\end{itemize}
things Blacks had to do was make White people more comfortable with their very presence.”

This mentality, however, permeated large parts of Black culture. Hair straightening became a way to appease whites and, tangentially, to reshape the Black aesthetic. Some, like Langston Hughes felt sorry for Black people who felt the need to accommodate whiteness, as he explained in “The Negro and the Racial Mountain.” Treva Lindsey explains that “white beauty ideals and trends within white beauty culture played integral roles in the developmental stages of a nationalized, black beauty culture” in the early 1900s. Straight hair became a sign of modern African American womanhood in the New Negro movement. There became a connection with manageability of hair with control and order over oneself in a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. This thought process evinced internalized racism as White people and Black people alike considered those who could not or would not straighten their hair savage and uncivilized.

1.1.3 Kinky vs. Straight

Hair plays a large role in presenting one’s respectability and femininity for Black women. According to LaMonda Stallings, hair becomes a medium through which heteronormativity is racialized. Stallings explained that early eugenicists and racists alike determined that Black people were hypersexual and deviant and began reading deviance directly onto Black bodies.

23 Byrd and Tharps, Hair Story, 26.


26 Ibid, 65.

The further one moved away from Eurocentric aesthetics, the more deviant they were perceived to be. Kinky hair is directly associated with Blackness; and, Blackness has historically been deemed deviant. Thus, “good hair”, characterized by manageability, is directly connected to heteronormativity whereas kinky hair is queer. Stallings explains that the coded language used to describe Black hair itself exposes the deviance associated with Black hair, but this will be discussed at a later point.

Similarly, Treva Lindsey connects Black women who straighten their hair to respectability. Straightened hair on a Black woman removed the “physical blackness” that is kinkiness. New Negro women in particular straightened their hair in order to live in the new, modern aesthetic of Black womanhood that existed during that time. This still rings true as natural hairstyles are often considered to be inappropriate for the workplace or even formal functions. Theorizing with Stallings, I argue that “straight” is coded language pointed to heteronormativity and sexual purity.

Stallings and Lindsey are certainly telling two sides of the same story as they point to kinky hair as deviant and straight hair as respectable for Black women. Thus, Black women with kinky hair can be read queerly or lacking the correct femininity. Even possessing a looser texture of hair may bring a Black woman closer to the “proper” femininity, one that is heteronormative,

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28 Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities”, 71.

29 Consider the court case of Rogers v. American Airlines, Inc., where Renee Rogers sued for discrimination after being forced to cover hair cornrows to report return to work. Rogers argued that American Airlines policy against all-braided hairstyles were discriminatory to Black women as braided styles are culturally specific to Black cultures. Rogers lost her case.
respectable, and obedient, as looser hair textures bring one closer to whiteness, which will be explained further in the next section.

### 1.1.4 Hair and Racial Tension

Not only determining femininity and identity, hair becomes a signifier of race in many ways. Many scholars argue that hair, like skin color, can be and has been used to determine and identify race. If one is found to be “too Black” or have “Black hair” the impact of the politics of hair moves from the theoretical to material.\(^\text{30}\)

For example, Yaba Amgborale Blay, in her chapter of *Blackberries and Redbones* entitled “Pretty Color ‘n Good Hair” describes the way hair, for Creole women in New Orleans, becomes a signifier of race. One’s hair texture was often used to determine whether one was Black or Creole. Being Creole afforded one privilege in the mid-1900s and still does to this day. “Tests” were often given based on hair to decipher one’s standing. Skin color tests were used as well, but hair was a more useful measure for race in this context. Store owners often administered the comb test which could bar a person from entry to an establishment if a comb became stuck in any way while gliding through a person’s hair. Any kink or tight curl could easily stop a comb. In this way, hair texture made someone Black or Creole and determined their social standing.

Blay finds that the Creole women she interviewed always distanced themselves from Blackness, taking up their French or Spanish heritage instead.\(^\text{31}\) One must have straight hair

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\(^{30}\) Once again, consider the case of Renee Rogers.

(wavy, at most) to have the privilege of being Creole. This straight hair removes the woman from Blackness and brings her closer to whiteness. Denying one’s African descent and using hair as a signifier of one’s distance from Blackness exposes the internalized racism of the Creole women Blay interviewed.

Another example of the primacy of hair in signifying race is Ralina Joseph’s examination of the play *Mixing Nia*. Joseph explores the way hair is used to racially transform the main character. Nia, a light-skinned Black woman, is able to move from whiteness to blackness to racial ambiguity simply by changing her hair. Joseph scrutinizes the use of hair as a racial signifier. She writes, “Her hair, …[a] clear signifier of Nia’s racial alliance, changes in each fantasy to…demonstrate that switching hairstyles necessarily accompanies switching personae.” To become white, Nia straightens her very long hair. Taking on Blackness means wearing her hair curly or wearing braids. Nia experiences less privilege when taking on Blackness throughout the play.

I point out the purpose of hair as a racial signifier to explain that hair is highly racialized. For Black women, hair has often been used to measure how close (or far) one is to whiteness. According to Kobena Mercer, seventeenth and eighteenth century scientific racism measured

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hair, skull size, etc. in determining one’s ethnic status with wooly hair placing one in “Negro” categories.³³ Kobena Mercer also describes hair as “the most tangible sign of racial difference.”³⁴ Both Blay and Joseph point out that distance from Blackness and whiteness can be aesthetically important and can lead to anti-black racism. Hair becomes a key ethnic signifier as it can be changed more easily than other bodily features such as skin color or body shape thus, one’s hair can allow one to move between races depending on other features.³⁵ As I will discuss in the following section, Joseph’s text *Transcending Blackness* digs deeper into the use of multiraciality in aesthetics. Using hair in this manner certainly plays a role in defining whose hair is beautiful and what beautiful hair looks like.

### 1.1.5 Distancing from Blackness/The Multi-Racial Aesthetic

As previously mentioned, hair is sometimes used as a way to distance oneself from Blackness and whiteness simultaneously. Ralina Joseph’s book *Transcending Blackness* explores the dichotomy that is created in the discourses on bi or multi-raciality. The dichotomy creates the binary between those who are special and those who are a problem. She argues that in establishing a multi-racial identity, anti-blackness, and the pathologization of Blackness often occurs.³⁶ On one hand, racist laws like the one-drop rule and tropes like the tragic mulatta diminish the privilege usually afforded multi-racial Blackness. Conversely, multiracial Blackness

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³⁵ Ibid, 35.

aesthetically is seen as transcendence of the shameful marks of Blackness. Joseph calls folks who have transcended Blackness “exceptional multiracial.” The aesthetic is not quite white but not entirely Black. Thus, the exceptional multiracial is able to move fluidly between whiteness and Blackness. Better yet, they have the “best of both worlds”; for example, the exceptional multiracial could have light skin, the “Black girl butt”, and curly ringlets instead of kinks.

This multiracial aesthetic is highly valued in United States culture, and it certainly does not stop or start with Blackness. Thus, Black women will wear Brazilian, Peruvian, Malaysian, or Mongolian hair as a way to grasp at this multiracial aesthetic. They are not grasping at whiteness. Instead, they may be valuing the look of mixed-racedness. Hair styling products like those created by the company Mixed Chicks or Miss Jessie’s Multi-Racial Curls contribute to creating this look of multiraciality. Indeed, Andre Walker, the creator of the Texture Typing System that will be discussed at length at a later point, feels that kinky hair should be chemically relaxed to create a looser, elongated curl. Joseph explains, “the mixed race person functions as a bridge between estranged communities, a healing facilitator of an imagined racial utopia, even the embodiment of that utopia.” In other words, multiraciality is seen as breaking down rigid barriers that historically presented themselves and caused conflict.

38 Ibid, 3.
39 This look may certainly lead to higher neoliberal flexibility as one can be read as representing a number of different races.
40 Joseph, Transcending Blackness, 2.
Similarly, Ana Perez investigates the specific implications of multiraciality among Mexicans in Florida in terms of ethnoracial experiences.\textsuperscript{41} Perez explains that the intersections of Blackness, whiteness, and brownness that Mexicans living in the United States experience places them in a “racial middle ground.”\textsuperscript{42} The language of mestizaje that is used to describe Mexican color lines disrupt the dominance of whiteness. Perez argues that the language of mestizaje is a practice of decolonization and a space for Latina theorization around multiraciality. The language of mestizaje and discussions around multiraciality are highly beneficial for my research as they point to a place where things are not as they seem. I am pointing out that Black women may be seeking an aesthetic that is not completely Black but is also not an attempt at a Eurocentric standard of beauty or a white femininity. Indeed, the multiracial aesthetic informs the hierarchies my research explores as it moves away from hair textures and curl patterns directly associated with and placed at the lower rungs of the strata of Blackness (kinky hair, unmanageable textures).

\textbf{1.1.6 Internalized Racism}

In her book \textit{Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery}, bell hooks explains that hair texture is no longer a site of “bodily pleasure” for Black women.\textsuperscript{43} Written in 1989, hooks recounts the oft-told story of the mother struggling to comb her daughter’s hair. She explains that the negativity that bombards Black women about their hair occurs early and therefore becomes internalized. Explaining where this internalization begins, hooks states, “Negative thinking about

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\textsuperscript{41} Ana Perez, “Gueras, Morenas, y Prietas: Mexicana Color Lines and Ethnoracial Sameness-Difference” (PhD diss, University of Maryland: College Park, 2013), 122.

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid}, 122.

\end{flushright}
our hair is usually conveyed in the home by parents, other caregivers, and siblings. One aspect of white-supremacist thinking that seemed to take hold of the black psyche in the 20th century was the assumption that straight hair was better. This kind of thinking is internalized racism.

Shauntae Brown White’s chapter of *Blackberries and Redbones* entitled “The Big Girl’s Chair” also addresses internalized racism. In this chapter, White explores the marketing techniques of Motions for Kids relaxers to Black girls. Motions, a chemical relaxer company, markets altering/straightening natural Black hair to young girls. White finds that Motions basically ingrains young girls with negative beliefs about their hair, making them believe that relaxed hair is better. Motions markets natural hair as difficult to maintain and unattractive. The company also makes it clear that the relaxer is a transition into womanhood. Young Black girls internalize these messages and decide to chemically alter their hair, thus subscribing to the racism within the Motions commercials.

In the works of Yaba Blay and Shauntae Brown White it is clear that the othering of Blackness by means of hair was internalized and perpetuated by Black people. The belief that Black hair needed to be tamed, altered, and straightened came directly from the dehumanization that enslaved Africans experienced and the need to survive in a world that was overtly anti-Black. Straight hair was considered beautiful, feminine and respectable instead of kinks that

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44 hooks, *Sisters of the Yam*, 85.

come naturally to Black hair. Instead, relaxers became naturalized as a way to control Black hair and thus Blackness in ways that could also control gender and sexuality expression.

My focus on internalized racism among Black women in their hair is for contextual purposes. As I have shown, Black women have long tried to subscribe to ever changing Eurocentric beauty standards. Some have failed while others have succeeded. I think it is important to realize that none of our choices and feelings are innocent. Wearing one’s hair naturally may seem (and can actually be) empowering for many Black women, but I seek to explore the not-so-innocent-but-not-completely-guilty (the contentious and vexed) areas within this group of women.

1.1.7 Hair Texture and Hetero-Black Womanhood

In addition to finding that Motions characterizes Black hair as naturally difficult to handle, Shauntae Brown White finds that the relaxer company also markets relaxers as necessary in a young Black girl’s psychosexual growth. In White’s analysis, Motions calls unrelaxed hair “virgin hair” as do many Black women and other hair companies. The “Bitter Girls”, a group of girls with unruly hair created by Motions advertisements, were presented as masculine and angry. White, “The Big Girl’s Chair,” 23.

46 Motions portrayed the relaxer as a “rite of passage into womanhood.” Indeed, bell hooks describes her hair straightening experience as “a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood.”47 The way Motions presents little girl’s hair as virginal before a relaxer and on the right track toward womanhood after describes the sexual development that is seen to take place

46 White, “The Big Girl’s Chair,” 23.


when a Black girl has her hair straightened. The masculine representation of the girls without relaxers points to the masculinity that is often ascribed to kinky hair. This female masculinity can cause questioning of sexuality, which would encourage mothers to put their daughters on a heterosexual path to womanhood through relaxers.

1.1.8 Black Hair Care and Politicized Aesthetic Turns

Discussions of Black hair care often focus on the hair care trends during a certain time period and the tools and products that were able to make those trends a reality for Black women.

One of the most popular points of entry for literature surrounding Black hair care is Madame CJ Walker. Credited for being the first Black millionaire, Walker made great strides in commodifying Black hair care in ways that never happened before. Prior to Walker’s interventions, Black women were learning hair care rituals from elders and friends in their communities prior to the twentieth century; Walker’s products and subsequent beauty schools created new markets for Black hair care tools and products. Black beauty culture grew from the business of hair care products, tools, advertisements, etc. designed specifically for Black hair care needs.

White hair care companies often advertised beauty products for straightening Black hair and lightening Black skin. Black hair care giants such as Madame CJ Walker, Annie Turnbo Malone, and Sara Washington faced criticisms because they marketed hair care products and tools in similar ways as white companies. Some felt that the Black beauty standard, offered by

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50 Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities,” 71.

companies such as The Chemical Wonder Company of New York, Boston Chemical Company, and The Hair Vim Growing Parlor, pulled Black women into Eurocentric beauty standards at the hands of other Black women. Many authors, and Black women at the time, disagreed and saw this new trend toward straight hair as the trendy new look for the modern Black women, particularly in the nation’s capital, as Treva Lindsey points out. Tiffany Gill, at a symposium at University of Pennsylvania, explained that straightened hair portrayed discipline while natural hair was a sign of laziness. Lindsey and Rooks also observe that access to hair care products and hair salons were reserved for elite Black folks, pointing to the importance of consumption that would continue within Black beauty culture.

The rise of consumer culture from the 1920s-1940s saw the rise of Black women’s buying power for Black beauty products prior to World War II. Straightened hair remained the aesthetic of choice for middle-class black women. Indeed, an entire industry was created for the business of managing Black hair. According to Lindsey, “By 1920, over 10,000 black women identified their occupation as hairdresser”; thus, the hair salon became a site of modernity as a

52 Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities,” 71.
54 Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities”, 25.
new industry was born as Black women were heralded as new entrepreneurs and patrons. This new capital in the Black community encouraged white companies to attempt to find business footing in this new Black market. This desire reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s as the Black market continued to grow. Trends in Black hair care became “natural” looking straight hair that was flowy after straightening.

The 1960s and 1970s brought on new trends in hair styling and hair care. As stated in *Hair Story*, “Hair came to symbolize either a continued move toward integration in the American political system or a growing cry for Black power and nationalism.” Thus, nappy hair and picked out Afros became the prevailing aesthetic for Black women in conjunction with the new political movement of the time. When the political aesthetic of the afro went out of style in the 1980s, straight hair and the jheri curl took its place, calling for consumption of new types of hair care products once again. The 1990s and 2000s became a time where weaves took the forefront and even more consumption was necessary; however, locs came into fashion during the neo-soul moment (1998) in which Lauren Hill became a Black cultural icon. The mid-2000s welcomed the new Natural Hair Movement.

I argue that the current Natural Hair Movement has given rise to new levels of consumption of hair care products and a different aesthetic that has not yet been explored.

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57 Lindsey, “Configuring Modernities,” 90,93.


59 Ibid, 97.

60 Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 50.
1.1.9 Texture Discrimination and Natural Hair Politics

The discourse surrounding the hierarchies in the natural hair community is currently blooming in social media. Various Black women Youtubers and bloggers have begun to engage in discussions about the discrimination they have experienced based on the texture of their natural hair from other Black women with natural hair. Jouelzy, a well-known Black Youtuber with kinky hair, for example, describes her feelings of being outside of the natural hair community. She states that the natural hair community presents curly, long hair as the pinnacle of healthy and beautiful natural hair. Jouelzy even found that companies selling products specifically to Black women with natural hair rarely sent her products to review. This shows that products for “natural hair” were only for certain textures and types of hair that fit into the beauty standard in which the companies felt willing to invest. Similarly, a Youtuber named Klassy Kinks, in response to Jouelzy’s initial video, expands on the “texture hierarchies” she has witnessed over the course of her time blogging on Youtube. Klassy Kinks also argues that the discrimination has travelled to the use of products. She states that products commonly use phrases like “curl elongation” and “curl defining”, but where does that leave natural hair that does not curl?

Similarly, the bloggers at twobrowngirls.co have found length to be another point of discrimination. They write, “When I think about all of the natural hair websites and tumblr pages I go to for inspiration, I find that an overwhelming majority of them seem to showcase natural girls with the hair that I want - long, “Bra Strap Length” that hang past the shoulders. There are

61 Klassy Kinks, “Response to Jouelzy’s ‘So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination’” Youtube video, 7:32, May 4, 2014,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVC8c7G0MHg
so many articles, videos, and tutorials about length retention, protective styling, vitamins, the “inversion method” (standing upside down for four minutes a day to get your hair to grow), but very little that I have seen celebrating TWAs [Teeny Weeny Afro] or closely cropped hair.”

Jouelzy also points out the production of natural hair plays a large factor in whose hair is deemed beautiful. She states that “my hair is not pretty to watch from beginning to end,” meaning that her hair does not subscribe to the common image of hair that is always curly and never kinky throughout the process of manipulation. The manipulation of her hair to look like something completely different from its literal natural state to a figurative natural state troubled her. In other words, Jouelzy felt the impacts of the hierarchies in the natural hair community because her curl pattern was more kinky than curly.

In light of these debates, Black hair clearly is imbued with meaning in American culture and undoubtedly in Black culture. “Hair indeed may be trivial, but it is central to the feminine definition,” writes Brownmiller. In his article, “Black Hair/Style Politics”, Kobena Mercer describes the politics of hair thusly:

Yet hair is never a straightforward biological 'fact' because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally 'worked upon' by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant 'statements' about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don't. In this way hair is merely a raw material, 


64 Ibid.

constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with 'meanings' and 'value'.

It is clear that Black hair is constructed in general, but natural hair has a politics all its own. This politics is made apparent by Kobena Mercer’s and Joulzey’s statements. Mercer explains that, indeed, all hair is worked upon, whether to make an ideological statement or to go to the store. When one takes up the moniker of “natural”, that person is typically not allowing their hair to freely grow from their heads. Natural hair is constantly manipulated to fit into the beauty standards of natural hair that I will explore with this project. States of literal and figurative natural hair are important for understanding the contexts of this project. Literal natural hair is the hair that grows from one’s scalp while figurative natural hair can refer to new textures and curl patterns created through styling and use of hair products. Figurative natural hair is worked upon while literal natural hair is not. The figurative natural state of Black hair is an exclusive aesthetic as some cannot conform to the standards, and the consequences can include ridicule or even social isolation. Thus, one’s decision to manipulate their literal natural hair into figurative natural hair can be considered as a political act.

Black feminist scholars have argued for the political nature of Black hair. Black feminist scholars like bell hooks and many others often write about what it means to be a Black woman wearing her natural hair. There are, however, gaps in the research that I fill through my own work. While the discourse around the hierarchies in the natural hair community is currently growing, there has been little to no academic discussion on the topic. In my research, I explore the ideals that women with natural hair aspire to while wearing their hair naturally. This is

66 Mercer, "Black Hair/Style Politics," 34.
important because these women believe that they are freeing themselves from the Eurocentric ideals of beauty, but they are, in fact, reaffirming hierarchies of a different sort.

1.2 Theoretical and Analytical Frame: Black Feminism

I will take up a black feminist framework in this project. I make the opinions and stories of Black women central. Black feminism will be used in this project to discuss larger sociopolitical topics. The participants of the project have Black feminist thought to offer to the study. I encountered as many Black feminist thoughts as women. It is important to point out that there is no one Black feminist thought.  

1.3 Theoretical and Analytical Frame: Subjugated Knowledges and Situated Knowledges

According to Patricia Hill Collins, Black women’s ideas can be deemed subjugated knowledges as they stem from a matrix of domination. Subjugated knowledges are defined as follows by Michel Foucault:

blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked, and the critique was able to reveal their existence by using, obviously enough, the tools of scholarship...a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as...insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.

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By this definition, my project is concerned with subjugated knowledges and situated knowledges. Black women have only recently, and I might add, rarely been asked to voice their opinions about their relationships to their own bodies. Emotional and corporeal knowledge in itself has often been disqualified as unnecessary and nonacademic. Thankfully, in Women’s and Gender Studies, academics are encouraged to seek knowledge from creative outlets and from lived experiences. According to Donna Haraway, situated knowledge requires that the object of study be seen as an actor and agent in the process of research, not as raw material to study objectively. However, one must realize that situated knowledges are not innocent because they are the product of one’s culture, values, and language. The participants in my research will convey their situated knowledges based on their standpoint that stems from a variety of contexts and histories specific to each participant. These knowledges are narratives created by individuals and are not absolute truth.

1.4 Methodology and Methods

This thesis uses interviews, a focus group and content analysis to answer this projects’ research questions. This study also privileges learning about Black women’s hair from Black women. “(De)Tangled” explores the ways Black women talk about and perceive their natural hair as well as the ideal aesthetics they desire with special attention to hair products analysis.

1.4.1 Research Questions

The big picture of my research is to investigate the hierarchies that are at play for Black women when determining their satisfaction with or assessing their natural hair and when performing an ideal Black femininity. Of course, this is a large mission to accomplish in a thesis

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Black women have deep connections to their hair, and it may be difficult to untangle these different feelings. To better understand these hierarchies, self-perceptions and desires, this study poses the following research questions: How do Black women talk about their hair? What are their desires or ideals concerning their hair? What are the narratives they provide? What aesthetic are Black women looking for? Throughout the project, I will attempt to answer these questions.

1.4.2 Methods

The primary method for my study consists of interviewing a group of seven Black women with natural hair. I chose this sample size so that I could have in-depth and intimate conversations. Further, interviewing participants also enabled a multi-method approach as I could also conduct a product analysis with the help of my research participants. The women who took part in this study self-identify as Black. Since I will be examining beauty as it relates to Black femininity, the project is open to those who self-identify as women. Two of my participants specifically identify as femme. I have previously stated the way I define “natural hair”; however, I believe that one’s self-identification is more important than my definition. Interviews are essential as they offer a way of exploring the deep relationship between a woman and her hair. Secondly, interviews as a method support the belief that knowledge construction is an ongoing process and taking place all of the time. In addition to conducting interviews, I gathered my participants together for a roundtable about hair. While I do have a position within the hierarchy that I studied which impacted the way participants interacted with me, I believe the

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I recruited the participants by the use of a preliminary survey posted on my personal Facebook page and in two natural hair Facebook groups. Forty-three people participated in the survey, and I chose seven people to be interviewed based upon their responses.
focus group is where my insider within status was most usefully employed. As a person who knows the natural hair lingo and has natural hair, I made this conversation feel natural and comfortable instead of like a guided interview. For example, I use many of the same products as my participants, and I know which terms are used so often (curl, for example) that consumers of products stop actively thinking about their meaning and significance.

Lastly, a content analysis of products catering to Black women with natural hair adds a different dimension to my project. While Black women certainly have their own ideals about their natural hair and their consumption of hair care products, the products marketed to this group of consumers may have another story to tell. I believe that searching for the ideals presented to natural haired women by the media may have some impact on what they look for in hair styling and maintenance. Analyzing the product usage of the participants helped me understand the ideals the participants strive to attain for their hair that may not be expressed through interviews. This combination of methods will help elicit fuller and more nuanced narratives that Black women relay (or withhold) about their natural hair. I will also be able to ascertain the ideal aesthetics Black women are searching for by directly asking in an interview and looking for the hidden and explicit messages in the products marketed to and used by Black women.

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72 As previously stated, my hair texture, curl pattern, and length places me in the upper areas of the hierarchies in the natural hair community. Thus, my insider status is precarious as my participants are located in various positions within the hierarchies.
2 Detangling: Understanding Terms and Meanings

Before one can understand the desired aesthetic of Black women with natural hair, one must understand the terms and meanings that exist and create natural hair.

2.1 Terms

Natural hair textures, curl patterns, lengths, and products comprise a language that is specific to the natural hair community. As previously stated, this language is important in recognizing, not only the meaning of these terms, but the way they interact with each other. LaMonda Horton Stallings and Geneva Smitherman help explain this in their scholarship. Smitherman asks, “What’s in a name, then? Everything, as we acknowledge that names are not merely words but concepts which suggest implications, values, history, and consequences beyond the word or ‘mere’ name itself.”

Indeed, the terminology used to describe Black hair is coded, specifically around sexuality, Stallings argues, beginning around the early twentieth century.

Those outside of the imagined natural hair community might not have specific access to the meaning and importance of these terms; and, in many ways, the hierarchies in the community are built from these terms. For those new naturals, the Internet can hold the answers to one’s questions. Blogs and forums provide access to opinions, advice, suggestions, and facts. The natural hair jargon can be difficult to navigate for some. Thus, I will begin this chapter by providing a glossary of terms that are popularly used among Black women with natural hair then discuss these terms based on historical context and the responses from the participants in my


74 LaMonda Stallings, “Coming Out Natural,” 364.
study. I will also explore the coding around femininity, sexuality, and respectability that takes place.

2.1.1 Glossary

- Curl – a loosely spiraled piece of hair (not specific to Black women)
- Kink – “an individual nap, like, a very tight curl,” a historically derogatory word used to describe Black folks’ hair
- Coil – “little ringlets,” a tighter curl that is not quite a kink
- Hair Typing – a system created by Andre Walker to categorize curl patterns that can act as a short cut in describing one’s hair to others and can assist in choosing hair products; the system is used in digital and physical conversations
- Popping – curl definition, lack of frizziness
- Shrinkage – the difference in length of one’s natural curl pattern versus their hair stretched to its maximum length
- TWA – teeny weeny afro
- Big Hair – a relative term used to correlate circumference of hair to length of hair
- Thick – a whole ‘lotta hair

2.1.2 Curl

I will begin with the word curl, which has a seemingly obvious definition but has multiple denotations to consider. The word “curl” often conjures the image of spirals. Curl is the most often used word when it comes to the lexicon of Black women with natural hair. In the preliminary survey distributed to over fifty participants, every single participant described their hair as curly along with some other descriptor. Participants defined curls as “spirals of hair.”

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75 Clarke Johnson, Interview by Schillicia Howard, March 12, 2015, transcript.

76 Tiffany Smith, Interview by Schillicia Howard, February 10, 2015, transcript.

77 Deena Jackson, Interview by Schillicia Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.
2.1.3 Kink

One participant described a kink as “an individual nap, like, a very tight curl.”78 “Kinky” has typically been a pejorative word for Black hair. This word is not used lightly, if at all amongst my participants. When it is used, however, it is used alongside words like “tough” and “coarse.” Clarke said that bunches and tangles came to mind when thinking of the word “kinky”79 while Erica felt that kinks encompassed hair with z-shaped patterns or no curl pattern at all.80

Black folks’ hair has been described as kinky for centuries; but a closer look at this word reveals its connection to Black sexuality. It is common knowledge that kinky is synonymous with “deviant” sexual practices. What does it mean, though, that the same word springs up in conversations surrounding Black hair? Indeed, one participant exclaimed, “there are a lot of associations for that”81 when we began discussing the word “kinky.” Naming tightly coiled or frizzy Black hair as “kinky” points to the deviance placed onto Black bodies, specifically Black women’s bodies. None of my participants described their hair as kinky.

I ask, then, if the absence of the word “kinky” in descriptions of one’s hair stems from the deviant connotation the term carries. Indeed, a curl is universally human, in that people of all races and ethnicities can have curls. Kinks, on the other hand, seem reserved for Black folks and wooly animals. My participants and other Black women with natural hair may not want to

78 Clarke Johnson, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 12, 2015, transcript.
79 Ibid.
80 Erica Harris, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 30, 2015, transcript.
81 Clarke Johnson, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 12, 2015, transcript.
describe their hair as kinky as a way to distance themselves from a deviant, animalistic trait in exchange for human curls and coils.

### 2.1.4 Coil

“Coil” was the most difficult of all terms to define. While the word “curly” was used more often than “coil” or “coily”, the two seemed nearly synonymous. One differentiated the two by explaining that curls are “loose spirals while coils are like springs.”\(^{82}\) It seems that a coil falls somewhere between a curl and a kink.

### 2.1.5 Hair Type/Typing

Hair typing is often considered a useful tool for finding the best products and styles for one’s hair. In essence, hair typing uses a chart which displays and labels hair based on one’s curl pattern from straight to kinky. Hair typing is not exclusive to Black women, but it is often used to reinforce hierarchies that exist in the natural hair communities. Though many of the women surveyed and interviewed noted that they do not use the hair typing system, all of them were able to provide their hair type based on this chart. This form of typing is not new and not free from critique.

Typing, or placing people in certain categories based upon similarities and differences, emerges from Enlightenment era and colonial forms of scientific empiricism. The Casta System, for example, was primarily used during the Spanish rule of Mexico. This system was race based, accounting for the mixtures of Indian, African, Spanish, and Mexican.\(^{83}\) The assigned labels were as follows: Españoles, Indios, Mestizos, Castizos Cholos, Pardos, Mulatos, Zambos, and

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\(^{82}\) Deena Jackson, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.

\(^{83}\) Adrian Bustamente, "'The Matter Was Never Resolved’: The Casta System in Colonial New Mexico." (*New Mexico Historical Review*, 1991), 144.
Negros. Españoles was the title given to folks who traveled directly from Spain or had pure Spanish ancestry while Indios were Native Americans. Mestizos were the children of an Español and Indio. Castizos had one Spanish parent and one Mestizo parent. Lower in the hierarchy is African blood mixed in with Spanish and Native American. The lowest class was “pure” African ancestry. In total, there were twenty-two classifications for people depending on their racial make-up. A similar typing is done in Louisiana Creole culture to determine one’s distance from or proximity to Blackness. Communities of color that are and were formerly colonized have inherited these epistemes of typing and categorizing.

Typing specific to hair for Black folks in the United States begins with the simple concept of good hair and bad hair. Good hair was straight or wavy, free of naps, easy to comb through. Bad hair, on the other hand, was kinky and coarse, broke combs, and required too much work. These delineations have been heavily ingrained in Black culture for centuries and pose material benefits and consequences.

In 1997, Andre Walker, Oprah Winfrey’s long time hair stylist, released the book Andre Talks Hair in which he discusses best practices for hair styling and debuts his hair typing system. Based on four textures of hair, Walker provides the reader with his opinion of the best styling products and techniques for each hair type. Type 1 hair is straight, Type 2 wavy, while Type 3 is curly and Type 4 describes kinky hair textures.

Today, this system has become more nuanced as the Texture Typing System was created by writers and readers of NaturallyCurly.com, a popular hair website. This system is based on Andre Walker’s four-type system while providing more in-depth typing. The Texture Typing System has become an extremely popular way for women, especially Black women, to decide

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84 Adrian Bustamente, “The Matter Was Never Resolved” 144.
what hair products will work the best on their hair. A simple search on Youtube of “hair products for 3c hair” yields approximately thirty-eight thousand results. The use of this system is a component of the natural hair community.

Figure 1: Hair Types 2-3

Figure 2: Hair Type 4
Though the Texture Typing System can be useful in practical terms, it begs the question, “What does it mean?” This system differs from the Casta System in that it is not obviously based upon ancestry; instead, it is based upon one’s visible curl pattern. Typing hair based upon curls and kinks can certainly attach race to hair type in ways that are similar to the Casta System.

Type 1 hair is bone straight. Conjuring an image of what Type 1 hair can lead one to think of a white person while kinky, Type 4 hair automatically provides imagery of a Black woman, often with very dark skin due to the images presented in the figures above. Between Types 1a and 4c, there are plenty of in-between spaces for race to take place. Most of the women surveyed for this project stated that they have Type 3c hair. According to NaturallyCurly.com, 3c hair is described as Curly Coily and the first Black woman’s face makes an appearance on the chart (Error! Reference source not found. Figure 2: Hair Type 4). The pictorial example for Type 3b hair is the only brown woman in the chart. This chart can help us understand the way race is constructed around curl patterns through the Texture Typing System. Indeed, curl pattern is not always as racially rigid since some Black people have bone straight or wavy hair. According to the usual System, though, Black hair (and white hair) only exists at one end of the spectrum of curls.

Of course, people critique the Texture Typing System on the grounds that it is divisive and places people in hierarchies simply based on their curl pattern or lack thereof. Nononsense57, a user on CurlyNikki.com a popular website for Black women with natural hair, writes, “Hair typing is confusing and divisive. There are nuances to every natural's hair and we

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should just enjoy the journey to discover what's best for our individual hair.”

An anonymous user responded by explaining that a friend of theirs who has Type 4b hair alters her hair texture to resemble a Type 3c curl pattern because it is more socially acceptable than her natural curl pattern. The same can be said for many Black women with natural hair, myself included, who alter their curl pattern to achieve another, more acceptable curl pattern.

The Texture Typing System itself is hierarchical as it places straight hair as first and kinky hair as last. Even the creator of the original system, Andre Walker, feels that it is best for Type 4 hair to be chemically relaxed because it is naturally brittle and has limited styling options. His remarks continue as he describes Black hair as inherently damaged. He explains, in reference to Type 4 (kinky) hair, “It is very difficult to achieve a longer length when the hair breaks, even with simple combing.” While hair typing for Black women with natural hair can prove useful for understanding what products might work best for achieving an ideal aesthetic; hair typing also creates hierarchies of acceptable curl patterns that are also attached to race.

2.1.6 Popping

Popping is an interesting term that does not seem related to hair at all, at least not in the way one would initially think. Popping is not the sound of a hair strand breaking, rather, popping is often used to describe a fully actualized curl. It is a complete spiral, free from frizz, sleek, and


87 Walker, "Decoding Hair Texture."


defined. A participant stated that her good hair day is strictly contingent upon whether or not her curls are popping. She stated, “everything defined. I think that’s for everybody, like if your hair is defined, it’s cute.” Many other participants had similar sentiments, describing good hair days as “when my curls are popping” or “not frizzy.”

2.1.7 Shrinkage

Shrinkage is pretty much, the bane of a natural girl’s existence. I think shrinkage is an interesting term because it centers the length of straightened hair instead of one’s natural texture of hair. Shrinkage is the length of one’s natural texture of hair but refers to the potential length of one’s hair when stretched or straightened. Many natural girls complain about their shrinkage via social media, stating that they wish their hair did not shrink up as much as it does and that its “true” length would show. The more shrinkage one has, the shorter their natural hair is in comparison with their straightened hair. Error! Reference source not found.

Figure 4: My Shrinkage is an example of my own shrinkage. The two lengths of my hair are my natural hair texture and blow-dried straight. The difference between the two lengths can be considered shrinkage. Shrinkage can often confuse people who are not familiar with natural hair. I have personally been asked if I cut my hair after wearing it straight then allowing it to return to my natural texture. A participant I interviewed admitted that she had come to terms with her shrinkage. She explained, “my shrinkage may make my hair look shorter, but I know when I get it straightened, I know what I got, so I don’t have to prove it to other people.”

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90 Tiffany Smith, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 10, 2015, transcript.
91 Deena Jackson, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.
92 Erica Harris, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 30, 2015, transcript.
93 Erica Harris, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 30, 2015, transcript.
Figure 3: My Shrinkage

Long hair is considered a sign of healthy hair because healthy hair does not shed or break off. Rarely taken into account is the fact that length of hair has more to do with genetics and less to do with health of hair. Thus, Black women with natural hair may be pushing themselves to reach unattainable length goals all in the name of health.

The term “shrinkage,” similar to “kink” has an interesting sexual connotation. Shrinkage, according to Urban Dictionary, is defined thusly: “when the male sex organ gets smaller due to cold temperature.” This definition of shrinkage is quite similar to its hair related counterpart. Indeed, the Urban Dictionary definition is related to the penis’ potential to appear longer under different circumstances. Both shrinkage situations are seen as something one must cope with and

Erica looks forward to stunting on people and showing off her length the next time she gets hair straightened!

94 Shante Jones, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.


hope that observers know this is not the “true length” of the object in question. Nothing is what it seems. Either way, shrinkage is considered an unfortunate, natural occurrence.

Understanding shrinkage is important in performing Black femininity. Long hair is attached to femininity, so shrinkage can certainly be considered as an inhibitor to this presentation.

2.1.8 TWA

TWA is an acronym for “Teeny Weeny Afro”. This style can range from an inch of hair to hair that comes out to one’s ears. Natural women who have recently chopped off their relaxed hair are typically thought to possess a TWA. The TWA is not big hair; but, the natural hair community often considers it to be on its way to the goal of big hair.

Figure 4: TWA to Big Hair
Figure 4: TWA to Big Hair depicts this journey from TWA to big hair, which will be discussed in the following section.\textsuperscript{96} In the upper left corner, the woman is shown with her TWA. Her expression is somewhat blank. The upper right panel shows that her hair has grown out, but her sad expression and stretching out a curl points to her dissatisfaction with the length of her hair. The bottom right panel shows even more hair growth. A look of satisfaction is pictured in the bottom right panel as the woman finally has big hair. It is clear that the TWA was simply the beginning in the journey to big hair in this illustration.

\textbf{2.1.9 Big Hair}

Big hair, on the other hand, has surpassed the TWA phase and is completely relative. During interviews with participants, I made a conscious effort to make my hair inaccessible. I previously stated that my natural hair might be considered “big hair.” It reaches below my shoulders in its natural, curly state and to the middle of my back when straightened. I did not want my hair to influence the participants’ responses. It did, however, become a point of reference. I wore my hair in a bun for the first interview. Tiffany stated that a goal for her hair was to grow it as long as it could get.\textsuperscript{97} When I asked how long she wanted her hair to be, she responded, “I mean yours looks pretty long. So I can just say like yours, I guess. Like,

\textsuperscript{96} The use of this image points to larger conversations happening in digital spaces in the natural hair community. Similar images of a journey towards big hair float around various areas of the community to provide encouragement for Black women with TWA’s or short hair in general that their hair will grow to be long or big. Images such as these reflect the discussions taking place in the community and are therefore important for understanding the common themes and occurrences in this digital space in particular.

\textsuperscript{97} Tiffany Smith, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 10, 2015, transcript.
eventually, one day, I want like big hair.” In a focus group, I asked my participants to describe and define “big hair.” One described “big hair” as having hair that is wider than one’s body while another stated that “big hair” is wider than one’s face. “Big Hair” is a relative term that correlates to long hair while taking shrinkage into account. Thus, if one’s hair is big, one will assume that it is also long when the curls or coils are stretched out.

2.1.10 Thick

Technically, having thick hair refers to the circumference of one’s individual hair strands. Genetics play a large role in the thickness or thinness of one’s hair. Large hair follicles produce thick hair and vice versa. When it comes to the natural hair community, having thick hair often translates into having “a whole lotta hair” for many of my participants. I remember having thick hair as a child in the 1990s, and my participants have similar sentiments. My thick hair was the reason that my mother sent me to the hair salon for a press n’ curl at the age of five and Erica’s mother sent her to the hair salon for her first relaxer at age four. Thick hair means snapping combs, popping hair bands, and much more. Thick hair is voluminous and related to having “big hair.” Thick hair had a connotation connected to strenuous labor because someone had to take the time to wash, detangle, and style all of that hair. Clarke expounded on the labor required of thick hair in the following way: “I put it up in a ponytail, and then, when I did get it straightened after the two weeks, I put it in a ponytail, because it was even hard to wrap. You know how you’re supposed to wrap your hair? But like, my hair was too thick to do the wrap

98 Ibid.
99 Focus Group, Interview by Schillica Howard, April 10, 2015, transcript.
100 Clarke Johnson, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 12, 2015, transcript.
101 Erica Harris, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 30, 2015, transcript.
every night. And it’s just an investment, a time intensive investment.”\(^{102}\) Recently, however, thick hair has taken on new, positive meanings that are often related to having healthy hair. All of the participants in this study described their hair as being thick. Some described their thick hair as a positive while others stated it as simply a fact.

### 2.2 Meaning Making

It is important to realize that the terms I defined along with the participants of the study do not exist as simple descriptors. To the contrary, these words, as language often does, construct realities. They stick together in certain ways to create greater meaning for a broader community of Black women with natural hair. One can grasp the concept of having thick hair without understanding what this materially means for Black women. In this section, I will explore the way the terms previously discussed come together to produce greater, material significance.

#### 2.2.1 Healthy Hair

Black women with natural hair often talk about the health of their hair when thinking of their hair desires and goals. It is to be expected that people so dedicated to their hair will have the utmost concern for its health. What is considered to be healthy hair, however, is up for debate. The creation of “healthy hair” is often wrapped up in some of the terms previously defined in this chapter.

All of the participants were asked what their goals for their hair were, and most of them stated that they wanted healthy hair. Digging deeper, I asked them to define healthy hair. One participant stated that having healthy hair meant having thick hair\(^ {103}\) while another pointed to

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\(^{102}\) Clarke Johnson, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 12, 2015, transcript.

\(^{103}\) Shante Jones, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.
defined curls as a marker of healthy hair.\textsuperscript{104} This may be true for these individuals, but these definitions point to greater issues.

Defining healthy hair in relative terms can create tension within the natural hair community. Those with healthy hair who do not fit the criteria of figurative natural hair can find themselves more concerned with the \textit{appearance} of healthy hair instead of the actual health of their hair. As an example, I will mention Joulzey, a Youtuber who brought attention to texture discrimination on Youtube.

Joulzey makes it clear that kinky-haired Youtubers get much less attention than their curly-haired counterparts, but she had more even bigger qualms with the benchmarks for healthy hair. She explains that the natural hair community is “full of swindle…because they continue to promote the idea that healthy natural hair is curly, is shiny, is laid, full of baby hairs…”\textsuperscript{105} The Youtuber continues to explain that making curly, shiny, laid hair the definition of healthy natural hair excludes and confuses some women with natural hair whose natural hair does not meet such criterion but is, in fact, healthy.

\textbf{2.2.2 True Length}

When asked to describe the length of their hair, participants in my preliminary survey often provided two answers: the length of their hair when curly or “natural” and its length when straightened. For example, participants gave the following responses regarding the length of their hair: “My hair is collarbone length when stretched. With shrinkage, it stops at chin length (measuring from the back)”; “Above my ears when wet and almost shoulder length when straightened”; “Right past my shoulders when straightened, Bottom of my neck when curly.”

\textsuperscript{104} Deena Jackson, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript.

\textsuperscript{105} Jouelzy. “So Over the Natural Hair Community & Texture Discrimination.”
often offer similar descriptions of my hair: to my shoulders when curly, to my mid-back when
straight or stretched. I believe this provides insight into centering of straight hair when it comes
to length. In the discussion of shrinkage, a reference is made to the potential length of one’s hair
if it were straight.

This thought processing is also important when the thought of big hair comes into play as
well. Big hair is often correlated to long hair, depending on one’s shrinkage. “Big hair” is a goal
that I see for many naturals on various social media platforms (Error! Reference source not
found. Figure 5: TWA to Big Hair) and within my study.

The language used to discuss and describe Black hair is important in understanding the
hierarchies in the Natural Hair Movement and the way Black women feel about their hair. Basic
terms such as “curl” and “thick” are not as simple as they seem as they combine to define
standards and ideals that Black women strive toward. By focusing on language connections
could be made to the way sexuality is projected onto Black hair through terms such as “kink”
and “shrinkage.” Words exist within context; and, it is important to understand the language of
natural hair to understand the community itself.
3 Custards, Puddings, and Other Hair Delicacies: Products and Material Cultural Analysis

3.1 Hair Products and Language

Products marketed to Black women with natural hair provide an interesting commentary on the ideals Black women seek to achieve with their hair. Analyzing how Black women want their hair to look can certainly be achieved by taking into account the products they use. Hair products claim to provide certain benefits to their users based on proper usage. Undesirable hair qualities are combatted so that ideals can be presented to the public. The marketing of these products speaks to the void they aim to fulfill; and, their prices and ingredients cater to specific markets.

Carol’s Daughter, Shea Moisture, and Miss Jessie’s are three popular brands of products purchased by Black women for use on their natural hair. The three brands offer a variety of products from shampoo to specific styling products. They also utilize social media to advertise their products and facilitate discussions on natural hair. Because of the popularity of their products and social media presence, focusing on these brands can offer great insight into the specific ways that Black women care for and present their hair to the world. The concerns Black women face regarding their hair will also be exposed by studying popular natural hair products. Focusing on Carol’s Daughter, Shea Moisture, and Miss Jessie’s, I will analyze their cleansing, conditioning, and styling products.

Shampoos are generally marketed to women as hair cleansers, products to remove all of the debris that build up on hair. Women deeply entrenched in learning how to care for their natural hair, have found that all shampoos are not created equally. For Black women with natural hair, holding on to as much oil as possible is of concern when cleansing their hair. Shampoo is often not even the first step for Black women entering the process of washing and styling their
hair. By analyzing the descriptions of shampoo products from the three brands previously listed, I will point out what is important for Black women in cleansing their natural hair.

The three brands I mentioned offer various brands of cleansers. Miss Jessie’s and Shea Moisture offer cleansers and shampoo to fit “needs” specific to Black hair such as brands specifically for moisture or dry scalp. On the other hand, Carol’s Daughter only offers two types of shampoos. The three brands use similar wording when describing the effectiveness of their products.

Carol’s Daughter’s Monoi Repairing Shampoo claims to repair ninety-six percent of damage done to hair upon one single usage. It claims to restore strength to delicate natural strands of hair. Using words like “fortifying”, “strengthening”, and “rejuvenating” often in the description of the shampoo point out the main selling points of the cleanser. Carol’s Daughter also uses buzz words and phrases which many natural women look for when buying products for their hair: “sulfate free” and “no mineral oil.”

The Super Slip Sudsy Shampoo by Miss Jessie’s claims to be “the best darn detangling shampoo. Period.” Miss Jessie’s claims that this shampoo is the perfect moisturizing shampoo for every hair type. It allows for more “manageability” of one’s hair, despite its curliness or kinkiness. Miss Jessie’s also uses the buzz word “sulfate free.”

Shea Moisture has various shampoos for women with different cleansing needs. The Coconut and Hibiscus Curl and Shine line offers shampoo which “hydrates and detangles hair”

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107 Sulfates are the agent used in soaps and shampoos to create the lather that is often considered to be the indication that soap is “working”. Some Black women with natural hair have recently pointed to sulfates as the cause of frizziness and damage.
while “gently cleans[ing].” It contains silk proteins that leave hair smooth and shiny. The Raw Shea Butter Moisture Retention Shampoo “hydrates and repairs.” It promotes “hair elasticity…while conditioning hair and scalp.” It becomes clear what is marketed to Black women with natural hair. However, when analyzing the cleansing products selected by Black women with natural hair this project concludes that Black women with natural hair want a product to build up their hair. There was little to no mention of actual hair cleansing. When cleansing is mentioned, it is always described as “gentle.” Instead of highlighting products that will remove oils and debris, the companies formulate the description of their products to what Black women are seeking for their hair. Product descriptions make it seem as if natural hair is naturally weak and “distressed” as Carol’s Daughter puts it. Black hair is inherently in need of strengthening and rejuvenation.

Phrases similar to what is found in the shampoos can be found among conditioners as well. For example, Miss Jessie’s Crème de la Crème Conditioner claims to be creamy and lightweight, detangling and moisturizing hair while restoring balance to hair and the scalp as well. It is specifically marketed to women with “wavy” or “curly” hair, and it is Miss Jessie’s only conditioner. Shea Moisture’s Raw Shea Butter Restorative Conditioner heals, repairs, and provides nutrition to the scalp. This conditioner is for “lifeless, dry, damaged” hair. Carol’s Daughter’s Cupuacu Anti-Frizz Smoothing Conditioner is for “dry, unruly, frizz-proned” hair. This conditioner makes hair immune to humidity and “controls the most unmanageable hair.” It provides a polished finish in a sleek style to natural hair.

Descriptions of styling products provide the most interesting content analysis. Miss Jessie’s Pillow Soft Curls styler creates big, soft curls. Combatting “Ramen noodle” curl definition, it is marketed as a fabric softener for hair. Carol’s Daughter’s Black Vanilla Moisture
and Shine Hair Sheen is for “dry, brittle, damaged” hair. This product claims to improve manageability in and add shine to hair. It is conditioning and hydrating as well. The Monoi Glosser by Shea moisture adds shine, strengthens and smoothes hair, is revitalizing and controls frizz for a sleek finish. Across the board, all of the products I mentioned contained a “rare” product that would automatically resolve the problems with one’s hair. Coconut oil infused with hibiscus, “fabric technology”, and rare cupuacu oil are just a few of the ingredients mentioned.

3.2 Implications

It became clear from my analysis that there is no product for healthy Black natural hair. All of the products point to a lack or problem. While this discourse is not exclusive to Black hair care products, the focus on the lack that persists in discussions of Black hair must be considered. The products make it seem as if natural hair is always dry, frizzy, and unmanageable. Buying these items become ways to fix the inherent problems residing in Black women’s hair. This is interesting when you take into account the fact that all three brands that I have mentioned are/were Black-owned businesses. It can then be said Black women are then profiting from telling other Black women about the problems with their hair and selling them the solution. When black women feel that their hair is constantly in need of repair and constantly lacking, they will be more likely to buy products from the brands that I mentioned.
4 Twist-out On Fleek!: The Natural Hair Aesthetic

As it is with most choices regarding the way one presents oneself to the world, there is a certain desirable aesthetic for Black women with natural hair. This aesthetic is different from person to person, but some ideals remain the same across the board. Certain curl patterns, textures, and lengths of hair are privileged over others. Of course, this is not specific to the current move toward natural hair or natural hairstyles. The natural hair aesthetic has changed over time from afros, etc. and previous aesthetics influence the current aesthetic. Hair products play a large role in creating and maintaining the aesthetic of the time by reflecting and shaping what consumers desire for their hair.

In order to understand the current natural hair aesthetic, I relied heavily on the responses of the participants in this study. A content analysis of the products the participants used on their hair also informed how this study interpreted the participants’ unspoken goals and desires for their hair. A future direction that this study and others could take to further understand the current natural hair aesthetic would be to investigate the demand for the “natural” wigs, weaves, extensions, and etc. that have currently entered the market. Creators of these products clearly notice the high regard for hair that has a more “natural” texture.

Wigs, weaves, clip-ins, etc. with kinky and/or curly texture reached a new level of popularity from 2014-2015. KRS Group, for example, is just one of these new companies specializing in "knappy" clip-ins, weft hair (for sew-ins), and wigs are forthcoming. Their extensions are thick and range from twelve to twenty-four inches in length. There are three textures to choose from: Not So Knappy, Kinky Coarse, Knatural Coarse. Wig companies such as Sensationnel, Outre, and It's A Wig now offer more curly and kinky synthetic wigs that match Black hair textures than ever before. Emulating natural hair textures by alternative means can certainly provide insight for the current aesthetic for natural hair.
Wigs, extensions, weaves, etc. have long had the stigma of emulating the non-authentic. They have been thought of as a way to cover a bald head (because if you have hair, why wear a wig?) and present in a non-natural way. The rise of “natural” texture wigs and extensions points to a new desire to present an aesthetic centered on curly hair. These products make the natural aesthetic available for those who cannot attain this aesthetic with their own hair and to protect their own hair in the process. When wearing crochet braids with marley hair, kinky textured extensions, or a curly wig, one’s desire is often to make the hairstyle look like it is sprouting from the scalp. In essence, the wearer is attempting to provide a natural (figurative and literal) aesthetic.

4.1 Curl Pattern

As I point out at various points in this text, curl pattern has often become important when thinking about Black natural hair. I asked my participants what a good hair day looked like for them. Many stated that defined curls are necessary to create a good hair day. They used products that defined their curls and moisturized their hair so that their curls popped. A bad hair day, in contrast, consisted of frizzy hair that had no defined curls. Three participants stated that, when their hair looked frizzy, nappy, or had no curl definition, they put their hair in a bun or wore a hat. Both of these styles point to putting one’s hair away or making it difficult to be seen.

Curls are clearly preferred over kinks as all of my participants aimed for styles such as twist-outs that provide curl definition. Erica, like other participants, was satisfied with a wash-and-go, however because their hair naturally formed desirable curls with use of the correct products.108

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108 Erica Harris, Interview by Schillica Howard, March 30, 2015, transcript.
4.2 Texture

Thick hair is important in the current natural hair aesthetic. As I previously mentioned, having thin hair is considered to be unhealthy; and, thick hair is deemed beautiful. Many of my participants pointed to having their hair ogled as a child because adults wanted this thick hair. Even today, participants were often complimented on their thick hair.

Having a hair texture that is manageable and cooperative is also an important part of the desirable aesthetic of the current Natural Hair Movement. Thus, products are marketed to Black women claiming to “tame” curls. My personal favorite product is one that I feel makes my hair soft enough to comb through, pointing to my desire to conquer my hair when the need presents itself.

Manageable hair textures also point to Black femininity and sexuality in ways that I previously discussed. Coarse hair that one’s partner cannot run their fingers through, for example, might compete with conceptions of acceptable femininity. Also, femininity is often thought of as obedient, and unmanageable hair is the opposite. The book *Tenderheaded* details the story of a Black woman writing to *Ebony* magazine in 1988 seeking advice for her desire to wear her hair naturally and her husband’s resistance. She wrote, “My husband feels that I will become undesirable to him and has said that he might leave me if I do [let my perm grow

A wash and go is not literally washing your hair and going as the name declares. A wash and go actually relies on products to create the proper curl. There is no twisting and limited styling involved, but it can be an alternation of one’s natural curl pattern.
out].”\textsuperscript{109} This concern is fairly common for Black women with relaxed hair who are femme lesbians or seeking men as partners. The author explains, “We try to create hair that is touchable—like the commercials tell us we should—while secretly hoping he won’t touch it.”\textsuperscript{110} Having kinky hair while maintaining one’s femininity can certainly be difficult for some Black women.

4.3 Length

Big hair is one of the most important goals amongst my participants after having healthy hair. Erica stated that she wanted her hair to grow to mid-back length while Deena and Tiffany wanted their hair to grow as long as possible. My desires are the same as I strive to attain mid-back length hair as well. Long hair is greatly attached to femininity and health, as previously stated.

4.4 The Hierarchies

By understanding the desirable and undesirable aspects of curl pattern, hair texture, and length, one can approximate the hierarchies in the natural hair community. Based upon the historical contexts of Black people in the United States and Black hair, looser curl patterns, softer hair textures, and longer lengths of hair place one at the higher rungs of the hierarchies. This manifests itself in the discussions my participants have surrounding their relationships to relaxers and their natural textures of hair. Those with looser curl patterns were not given relaxers as children while those with tighter curl patterns and thicker hair received relaxers at young ages.


\textsuperscript{110} \textit{Ibid}, 161.
The hierarchies are also clear in the language used to describe hair, as previously mentioned. Curls are preferred over kinks, manageable hair over nappy hair, big hair over a TWA.

4.5 Implications

At this point, it becomes clear that a certain group of Black woman who wear or has ever worn their hair naturally cannot achieve the ideal\textsuperscript{111} aesthetic of this new Natural Hair Movement. Kinky haired Black women, Black women with short and/or “unmanageable” hair, etc. then, can perform this failure or alter their hair texture to fit into this aesthetic by means of twisting, texturizing, and etc. I point to having a “bad hair day” as failure for Black women with natural hair. My participants defined a bad hair day by unmanageable, uncooperative hair, days when their hair failed to obey. This unmanageability presented itself as “frizzy hair”\textsuperscript{112} or hair that did not form proper curls; basically, disobedient hair is the failure to present the correct curl pattern, length, and texture of hair. Inhabiting failure, especially for Black women with natural hair, puts one at risk of being deemed ratchet. “Ratchet has been defined as foolish, ignorant, ho’ishness, ghetto, and a dance. It is the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race, as opposed to the promotion of failure or respectability that is important here,” according to LaMonda Stallings.\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{111} I would like to point out that “standard” and “ideal” are not synonymous. Many Black women with natural hair meet the standards of the aesthetics of the current Natural Hair Movement, but ideals are unattainable in that they are ever changing and a source of aspiration to support the continued policing of bodies and selling of products, in this context.

\textsuperscript{112} Shante Jones, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 18, 2015, transcript. And Ameera Hill, Interview by Schillica Howard, February 10, 2015, transcript.

hair texture can make a Black woman seem ignorant, foolish, and unprofessional in the world’s eye. This failure can also cause one to second guess their status as a Black woman with natural hair, as one of my participants pointed to Youtube tutorials where the comment sections are full of Black women who do not understand why their hair does not emulate the YouTuber’s hair and express doubt about their natural hair experience. As previously mentioned, disobedient hair can impact one’s perceived femininity. On these days, participants turned to scarves, buns, and hats to cover their failed hairstyles.

4.5.1 Black Femininity

As previously discussed, hair is large part of the social construct of femininity, and this can be especially true for Black women. According to Stallings, “Black hair lies at the crux of the African American community’s performance of heteronormativity.”\(^{114}\) Though Stallings is referring to the period after the emancipation of slaves in the United States, I argue that this is still true. Heterosexual and femme black femininity, in terms of hair, has often been attached to straight, flowy hair, hair that obeys. Obedience is important for femininity on a near global scale, and Black women often feel the need to combat the domineering Black woman archetype. I argue that hair that behaves in the correct way (ie. forms defined curls, is a feminine length, etc.) and expresses Blackness by showcasing one’s “natural” hair texture is an intense indicator of Black femininity.

4.6 Conclusions

With (De)Tangled, I explored the hierarchies that exist in the natural hair community, the aesthetic of the Natural Hair Movement, and the connection to Black femininity and sexuality by engaging Black women with natural hair and the products marketed to them. It became clear that

\(^{114}\) Stallings, “Coming Out Natural,” 363.
Black women seek long, big hair that is manageable. Curls, though not perfect, should be defined and frizz-free. This aesthetic points to a heteronormative Black femininity. (De)Tangled deepens the discourse in African American Studies that posits the experiences of Black women with natural hair against those of Black women with relaxed hair. These conversations can continue in African Diaspora Studies as Black folks with differing hair histories can have similar conversations. This project also adds to the discourse in Women’s and Gender studies of Black femininity and the thin line of kinkiness Black women walk. (De)Tangled offers a unique discussion on a new movement occurring for Black women.
REFERENCES


11. "Curly Pudding." Miss Jessie's. missjessies.com/curly-pudding#.VS7DKVL3anM.


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Preliminary Survey

1. List your name, age, and email address below.
2. Do you use the hair typing system (ex. 3c, 4a, etc.)?
3. If yes, what is your hair type?
4. How would you describe your hair texture?
5. Describe the length of your hair.