For my grandmothers and their great-great-great granddaughters.
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The purpose of this study is to investigate whether hair texture and hairstyle choice have symbolic meanings among women of African descent. Hair is a personal yet public pronouncement about identity. This work is an effort to understand how group identity is formed and maintained through everyday experiences in the African Diaspora.

This dissertation addresses two key questions:

- Are there shared symbolic meanings that women of African descent associate with their hair texture and hairstyle choice?
- If shared meanings exist, do they form the basis of a cultural belief domain among women of African descent?

To answer these questions, data collection involved participant observation, interviews, pile sorts, free lists, electronic surveys, digital storytelling techniques, ethnographic film and photography, and an online experiment. These data-collection methods provided for a deeper understanding of the underlying symbolic and not simply the “stated” meaning attributed to different hair textures and styles by African-descended women.

Asking how hair textures and styles serve to help African-descended women carve out unique racial, gendered, social, and economic identities is critical to our understanding of what it
means to be a woman of African descent. Thus, any attempts at understanding the lived experiences of Black women will ultimately help us in defining the parameters of the African Diaspora.

The data from this research reveal that hair is a cultural domain for women of African descent. Additionally, within this cultural domain hair texture is utilized as a way to assess an individual’s racial status. So hair texture is used to race or de-race individuals symbolically. I found that hairstyles also transmit tacit messages about sexual orientation, gender, social status, religion and politics. Women of African descent use hair to symbolize their social, cultural, political, and ethnic identities. For this group of women the material culture of hair serves as a way to extend their personal lives into the public.
CHAPTER 1
REPOSSESSING THE BLACK FEMALE BODY: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND APPEARANCE IN THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at Black people’s hair. It’s the perfect metaphor for the African experiment: the price of the ticket, the toll of slavery and the costs of remaining. It’s all in the hair.

—Lisa Jones, author of Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America.

Introduction

The introduction to this dissertation outlines the purpose of the study; describes the research problem, offers a rationale for the research, and defines the research objectives. Two specific research questions are presented for investigation. The introduction also discusses the significance of the study, and defines its key concepts. The final section of the introduction provides an overview of the dissertation chapters and summarizes this introduction.

Purpose of Study

The main purpose of this study is to explore and document the symbolic meaning associated with hair textures and styles among women of African descent in the United States. Evidence of these symbolic meanings is disbursed throughout the dissertation in the form of excerpts from digital hair stories completed by some of my research participants (see Figure 1-1 Nakia Baker and the description of how the photo displays meaning written by Ryan Santoo). These photographs and the explanatory essays that sometimes accompany them provide the reader with a snapshot of the beliefs held by my research participants. This work investigates whether or not a shared cultural domain exists about hair among women of African descent in America. Cultural domains are systems of belief shared by groups and they can be identified through the elicitation of lists of key terms, core ideas, actions, or other components (Bernard 1998; Borgatti 1996; Furlow 2003; Weller and Romney 1988; Weller 1998). The main idea behind cultural domains is that culture groups have shared beliefs or perceptions that are not
based on individual preferences. Implicit in this theory is not notion that group beliefs can be ascertained because a universal right answer exists for these beliefs (Bernard 1998; Borgatti 1996; Furlow 2003; Weller and Romney 1988; Weller 1998). My work focuses on the body and more specifically hair as an identity marker and a possible cultural domain.

This work is also concerned with understanding how culture groups are formed via individual and group identity, the criteria and boundaries utilized in their formation and how we can know this. The specific culture group I am focusing on is women of African descent in America. Despite the fact that a minor number of my participants were located outside of this geographical space, I allowed them to participate based on their perception of themselves as valid members of the group I called, women of African descent. For me questions about culture groups and identity are some of the most important questions ethnographers can ask in the early 21st century (Handwerker 2001). In my research I am attempting to document the personalized channels within global markets that African-descended women utilize to redefine or symbolically reinvent their lives through the cultural domain of hair. Like Ronald Walters (1993) who used both the real and imagined linkages between Africa and its Diaspora as his units of analysis, I use hair as my unit of analysis while investigating local and global identity formation.

The Black body remains a central issue in the debate about Black identity because the body is still related to how we define group membership and boundaries (Zack 1995). I intend to focus on how this gendered identity is performed and witnessed by women of African descent in America. Understanding how identity is performed among African-descended women in America may assist scholars in expanding the notion of a shared community in the African Diaspora. Ultimately, I believe that the key to understanding identity construction in the African
Diaspora is grounded in creating and accepting inclusive definitions and honoring divergent experiences.

The Problem

While numerous books and research projects have investigated the importance of skin color among people of African descent, most researchers have not been interested in investigating the profound meaning attributed to hairstyles and texture. This material culture called hair is perceived as a signifier of a Black woman’s sexuality, racial pride, professional status, social standing, and genetic origin. Despite its enormous importance the meaning of hairstyles and textures in the African American community remains an under-researched area.

Skin color has been the primary research focus because historically, in the African American community, there exists a major divide over the issues of skin color and hair texture that has created a continuing legacy of separatism, divisiveness, and sheer disdain (Russell, et al. 1998). This division often starts in childhood, as documented by Sonja Lanehart in her book, *Sister Speak* (2002). Lanehart’s narrative of one African American woman’s experiences reveals negative encounters with skin color and hair texture biases as early as the sixth grade. The woman recounts her memories of being recognized as the dark skinned girl who was only picked to be a majorette because she had long hair. She believed she was denied the position of head majorette because of her dark skin. This intra-racial skin color prejudice, also known as “colorism” or pigmentocracy,\(^1\) has functioned to divide the African American community

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1 As Robin notes, the connections between power, privilege, and ethnic identification are so pervasive that in 1980, French social anthropologist Danielle Demelas, coined the term pigmentocracy to describe this intricate web of racially coded social relations (1999:13). This legacy began with the racist ideology developed during slavery which consisted of a binary system between “whiteness and its alleged opposite blackness, and deemed the black slaves inferior to their white masters in culture and intelligence, in physical appearance and skin color” (Williams 2000:17). In the Caribbean pigmentocracy, “brown-skinned mulattoes (a closer approximation of the unchallenged white aesthetic idea) occupied a position above black-skinned Negroes, but below whites. The mulatto woman was perceived as, and perceived herself to be, more beautiful than the black woman, and she was more beautiful than the
throughout its institutions, including sororities, churches and colleges and universities (Lake 2003). Some elitist African American social organizations even devised entrance exams to their groups that were known as “paper bag” and “comb” test (Lake 2003; Russell, et al. 1998). These tests were designed to measure skin color for lightness and hair texture for straightness. Research reveals that experiences like these permeate the consciousness of women of African descent (Neal and Wilson 1989). Despite the fact that skin color may be used metonymically to speak to issues concerning overall phenotype, typically researchers have not singled out hair from these physical characteristics as a point of interest.

Unfortunately, similar attitudes stretch beyond the Americas into Asia, India, and the South Pacific (Gailey 1994). Roksana Badruddoja Rahman of Rutgers has shown in her research that South Asians aggressively seek marriage partners with lighter skinned women (Rahman 2004). Furthermore, a large portion of the Asian cosmetics industry is dedicated to skin lighteners that promise to make users “fair and lovely” (Assisi 2004; Olivelle 1998; Rahman 2004). The clear implication of these advertisements is that you cannot be both dark and lovely.

Similar prejudices are evident in Brazil where dark skin is associated with criminality and an increased potential for becoming the victim of violence (Mitchell and Wood 1999). Furthermore, even though Latin Americans typically assert the absence of color based racism in their culture, they adhere to a status quo where Whiteness is at the pinnacle of beauty and Blackness occupies the base (Sanchez, et al. 1996; Twine-Winddance 1998). Understanding that “it is generally accepted that “races” are social constructions, categorical identifications based on a discourse about physical appearance or ancestry”(Wade 1993: 3), and that “race operates differently in different contexts” (Clarke and Thomas 2006: 2), I consciously attempt to

black woman, and she was more acceptable to the dominant white ruling class” (Williams 2000:17). Colorism is also a term used by sociologist Bertice Berry to describe Black-on-Black discrimination (1988).
operationalize the notion of Blackness. Following Whitten and Torres in my research I begin to define the terms Whiteness and Blackness as follows:

The term *black*, according to Webster, is an adjective derived from Latin constructs meaning, in a literal sense, “sooted, smoke black from flame.” Its first meaning in the twentieth century is “opposite to white.” . . . The concept of blackness, . . . reflects again and again on the ironies of its origins . . . the dialectic between the darkening influences of white domination in the African diaspora and the enlightened cultural, social and economic creativity produces and reproduced in the eternal fires of black rebellion (Whitten and Torres 1998: 3).

When I invoke the term Blackness, I evoke notions of “racialized geographies of the imagination” and instead of capitulating to the illusion of Blackness being linked to a physical location I refer to locations where the notion of Blackness has been constructed and reformulated in social spaces on a global level (Brown 2006: 73). In these geographies of the imagination racial formation is heterogeneous and processual “bounded by local experiences . . . rooted within historical and contemporary political economies” (Clarke and Thomas 2006: 27).

Blackness and conversely, Whiteness are poly-sysetemic categories that I argue should refer to the complex system of racial classification through which structures of domination are created, reproduced, and experienced. The concept of Blackness denotes an association with Black culture, an African political, cultural, and personal identity that is rooted in colonial and postcolonial experiences that position Whiteness as the pinnacle with Blackness at the base (Hord, 1995)

This pyramid system of racial hierarchy results in the marginalization of darker colored skin on a global level (Allahar 1993). For example, in Latin America negative references to Black physiognomy are so prevalent that it is often thought of as a joke (Sanchez, et al. 1996). Similarly, in Nicaragua the *solapado manner* (racist behavior) is so commonplace that African-descended people rationalize taunts about their hair texture, perceived sexual prowess, and physical abilities as forms of merriment (Sanchez, et al. 1996).
Often employers demand a *buena presencia* (good appearance) for workers to gain employment and although this phrase translates literally into a good appearance, it actually means White skin, blond hair, and blue eyes. A response to this overt racism is evidenced by an anti-racism campaign in Panama that prompted a book entitled “No Me Pidas Una Foto” which translates, “Don’t ask me for a photo” (Barrow 2006). These negative encounters and economic consequences reinforce the desire of some African-descended people to alter the physical appearance of their children by marrying Whites (Assisi 2004; Hertel and Hughes 1990; Udry 1971), changing their own skin complexion with skin lighteners, bleaching peels and other cosmetics (Adebajo 2002; Giudice and Yves 2002; Goering 1971; Neal and Wilson 1989), and more immediately through cosmetic surgery (Gilman 2001). These global realities influenced my decision to allow participants who would not traditionally be defined as women of African descent, such as Melanesians and Africans in America, to participate in the research.

I submit that alongside this well documented system of pigmentocracy there also exists a “texturocracy” or social hierarchical system largely based on hair texture and hairstyle embraced by every ethnic or racial, gendered, and socioeconomic group ever exposed to any form of colonialism. In this texturocracy, hair described as fine and straight is perceived as more valuable than hair that is described as coarse and curly. Therefore, despite the fact that skin color remains an extremely important issue among African-descended people, hair is the starting point for my scholarly research.

**Research Questions**

The research for this dissertation has been guided by two anthropological questions:

- Are there shared symbolic meanings that women of African descent associate with their hair texture and hairstyle choice?
- If shared meanings exist, do they form the basis of a cultural belief domain among women of African descent?
I have chosen to answer these questions by conducting four levels of inquiry. First, I describe and analyze symbolic acts regarding Black hair gleaned from women of African descent in America. Second, I investigate and evaluate the importance of the symbolic acts. Third, I elicit the meanings informants attribute to these acts and fourth, I create a conceptual framework that relates how these acts function among women of African descent (Firth 1973a). Specifically, I investigate eight Black hairstyles, identified by my research participants as salient to women of African descent in America. The styles that serve as the entry point for my analysis are called relaxers or perms, braids, dreadlocks, twists, jheri curls, weaves, micro braids, and afros or naturals.

**Justification of Study**

Understanding the contested space the Black body occupies is critical for any serious analysis of identity construction in the African Diaspora. Jemima Pierre echoes my concern when she states, “we must devote more careful attention to the structures, processes, contexts, and outcomes of identity formation in the African Diaspora” (Pierre 2002). In order to deconstruct general concepts of identity, researchers must be willing to analyze the symbols that craft the current perceptions of “racial” identities. I find the work of feminist anthropologists and philosophers relevant to this effort. Specifically, I rely on Judith Butler’s (1993; 1990) description of performativity as a way to understand the processural nature of identity formation where seemingly unrelated ideas can be brought together to form an open ended fluid system of meaning. Furthermore, Natasha Pravaz says,

> These ideas are central to understanding the materialization of “sex” or “race” in the body as a regulatory practice whose efficacy is not grounded in biological truth but in the repetition of social rules based on the impulse to approximate and embody normative ideals (Pravaz 2003:122).
In this age of globalization where the world has become an interrelated nexus of transnational global fields, concepts of identity are in constant flux and may change with the sociocultural landscape (Harrison 1998:609). This concern with the ever changing nature of identity is the same issue Dubois characterized as “the problem of the 20th century” (1903:16). What is this “color line” and how does it manifest itself in the experiences of African American women as they formulate their personal and national identities. Like critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1992) I believe that the vestiges of race and racism cannot be cast off by simply ignoring the concepts imbedded in these ideas. Race is still linked to identity and it remains a way of “knowing and organizing the social world” (Winant 1994:xiii). But, even though we continue to use race as a marker there is no shared theoretical, methodological, or political consensus about how to interpret and explain the social realities that constitute race (Harrison 1999:610). So my work attempts to explain one of the social realities that help construct racial identity for women of African descent. I believe that analyzing women’s beliefs and experiences with hair will enable us to better understand the importance of the phenomenon as it relates to the production of identity among African-descended women. This is important because, “anthropology, as I see it, asks that we understand the dynamics of identity and of social relations in contextually appropriate ways” (Pravaz 2003:136). Understanding the evolution of identity construction among African-descended women will be limited if researchers fail to categorize the structures, processes, contexts, and outcomes that become the “performances” of identity in the African Diaspora. Researching and documenting these structures may help to demonstrate their usefulness in the formation of a specific cultural domain about hair.

crucial questions about this notion of identity construction and Blackness. For example, “Who is authentically Black and who is empowered to determine this reality?” These questions are echoed by Debora Dickerson (2004), in her book *The End of Blackness*. Looking at these works prompted me to ask a multitude of questions about the construction of Black identity. For example, following the concept of Blackness popularized by hip hop culture prompts me to ask, Does speaking Black English, having multiple “babies’ daddies,” or bad credit make me Black? Do I need to dodge bullets in South-Central L.A. or participate in Jack and Jill and the Golden Sable debutante Ball in order to be authentically Black? How does one, "keep it real” as the rappers implore us to do? What are authentic Black politics? How exactly do I earn and maintain my Blackness, and more importantly, who decides when I am “there”? The same sentiment is echoed in Martin Favor’s book, *Authentic Blackness* (1999), when he asks whether or not race, class or culture, should control how intellectual work is categorized. Favor discusses out how the concept of Blackness is problematic because if we attempt to base it on a shared history then Blacks from alternate historical viewpoints are excluded and if we tried to link it to genetics then we are giving credence to the notions of difference. These same questions are applicable when we attempt to conceptualize identity in the African Diaspora. However, the resolution of these questions is less important than what has been called, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, the “discourse” of Diasporan identity (Favor 1999). This discourse is important because historically we have been unwilling to challenge popular notions of Blackness. However I assert that Diasporan scholars must unabashedly engage in this discourse if we are to forge any sense of community that extends across politics, geography, class, and gender.
Grappling with questions about identity in the African Diaspora, I realized that gender influences this construction and that the Black female body is a valid and necessary site for discourse analysis about what has been called a Diasporan identity (Favor 1999). Following Gilroy who states that, “gender is the modality in which race is lived,” I turned my attention to studying the “ritualized social forms” produced by women of African descent (Gilroy 1991). This research decision was heightened by my reflexive analysis of what is important to me as a woman of African descent and I was able to identify hair as a salient issue in the performance of identity for African-descended women. I began to examine the symbolic meaning African-descended women attribute to hair and hairstyle choice.

In spite of my desire to avoid reifying the stereotypes racist ideology has historically relied upon by calling upon an element of racial classification as a unifying factor, I cannot disregard the historical and social significance of the idea of “race.” This social concept in the United States with similar permutations globally is often based on perceived phenotype, and historically and up to the present is significant in the construction of group boundaries. I assert that the biological similarity of hair among African-descended women acts as a unifying factor for this group across geographical boundaries. For example, because of her light skin and tightly coiled hair, Katya Azoulay, a Jewish woman of African descent, is constantly bombarded with the questions like, “What are you?” and challenged by statements like, “You’re not Jewish,” because of her skin color and hair texture (Azoulay 1997). Azoulay’s experience is a poignant example of the fact that racial classification and group boundaries are socially constructed ideas that remain dominant factors in what are perceived as markers for Blackness.

I focus on women of African descent because hair is so central to the construction of the Black female’s racial or cultural identity, her sexuality, gender roles and dynamics, and her
access to or exclusion from various types of power, including aesthetic, cultural, economic, and political. But in order to initiate a real discussion about hair in contemporary culture and its role in identity construction and resistance among African-descended women, I must historicize the conceptualization of the Black body and ultimately, the Black female body.

**Significance of Study**

**Historicizing Blackness**

One of the key elements required to understand the relevance of hair as a performative identity marker among African-descended women is the history of the powerful imagery and beliefs related to Blackness and the female body. The historical development of the concept of Blackness in the Americas is relevant to the Diaspora because the spread of ideas about the significance of skin color have not been constrained by geography. White racism and the negative stereotypes it created to subordinate Black bodies may be a historically recent invention but notions of color based inferiority have been adopted by other cultures and societies on a worldwide basis (Smedley 1998).

**Linking Color to Race**

The real power behind color prejudice comes from its association with notions of group membership and “race.” Racialization of skin color, physical features, and hair texture served as a powerful way to distort the image of the Black body. Moreover, it became the unifying force upon which the concept of Whiteness could be launched. Interestingly, one of the reasons it was imperative to create a negative image of the Black body was because slaveholders, who in some contexts were outnumbered by the people they enslaved, needed the allegiance of poor White non-slaveholders in order to maintain physical control of Blacks. The notion of a shared “Whiteness” became a way to grant poor people an elevated social status that was based solely upon their physical appearances (Hartigan 1997). “Whiteness” visibly unified the population and
allowed them to control large numbers of enslaved people (Davila 2003; Hartigan 1997; Stanfield 2006). The ideology of Whiteness was advanced by constant attempts to outline the parameters of Blackness (Smedley 1998). One example of this effort can be found in the first American edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1798). Under the entry "Negro" it reads:

Round cheeks, high cheek-bones, a forehead somewhat elevated, a short, broad, flat nose, thick lips, small ears, ugliness, and irregularity of shape, characterize their external appearance. The Negro women have their loins greatly depressed, and very large buttocks, which give them the shape of a saddle. Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race: idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness and intemperance . . . strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself (Eze 1997:94).

This “racial” definition shows how the dominant view of the Black body connects the physicality of Blackness with negative morals and character traits (Conrad 1987). By defining the Black body as “naturally” ugly, idle, and profane, the White body is implicitly exalted as “naturally” beautiful, industrious, and sacred. Negative images of the Black body became ingrained in landscape of the dominant ideology because Whiteness was defined as an oppositional reality to Blackness (Foutz 1999). A key element in this belief system was that Europeans, who had "straight hair and noses" were naturally beautiful and therefore both physically and spiritually superior, while curly hair and broad noses were ugly indications of barbarism (Foutz 1999). Group identity or race was inscribed on the individual bodies of enslaved Africans. Skin color, and hair texture became accepted as outward symbols of race and expressions of an internal pathology (Ferguson 1916). The concept of race globally linked the Black body to ideas about high levels of sexuality, depravity, laziness, and violence that needed to be controlled (Baker 1998; Hayes 2002; Roberts 1994).
Black Female Bodies

Interestingly, some of the first exposure the public had to the scientific construction of race via anthropology was during the 1893 and 1904 World Fair’s (Baker 1998). These events introduced the general public in America to the "scientific evidence" of the inferiority of the Black body and the superiority of the White body (Baker 1998). Legal, anthropological, economic, religious, and social forces worked in unison to craft negative images of the Black racial body (Collins 1990). Focusing on the body as the locus of race helped to cement ideas about racial inferiority being written into the very text of the Black female body (Gates 1986). The Black female body became the physical manifestation of all the negative character traits associated with the race. In this circular reasoning the body became evidence of the traits and the traits were manifested in the perceived ugliness of the body (Gilliam 1997; Gilliam 2001; Gilman 2001; McClaurin 2001; Pravaz 2003). Dark skin and kinky hair “themselves” became representations of primitiveness and immorality. This was in direct opposition to White skin and blonde hair which became the physical manifestation of civility, chastity, and beauty. Race and the condition of servitude were symbolically inscribed on the physical body of the Black female (Drake 1987; Fannon 1967; Memmi 1965; Vizenor 1965).

The image of the Black female body as an example of savage sexuality and racial inferiority was confirmed by the lurid exhibition of the genitalia of Sarah Baartman, who is better known as the "hottentot venus" (Maseko 1998; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Europeans were able to visually palpate the "otherness" of the Black female body with the exhibition of Baartman's pronounced buttocks, a physical condition known as steatopygia\(^2\), and her rumored

\(^{2}\)Classified as an "abnormal" protuberance of buttocks, "steatopygia, a physical condition first anatomized by the physicians who dissected the Hottentot Venus and other African women, appears in the medical, physiological, and anthropological literature of the nineteenth century, as well as in depictions in plastic arts and in literary works of women exoticized by their race, their profession (prostitutes, goddesses, harem inmates), their class (laundresses,
ependent labia minora³ (Baker 1974; Sharpley-Whiting 1999). Sarah Baartman's body served as the foundation of European ideas about Black female sexuality and her exhibition became one of the initial ethnographic studies of the Black female body (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: see Figure 1-2 La Belle Hottentot).

In the 20th and 21st centuries the development and spread of mass media has helped to further objectify and "other" the Black female body. Magazines like the National Geographic made images of nude Black females readily available to the masses and held their bodies out for public review as valid anthropological specimens (Willis and Williams 2002). The Internet today provides groups the opportunity to display various types of images regarding the Black female body. These images range from positive, such as the photos found in the online forum called www.nappturality.com, to cartoons that are absurdly stereotypical and racist (see Figure 1-3).

In attempting to re-appropriate our images, Black women face an exploitive paradox where we are forced to choose between being hyper-visible and sexual or invisible and asexual. It should be clear now why the construction of the Black female body is a central issue when attempting to understand the link between the history of racism and identity construction in the African Diaspora. For people of African descent, the geography of the body serves as a powerful and visible symbol of racist ideology. Only by dissecting this symbolic landscape can we hope to

³ The labia minora, sometimes referred to as the inner lips of the vagina, are folds of skin that extend downward from the female clitoris that are surrounded by the labia majora. “The famous "Hottentot apron" is a hypertrophy, or overdevelopment, of the labia minora, or nymphae. The apron was one of the most widely discussed riddles of female sexuality in the nineteenth century. However, its existence, its intriguing origins, and its uses had been greatly debated in various travelogues of the eighteenth century” (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 27).
regain control of the body that serves to define our character, our souls, and our morality. Yet, given the complex history surrounding the negative images associated with the Black female image, repossessing this symbolic landscape will not be a simple task. In part this task will be difficult because certain images are ingrained in the individual psyches of women of African descent. For Black women these images speak “to” us and “through” us as we police each other’s “presentations of self” (Goffman 1959). Recognizing this internal level of control among African-descended women prompted me to focus on hair as a key element in the construction of Black female identity.

**Performing Identity in the Diaspora**

Public, political, and extremely personal for women of African descent, it only makes sense that hair and hairstyles would eventually be interpreted as a prime domain for reproducing and transforming social meaning. Hair is a multilevel, multi-vocal symbol that is imbued with a plethora of ideas about sexuality (Cooper 1971; Mageo 1994), socioeconomic status (Banks 1997; Bonner 1994; Harris and Johnson 2001; Herron and Cepeda 1997; Zollar and Herron 2001), political beliefs (Rooks 2001), and even ethnic identity (Brown 1994). Despite the nomenclature used, concepts of “good hair” and “bad hair” still exist in Africa and the African Diaspora (Banks 1997; Bennett and Dickerson 2001; Bonner 1994; Harris and Johnson 2001; Herron and Cepeda 1997; Zollar and Herron 2001). These concepts prompted me to ask, “What is good hair?” How does one assess the quality of another individual’s hair and how does having what is classified as “good” hair influence your life? Moreover, what is “bad” hair and how are these values transmitted culturally? Is bad hair resistance hair while good hair is compliant? I believe that the symbolism associated with “bad” or “nappy” hair goes beyond a mere indication of type of hair texture. An analysis of statements made by informants in my preliminary research, such as, “boy, he got some good hair, I bet he will make some pretty babies” reveals
that hair texture also implies perceived biological quality [personal communication with author, December 10, 2004]. In the African-American community the word “nappy” itself, which is often used to characterize “bad” hair, is almost as offensive as a racial slur.

For example in New York City a White teacher read a book entitled *Nappy Hair* (Herron and Cepeda 1997) to her class and was suspended from work after being bombarded with threats from angry Black parents. Despite the fact that the children’s book was written by a Black woman and espoused a message of self love for the natural diversity of Black hair textures, many people rejected the positive image espoused by the book because of the negative symbolism they associated with the word “nappy.” By investigating the meaning of hair texture, my research focuses on the lived experiences surrounding “good” and “nappy” hair. Or even more recently when Don Imus, one of the country’s most popular radio talk show hosts described the Rutgers women’s basketball team as “nappy headed ho’s” the media began questioning whether his comments could bring down a multimillion-dollar media business (Lieberman, et al. 2007). However his producer, Bernard McGuirk, made similar comments about the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) women’s basketball final being a competition between the “Jigaboos vs. the Wannabees” and this slur barely raised an eyebrow (Carr 2007). McGuirk did not use the word nappy so his comments did not trigger the same reaction. The word nappy is powerful because of its symbolic meaning among African-descended women. Hair really matters to women of African descent and this is why it serves as a valid and significant area of inquiry (Banks 2000).

**Agency, Perception, and Hair**

Any discussion of the Black body requires a focus on its materiality. As a society we are drawn to imagery composed of skin, nails, lips, hair, and body forms; however, this is never the entire enunciation of the Black body because it is inextricably connected to historical
representation and both individual and societal perception and interpretation (Bennett and Dickerson 2001). These perceptions and interpretations vary immensely depending on the contexts within which they are experienced. Following Ian Hodder, who writes that material culture is used by individuals as a medium for communication, conformity and identity expression I assert that, “an individual's guise may be transient and temporary, depending on context” (Hodder 1982:27). So although some theorists assert that the use of straight hair is evidence of self hatred, I believe that hairstyle choices may serve different functions depending on the context they are displayed within. For the Black female, however, institutionalized racism and chattel slavery is the prism through which her body has been experienced and interpreted. This ideology creates a permanent and fixed impression of her in the minds of her peers and oppressors.

Historically, in the United States, the Black female body became chattel for breeding and an elaborate racial ideology was developed that made her the quintessential dichotomy. She became simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible, masculine and womanly, repugnant and desirable, but she always remained identifiable through her hair texture, skin, and facial features (Bennett and Dickerson 2001; Gilliam 1997). Despite the fact that race is not a biological reality, forensic anthropologists are still using hair as a component for determining the “race” of unknown subjects (Smay and Armelagos 2000). Linking “race” to hair is not a new concept among anthropologists and even Firth noted that physical anthropologists have argued that, “hair [texture] is apparently a true racial character in man, hereditary and unaffected by environment” (Firth 1973a:263).

According to the work of authors like Pravaz, Williams, Smedley and Loren, identifiable bodily features such as hair texture and skin color were placed on a racial continuum by
colonizers who graded individuals by their percentage of Whiteness (Pravaz 2003; Smedley 1998; Williams 2000). Different treatment was afforded to people based on their determined percentage of Whiteness and thus perceived racial differences served as a basis for status differences (Loren 2001; Pravaz 2003). From slavery up to the present 21st century the Black female body has been unable to discard the negative imagery assigned to it. The genesis of the concepts regarding “good” hair and “bad” can be found in a history of racial classification and social hierarchy. It is within this crucible of 500 years of White supremacy and racial oppression that the Black female body has been forged, stigmatized and devalued, thereby creating a fracture in the essence of her personal identity and public perception. I would suggest that some aspects of Black women’s beautification rituals became a form of agency and through these rituals Black women’s hair became a location for symbolic action and interaction.

**Functional Definitions of Key Hairstyle Terms**

**Basic Hair Biology**

This ethnography documents the symbolic meanings attributed to hair and hairstyle choice among women of African descent. In order to effectively discuss the symbolic meanings associated with hairstyles and hair texture I must begin by explaining the biological reality of hair. This is important because a firm understanding of what hair is “physically” helps explicate what it does “symbolically.”

All hair begins as slender threadlike outgrowth of keratin, or dead protein that protrudes from the skin. This keratin has three main morphological areas, the cuticle or translucent scale like outer layer of the hair shaft, the cortex which can be conceptualized as the meat of the hair shaft, and the medulla which is the central core of the hair shaft (Brannon 2006; Deedrick and Koch 2004; Paus and Cotsarelis 1999: see Figures 1-4 and 1-5).
Despite the fact that the concept of race does not account for human genetic variation, forensic anthropologists have used the morphological variations in hair to create typologies that are associated with the socially constructed categories called race (Deedrick 2000; Smay and Armelagos 2000). These variations are based on the shape of the hair follicle which directly influences the shape of the hair shaft. In the past, anthropologists associated hair with the physical stereotypes we call “races,” the category Caucasian represented European origin, Ethiopian or Negroid were of African origin, and Mongoloid described people of Asian origin (Deedrick 2000; Deedrick and Koch 2004; Marks 1995: 54). According to Deedrick and Koch, in some instances the racial characteristics exhibited are not clearly defined, indicating the hair may be of mixed-racial origin (2004). However, it is not clear what these instances may be. Deedrick and Koch go on to note that studies on the morphology of hair by race reveal that Caucasian hair is oval to round shaped with even pigment and a medium size cuticle. Deedrick writes that it is this oval shape that gives the so called Caucasian hair a straight or mildly wavy appearance. For identification purposes round hair shafts with an auburn pigment and thick cuticle are sorted into the category of Mongoloid or Asian hair (Deedrick 2000). Deedrick notes that this shape of the hair cells makes it appear very straight. Finally, Deedrick explains that hair that has been categorized as Negroid or African appears to be primarily elliptical or flat shaped with dense pigmentation and a thin cuticle (Deedrick and Koch 2004; McClain 1998). This flat shape of the hair cells combined with naturally lower levels of scalp oil and larger amounts of sulfur gives African typed hair an extremely curly appearance. This texture of hair is susceptible to twisting or buckling, conditions that can create splits in the hair shaft (Deedrick and Koch 2004). These factors work in unison to create the tightly twisted hair that is associated with
people of African descent. This naturally formed hair texture is the root of my discussion about the meaning of hair among women of African descent.

The curly hair texture associated with being of African descent can be manipulated into various styles, using assorted techniques that range from chemical applications to manual contortions. My preliminary research and participant observation revealed eight major hairstyles that were salient to my research participants. So I focused my work on what the women identified as the most prominent styles among women of African descent. These hairstyles are called relaxers or perms, braids, weaves, twists, cornrows, jheri curls, short naturals and dreadlocks. What follows is a basic discussion of the procedures used to create these styles.

**Black Hairstyles**

This section will provide a description of the chemical and manual processes women of African descent go through to achieve the eight styles mentioned in the previous section. An important component of my research is a detailed explanation of how these hairstyles are created. For a detailed discussion of the historical significance related to these different styles see (Banks 2000; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Johnson 2004; Johnson 1991; Tyler 1990).

Chemical relaxers are worn by an estimated 75 percent of African-descended women (Quinn, et al. 2003; Russell, et al. 1992:91). Chemical relaxing is completed by the application of a cream or lotion mixture of sodium hydroxide, guanidine hydroxide, or calcium hydroxide (Meadows 2001) to penetrate the cortex of the hair shaft and break the cross bonds of the cortical layer (Babino, et al. 1995; Browne 1989; Fletcher 2000; Kinard 1997; McClain 1998; Meadows 2001; Quinn, et al. 2003). This process changes the molecular structure of the hair by chemically removing its tight curl pattern. The hair takes on the appearance of being straight. However, this process also weakens the hair shaft and over time results in breakage. Among women of African descent in the United States, this process is commonly called a “perm” (Babino, et al. 1995;
Banks 2000; Browne 1989; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Cornwell 1997; Draelos 1997; Ebong 2001; Fletcher 2000; Harris and Johnson 2001; Jones 1994; Kinard 1997; Quinn, et al. 2003; Rankin and Korlewala 1993; Sieber, et al. 2000: see Figure 1-7). This style is becoming even more popular as products like, “Soft & Beautiful Just For Me Texture Softener” by Alberto Culver, are marketed towards girls as young as five and their mothers as an alternative to hair pressing or relaxing. This product is called a no lye conditioning relaxer and it purports to cause less breakage than simply combing natural hair. The product is replete with a Web Site geared towards young girls where they can become a product VIP member, play games, and compete to win a doll made in their own image (http://www.jfmvipclub.com/ ). Chemical relaxing is an extension of thermal styling methods such as flat ironing, hot combing, and curling (see Figure 1-6 Hot Combs). These thermal methods of hair straightening provide a similar hairstyle appearance, but they do not cause permanent changes in the chemical make up of the hair.

In Africa, particularly among the Yoruba, cornrow braids were used to symbolize important cultural markers such as ethnicity, social status, religion, and age (Sieber, et al. 2000). It is possible to produce very artistic cornrow styles that range from simple lines to complex replicas of geometrical shapes Braiding has traditionally involved twisting three sections of hair in an overlapping motion until the end of the hair is reached. Individual braids may also be called plaits. Micro-braids are another popular braid style that is created by adding synthetic or human hair to the three sections of the wearers’ hair, thereby extending the length and fullness of the style (see Figure 1-8). One of the drawbacks that wearers have with this style occurs when the braids are too tight which results in hair loss from excessive tension on the hair follicles. Braiding also includes a process called cornrowing or canerowing (see Figure 1-9). This process is where hair is braided very close to the scalp. (Babino, et al. 1995; Banks 2000; Browne 1989;
Braids have grown into a popular style and have been donned by famous entertainers such as Brandy and Alicia Keys.

Weaves are a set of hairstyling practices that has several different modes of production. One way to create a weave involves relaxing the hair and then placing several small cornrow braids in the middle and back of the head. Then artificial hair that has been attached to a weft, or plastic strip, is sewn on to these cornrow braids with a needle and thread. The relaxed hair is then used to conceal the weft and the real and artificial hair is blended together to create the illusion of longer thicker hair. Another way to create a weave style involves using a special glue to attach small amounts of hair to small sections of hair at the base of the scalp (see Figure 1-10). These additions increase the volume and length of the hair. Yet another procedure for weaving involves covering the entire head with a type of stocking material and then applying the synthetic or human hair over the entire head. The hair can be glued to the stocking or sewn to the stocking but it creates a type of long term wig that is much more difficult to remove than a traditional wig (Babino, et al. 1995; Banks 2000; Browne 1989; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Cornwell 1997; Draelos 1997; Ebong 2001; Fletcher 2000; Harris and Johnson 2001; Jones 1994; Kinard 1997; Rankin and Korlewala 1993; Sieber, et al. 2000).

Twists are another hairstyle that has become popular. This style is created by twisting two sections of hair together until the end is reached. This style can be achieved with or without the addition of extra human or synthetic hair (see Figure 1-12).

In the 1980s, a chemically based hairstyle was introduced called a jheri curl. This hairstyle is produced by applying two different chemical processes to the hair. The initial part of the process uses a chemical similar to a relaxer so that the molecular bonds in the natural curl pattern
of the hair are relaxed. Then after the natural curls are loosened the hair is set on perm rods. A second chemical solution is applied to the hair while the perm rods are in place and this locks in a larger curl pattern that is dictated by the size of the perm rods. This procedure is more involved than the previously described relaxer. In fact, the application of two oppositional chemicals can be very damaging and drying to the hair and wearers are required to frequently moisturize the hair with oil products (see Figure 1-12). This need to frequently apply oil to the hair diminished the popularity of this style, since it often left the hair wet and oily for hours after the products were applied (Armstrong, et al.; Babino, et al. 1995; Banks; Browne; Byrd and Tharps; Cornwell; Draelos; Ebong; Fletcher; Harris and Johnson; Kinard; Rankin and Korlewala; Sieber, et al. 2000).

Short naturals are a style created by cropping the hair close to the scalp. The length of the hair can range from under an inch to several inches in length. The primary characteristic that distinguishes this hairstyle is that it is usually devoid of chemicals. This style has also been the predecessor of a style known as the Afro. The Afro is produced by combing the natural hair away from the scalp. The curl pattern in Black hair allows the hair to stand away from the scalp without dropping. This natural strength can be used to create a dome-like hairstyle that can be molded with light patting (Babino, et al. 1995; Banks 2000; Browne 1989; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Cornwell 1997; Draelos 1997; Hatton 1994).

Dreadlocks, dreads, or locks, is a hairstyle that is achieved by allowing the hair to intertwine and twist into its natural curl pattern. This process may take weeks or even months to achieve depending on the tightness of the individuals curl pattern. In order to achieve this style wearers may avoid washing or combing the hair for several weeks or even months. This process causes the hair to become matted and once the dreadlock is formed it cannot be combed out. In
order to change the hairstyle the wearer would be required to cut the dreadlocks off. This process can occur naturally or it can be “styled” by twisting or palm rolling techniques (Flinker 1985; Johnson 1991; S.B.G. 1980). The term dreadlocks was actually coined by the Rastafarian religious movement and the hairstyle was popularized in the 1980s by rock star Bob Marley. However, the hairstyle has been worn by people in many different cultures prior to and since the advent of the religious movement (Banks 1997; Ebong 2001; Seiber 2000). For example, the Biblical figures Sampson and John the Baptist are reported to have worn dreadlocks (Mastalia and Pagano 1999). Furthermore, descriptions of the hairstyle can be found in the Veda scriptures of India and the style is worn by Sadhus (holy men) and Sadhis (holy women) in India to this day (Mastalia and Pagano 1999). The style is worn by a diverse group of people across the globe including the Maasai, the Mau Mau, and New Guineans (Mastalia and Pagano 1999; Sieber, et al. 2000). I have taken the time to describe these eight Black hair forms so that my discussions about the symbolism associated with Black hairstyles can focus on what they signify and not the signs themselves.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for understanding all the key concepts and issues that will be further explored in the dissertation. I used chapter one to introduce the purpose of the study, discuss the problem, and present the research questions. This is followed by a discussion of the rationale for selecting this topic and functional descriptions of the hairstyles identified by my participants as salient. This section includes a discussion of Blackness, the connection between color and race, the history of the Black female body, the biology of hair and finally the Black hairstyles identified to be salient by my research participants.

In chapter two, I review the literature by starting with the psychoanalytical and anthropological discussions of hair as it relates to Whites. This general hair theory is important
because it serves as the basis for many of the contemporary theories about Black hair and also reveals how hair has been interpreted by social scientists. After reviewing the general literature on hair I examine the theories produced about Black hair and the African Diaspora by Black psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists. I extend my review of the literature on hair theory to include the African Diaspora because it is important for me to situate my work within this conceptual area of study. This chronological review of the literature serves as a historical overview of Black hair culture.

Chapter three describes my research design. In this section the methodology I used is presented and the specific methods utilized to gather the data for my study are reviewed. While discussing the settings in which my research took place I also reflect on the importance of my role as a native researcher and the impact this had on my ability to implement my research strategy. This chapter also includes a description of my sampling techniques and sample demographics.

Chapter four is where I begin discussing the data from my participant observation, such as interviews, and digital storytelling exercises. The voices of African-descended women dominate this chapter with the articulation of hair stories and hair symbolism.

Chapter five is a summary of the data obtained through a survey and an online experiment. This visual presentation of data gleaned from the experiment is juxtaposed and verified against the numerical data that the respondents provided me with in the survey. This chapter also discusses the political economy of hair as it relates to the human hair trade and hair braiding as a profession.

In chapter six, I flesh out the concept of hair as a cultural domain. It is here that I synthesize the information found in the first five chapters, including my data analysis to create a
conceptual framework for the cultural domain of hair. While exploring the parameters of the cultural domain of hair for African-descended women I conclude that this domain functions as an important component in the construction of cultural and personal identity for African-descended women. In this final chapter I also discuss the limitations of my study, reevaluate my research goals, and identify opportunities for additional academic research.
Figure 1-1 Nakia Brown. Photograph courtesy of Ryan Santoo and Sybil Dione Rosado. Nakia Brown says she wears dreadlocks as her choice of hairstyle because of pride. She claims to be a strong, independent, proud Black female. With this in mind she has chosen her hairstyle to depict these values that have been instilled in her from her family. She prefers to wear dreadlocks above braids or other choices because she considers them the most distinctive of African-American hair culture. Which other race’s hair can form as beautiful or natural locks as Black person’s can? Nakia is from the South and has not remembered a time when she did not face some form of discrimination from the prejudiced majority. However, instead of wallowing in self-pity, she has struck back and is in college when many wrote her off before. Many people who previously knew her never thought that Nakia would make it as far as college. She hopes to further surpass their expectations by graduating and leading a successful professional and personal life. Nakia sees dreadlocks as the most fundamental African-American hairstyle and wishes it were more widespread. Yes, you do tend to be stereotyped a lot quicker with dreadlocks than without them, but Nakia says it is a small price to pay for personal gratification. Her hair is symbolic also of her social position and culture. Nakia was chosen because a female with dreadlocks could not be neglected when addressing an African-American hair survey. It is a significant part of the culture and recently has become much more popular amongst females. I am certain, like Nakia, they wear dreadlocks as symbols of their ethnic individuality and with a certain degree of pride. ---Ryan Santoo, Benedict College Student response to digital storytelling assignment.
Figure 1-2  La Belle Hottentot circa 1814. Permission Granted by Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
Figure 1-3  Fat black welfare queens cartoon. [Reprinted with permission from Tom Metzger publisher of the Big Book of Racist Cartoon and The Insurgent website at www.resist.com ].
Figure 1-4  Cross section of hair follicle. [Reprinted with permission of Douglas Deedrick 2000, Hair Fibers Crime and Evidence Part 1 Forensic Science Communications 2:3.].
Figure 1-5 Cross section of hair and scalp. [Reprinted with permission of Douglas Deedrick and Sandra Koch 2004, Microscopy of hair Part 1 Forensic Science Communications 6:1.].
Figure 1-6 Hot Combs. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-7  Completed relaxer style. Photograph courtesy of Don Johnson and Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-8  Hair being braided with synthetic hair. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-9  Cornrow hairstyle being crafted with synthetic hair. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-10  Weave hairstyle. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-11  Twists hairstyle. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 1-12 Jheri curl photo. Sybil Dione Rosado at age 12 photograph courtesy of Don L. Johnson.
Figure 1-13  Short natural hairstyle photo. Photograph courtesy of Dr. Sybil Johnson.
Figure 1-14  Long dreadlocks hairstyle. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
CHAPTER 2
THEORIZING THE BODY AND HAIR: A HISTORICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Ever since the Biblical Samson was brought down by Delilah, who cut his seven locks, hair has been a fascinating and symbolic cultural entity (The New King James Version, Judg. 16. 20). However, this fascination has not been restricted to one culture. The Masai of Kenya believed their chief would lose his power if his chin was shaved; some Native American tribes removed the scalps of their enemies in order to release their souls and capture their power; and strict Orthodox Jews still maintain prohibitions against shaving (Cooper 1971). Hair has represented everything from virility to submission and sexual restraint. As early as 1886 anthropologist, G.A. Wilken studied the relevance of hairdressing as it pertained to ritual mourning (Wilken 1886). Recent research on hair reveals that it is an extremely important factor in African American women’s lives (Banks 2000).

My research primarily focuses on the beliefs about hair held by women who identify themselves as being of African descent in the American South. Obviously, the symbols have changed over time and vary from culture to culture, but hair remains an extremely salient topic for social scientists and in particular anthropologists. I have crafted this chapter to examine the socioeconomic and cultural construction of the body; review the psychoanalytical, and anthropological literature on hair symbolism; discuss the specialized role of hair among African-descended women in America; provide the reader with what I call a Black hair historiography; and present a literature review of the social science writings on Black hair. These activities were conducted in order to answer the following research questions:

- Are there shared symbolic meanings that women of African descent associate with their hair texture and hairstyle choice?
- If shared meanings exist, do they form the basis of a cultural belief domain among women of African descent?
Socioeconomic and Cultural Construction of the Body

Since hair is simply one small part of the body, I believe that any discussion of its anthropological significance must begin with the broader concept of how the body has been viewed by some anthropologists and sociologists. Discussing the body first will help me to contextualize the history and symbolic meaning of hair among African American women. Moreover, this discussion is crafted to help the reader understand the magnitude of body politics and how hair can possibly serve as an extension of an individual’s personality, sexuality, political inclination, or religion. Thus, to understand the symbolic meanings with which hair may have been imbued, it is helpful to start with how the body has been symbolized.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (2003) theorized that the body is an organ of communication that is used to actively create symbols to help us maintain our societies. Douglas states that, “the physical body is a microcosm of society” (Douglas 2003:76-77). My reading of Douglas’ work is that she envisions the human body as a symbol that fluctuates with cultural change. As a culture becomes more restrictive, the way in which its members treat their bodies becomes more controlled. The parallel that Douglas creates between society and the body seems to be based on a combination of the sociological theory of functionalism and social interactionism. The syllogism that can be crafted from Douglas’ work is that the body is a microcosm of society, hair is a part of the body, and therefore hair is a microcosm of society. But, this may be a specious argument and in part the purpose of my research is to investigate whether or not there are shared meanings about hair that constitute a cultural domain. Douglas’s work remains useful to me because it gives an indication of how powerful the body and by extention hair have been viewed.
Some philosophers and sociologists have also asserted that the body functions as a symbol (Goffman 1959), a source of power (Foucault 1979), and as a statement of identity (Synnott 1987). Reading these ideas, I find myself believing that the body is a powerful location for the creation of identity and symbolization. If our bodies all looked the same I am sure that we would create a new way to craft our individuality. However, we do not all look alike and we use our bodies to carve out individual identities from our society’s populace. Our bodies mark us and we mark our bodies to indicate who we are, what we think, and how we feel as members of the society we exist within. Hewitt says, “Marking the body enculturates and differentiates an individual, and the precise meaning of body modification is unique for each person and each society” (Hewitt 1997:11).

It is my contention that our particular culture teaches us how to control our bodies and thus harness our power as individual symbolizing beings. We are active participants in the creation of our identities as our culture shapes our perceptions of what these identities should entail. A good example of this relationship between identity production and cultural pressure is expressed by one of my research participants when she relates this story about her pursuit of employment in the 1970’s,

The guy said Uhm you know you have to have a work visa and I said what do you mean I have to have a work visa? He said aren’t you foreign? I said no I’m from Alabama! So at that point I started growing the perm out you know, ‘cause that meant that if he couldn’t identify me for who I was, then maybe I wasn’t really identifying me for who I was. [Ms. Donna Todd, Interview March 2005].

Donna’s analysis of her own production of identity indicates that she was aware of the direct relationship between how she manipulated her bodily appearance and how society would judge her. Donna clearly provides an example of how we actively craft our identities in relation to societal pressure. Understanding this societal pressure and control over the body is valuable
because it serves as the locus of what Pierre Bourdieu terms “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1986; Bourdieu 1990).

In the *Logic of Practice*, Pierre Bourdieu outlines the validity of symbolic capital as a strategy for enhancing one's economic prowess (Bourdieu 1990). He argues that symbolic capital operates as a form of credit based on the belief that its possessor is wealthy and therefore honorable (Bourdieu 1990; Kato 2004:4). This symbolic capital is inherently powered by social definitions of value. These social definitions of value emanate from individual cultures where cultural capital is formed through a process of economic socialization (Bourdieu 1990). Cultural capital is a form of knowledge that equips agents with the ability to decipher cultural artifacts and relations and this cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital.

An example of economic socialization occurs among women of African descent in the American South when they make their first visit to a beauty supply store that sells products specifically tailored to them. Upon entering these stores, the women or girls are exposed to a cornucopia of gels, oils, and other potions that are purported to dramatically increase hair growth. The price of the product correlates with its alleged effectiveness. The more effective the product is in generating hair growth the more it costs. This socialization experiences teaches the women that long hair is valuable, so valuable that it even costs more to acquire (Akbari 2002; Allahar 1993; Archer 1968; Ashe 1995; Banks 1997; Banks 2000; Bennett and Dickerson 2001; Bond and Cash 1991; Brooks 2001; Brown 1994; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Chambers, et al. 1992; Jacobs-Huey 1999; Perkins 1996; Persadsingh 2003; Rooks 1994). Being actively socialized about the material worth of hair reinforces its symbolic value for women. Armed with an understanding of the socioeconomic and cultural construction of the body we are now prepared to discuss hair symbolism.
Psychoanalytical and Anthropological Literature on Hair Symbolism

In order to understand the importance of hair as a possible shared symbolic meaning I begin by trying to understand the various ways in which social scientists and philosophers have grappled with the symbolism of hair. In this section I will explore some of the key theoretical views that historically have informed our thinking about hair. Some of the earliest social science theories on hair can be traced back to Freud’s (1922) posthumous publication, “The Medusa’s Hair.”

Researchers have described Freud’s note as a psychoanalytical assessment that equated the fear of matted locks of hair to castration (Banks 1997; Obeyesekere 1981). This “castration complex” is a common theme in Freud’s work and when analyzing dreams he often seems to equate hair cutting, baldness, and even tooth loss to castration (Freud 1938:595; Petocz 1999). Freud’s fascination with the symbols of castration, led him to assert that a woman’s hair and mouth were synonymous to her genitals in dreams. As Freud describes the “genital symbols in mythology,” he points out that “above all the snake, is the most important symbol of the male member” (Freud 1938:373; Petocz 1999). Consequently when considering the snakes protruding from Medusa’s head, Freud analyzes the snake hair as a phallic symbol and the removal of her head and hair to be symbolic of castration. Sigmund Freud's work serves as the starting point for psychoanalytic theories regarding hair in anthropology.

Charles Berg (1951) followed Freud's reliance on psychoanalytic theory in his book The Unconscious Significance of Hair. Berg delved into the psychoanalytical meaning of hair in dreams and folklore. He extended Freud’s analysis of hair cutting as a “castration complex,” to argue that head hair was a universal symbol for genitals and thus cutting hair was a symbolic form of castration and denial of sexual freedom. Berg relied on ancient ethnographic evidence to assert that this castration anxiety was a “cultural universal” that even transcended gender. Berg
writes, “If we enquire further into the mysterious nature of this strength invested in the hair we
discover that it is held to have fertilizing powers” (Berg 1951:23). He also states that, “I shall
merely call attention to the fact that this hair behaviour has in women become so important that it
has been specialized and relegated to a host of professionals” (Berg 1951:4). Berg viewed
hairdressing as a ritualistic celebration and he was determined to unearth its psychological
meaning.

Considering the historical development of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory as a treatment for
neurotic, wealthy European women, I find it problematic to use this approach in the study of a
more diverse population. Psychoanalytic theory underestimates the role environment plays on
individual personality development, and overemphasizes the influence of the sex drive. While I
agree with Berg’s and Freud’s views of hair dressing as a ritual infused with multiple symbols
and meaning I do not rely on their assertions that hair is primarily representative of sexual
organs.

Anthropology has been instrumental in affirming that Freud and Berg were correct in
believing that hair held symbolic importance and contained focused unconscious meaning. In
1958, anthropologist Edmund Leach commented on this aspect of Berg’s work in the essay,
*Magical Hair*. In *Magical Hair* Leach reexamined the ethnographic evidence cited by Berg and
presented his own ethnographic examples in order to arrive at the same conclusions. Interestingly
Leach expanded the notion of hair as a symbol by providing additional examples of this reality in
different cultures.

Leach argued that hair is associated with sexual relations in a multitude of cultures. Leach
was concerned with finding out “where the content of symbols come from and how is it that
some symbols are more emotionally loaded than others” (Leach 1958:147). He divided the social
world into a public realm which consisted of our public interactions in our culture and a private personal realm where we craft our individual personalities and symbols in preparation for our public performances. For Leach symbolic meanings were the provenance of the public realm and thus they had very little personal significance. He concluded that hair is a material entity that serves as a public symbol. However, for Leach the conscious public symbol of hair can only be moderately illuminated by psychoanalytical theory. Leach's emphasis on locating the origin and emotion attached to symbolic meanings attributed to hair adds credence to my research questions about the shared meaning of hair and the possibility these meanings constitute a cultural domain. By investigating the origin and symbolic value of hair textures and styles my work parallels Leach’s.

A contemporary update on Leach’s and Freud’s assertion that hair contains symbolic sexual powers can be found in Wendy Cooper’s *Hair: Sex, Society, and Symbolism* (1971), which provides an in-depth analysis of the history of hair and hairstyles from ancient Egyptian times to the hippies of the 1970s. Cooper discussed how hair has been linked to female sexuality in many cultures and she notes that the appeal of women's head hair is almost a cultural universal. Cooper also delved into the history of hairdressing and the hair industry. She argued that hairdressers were artists who were charged with the renewal of women's glamour, spirit, and confidence (Cooper 1971:181). Overall, she provided an in-depth look at the history of hair and its symbolic importance in various cultures. Cooper's work, when combined with Berg's, provides a firm basis for my inquiry into the function of beauty shops in the art of ritualistic hairdressing. Cooper laid the foundation for researchers to interrogate the beauty industry and its workers as producers of culture.
In the essay *Social Hair* C.R. Hallpike, (1969) challenged the association Leach made between hair cutting, castration, and hair length as an indication of sexuality. Although Hallpike agreed that hair has been perceived as the seat of the soul, he argued that there was no clear evidence linking hair to libido and thus symbolic castration. Hallpike pointed out that with Berg's logic everything cut or removed from the body would be reduced to symbolic castration. He offered men's beards as a more appropriate location for symbolism associated with castration.

Hallpike also theorized that donning long hair was symbolic of being outside of society and cutting or hairdressing equaled social control and the reentry into society (Turner 1975). Hallpike critiqued Leach's reliance on the psychoanalytic paradigm that focused on an individual’s understanding of symbols. Instead Hallpike (1969) advocated determining the structure of symbolism as it relates to the group’s cosmology, social organization, and values. Hallpike says,

> once the anthropologist has discerned the structure of the symbolism in the culture he is investigating, his work is complete. The structure is “there” in the symbolism, just as the structure is “there” in a language analysed by the linguist (1969:263).

Hallpike’s work encouraged me to investigate how hair symbolism might shape the worldview of African-descended women. By characterizing hair as a symbol of group cosmology Hallpike positively influenced my belief that hair could be a cultural belief domain.

Raymond Firth’s essay, *Hair as Private Asset and Public Symbol* (Firth 1973a), confirmed Cooper’s assertion that hair is a true “racial” characteristic. Firth also argued that the significance of hair and hairstyles is a cultural universal. For Firth hair and hairstyles were used as a form of social expression and control. For example, Firth mentions the use of the Afro by women in the mid-1960s as a symbol of ethnic identity and politics. He also made an important observation when he identified the link that African Americans perceive between non-kinky hair and the social status of Whites (Firth 1973a:273). Firth argued that although hair is a private asset its
visibility also makes it a public symbol. Like Hallpike, Firth saw a connection between hair length and social control, particularly in Western culture. But, he differed by noting that in the Buddhist belief system, long hair is associated with power and shorn hair “symbolizes subjugation of the self to social rule” (Firth 1973a:290).

Firth recognized that “different forms of social control may demand different forms of hair treatment, even in the same society” (Firth 1973a:297). Therefore, although he argued that hair is a universal symbol, he admits that its meaning is inherently variable. Firth made some of the first arguments about the integration of the public and private significance of hair. For example he connects the private to the public and political display of hairstyles for African American women when he writes:

A more recent kind of statement, indicating not a personal relationship so much as a personal commitment, has been the wearing of ‘Afro’ hair styles by black American women. Appearing in the mid-1960s as a manifestation of black pride, with its suggestion of African, not American origins and independence, the ‘Afro’ became a symbol of ethnic identity and as such a political statement (Firth 1973a: 297).

Firth’s work strongly influenced my research on several levels. His recognition of the symbolic importance of hair for African Americans, his arguments about the public and private value of hair, and finally his acknowledgement of the potential for intra-cultural variation of symbolic beliefs make his work a suitable foundation for my research.

In *Hair, Sex and Dirt*, P. Hershman (1974) conducted what he called an ethnography of body symbolism. In this ethnography, which focuses on hair within Hindu and Sikh Punjabis cultures, he attempted to test the universality of particular symbols. Hershman supported the psychoanalytical thesis presented by Berg that said hair is associated with genitals. However, he asserted that what a symbol “is” should be separate from what a symbol “says or does” (Hershman 1974:291). Subsequently for him hair never means any one particular thing, but rather in various contexts it is used as a means of expressing different things (Hershman
Thus Hershman asserted that although symbols gain their emotive power from a subconscious association with genitals once these symbols are manipulated by cultural rituals they become expressions of cultural values. Hershman's recognition that the symbolic meanings associated with hair may vary depending on the context serves as another important prong in the framework for my research. Gananath Obeyesekere (1981) used his book entitled *Medusa's Hair*, in an attempt to supersede traditional ethnography by focusing on the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of his informants' lives. Obeyesekere criticized Leach’s analysis of private versus personal symbols when he argued that cultural meanings are linked to personal experience and personal symbols. In other words, the public symbol is directly connected to the private symbol. Despite the fact that Obeyesekere recognized the value of psychoanalytic theory, he criticized the notion advanced by Berg that hair is a symbolic penis.

Obeyesekere also pointed out the ethnocentrism in both Leach and Berg's analysis of hair symbolism. Obeyesekere argued that:

The anthropologist works on the assumption that cultural forms derived from Western thought—magic, ritual, myth, and so forth—are part of an integrated symbolic order we call culture, and that all of it can be analyzed in the identical manner. Furthermore, note that terms like myth and magic are labels from popular Western thought; these categories are not found in most non-Western systems . . . the presumption that such labels have cross cultural value…is simply unsupported (1981:18).

He encouraged researchers to investigate the meaning that individuals attach to symbols instead of attempting to infer it from our ethnocentric cultural standpoints. He pointed out that Berg and Leach erred because they inferred the meaning of the symbol from itself and did not refer to the persons in the culture who employ the symbol (Obeyesekere 1981). By investigating the matted hair of the Hindu ascetic, Obeyesekere locates the origin of the symbol, the personal
meaning of the symbol for the individuals, and the social or cultural message the symbol communicates to the group.

Obeyeskere advocated a methodology that references the group, the individual, and the culture in which they live when attempting to understand symbols. His work is particularly influential to my research as a methodological guide. I have crafted my research to elicit the origin, meaning, and cultural messages imbued in Black women’s hair. Hair theorists have postulated that hair can be used as a form of resistance to conventional ideas (Mageo 1994), but it can also simultaneously convey oppressive and liberating messages about a person’s beliefs, morality, sexual orientation, politics and religious sentiments through its symbolism (Eilberg-Schwartz and Doniger 1995). In my research, focusing on the group, the individual, and the culture allows for the possibility of uncovering grounded theory specifically about the hair culture of African-descended women.

Hair among African-Descended Women in the American South

The international performance ensemble known as the Urban Bush Women is dedicated to social activism and community development. For over twenty years they have sought to enlighten the public, encourage community development, and speak out against oppression and exploitation. Their performances celebrate the beauty of Black womanhood and the cultural influences of the African Diaspora. Recently the Urban Bush Women produced an interactive performative dialogue about the political significance of hair. Their production entitled “Hairstories,” explores the political arena of hairstyles and textures through a multimedia dance performance (Zollar and Herron 2001). This dance/multimedia presentation/audience participation piece engages the concept of nappy hair and its relationship to beauty ideals and social capital. In the scene titled “Hot Comb Blues,” Zollar’s group demonstrates the political,
social, aesthetic, and intergenerational conflict that stems from hairstyle choice and texture among African-descended women.

The scene: physicalized the burn of a hot comb, the itch of a perm, and the yanking and tugging of a mother combing her daughter’s hair. The performance evoked visceral memories in hair party participants and inspired them to tell stories about their own “hair hell moments.” These stories stimulated dialogue about what people put themselves through to have “good hair.” Further questioning led the group to consider the social pressures behind “good hair” and “bad hair” and the origin of our values about acceptable forms of beauty (Atlas 2005:5).

Zollar’s work is important because it demonstrates how hair functions to form ideas about identity, politics, and beauty ideals. Hair matters to African-descended women because it is a visible manifestation of gendered and racial identity. The production of “Hairstories” is one of many public and personal explorations of hair conducted by African-descended women in recent years.

This play and other artistic works affirm that hair is a complex and powerful signifier for Black women. As a result, Black women’s styling of their hair is a cultural process intertwined with what Gananath Obeyesekere calls “cultural symbols” that include historical notions about social biology and social race (Mercer 1987; Obeyesekere 1981:2). These cultural symbols are the expression of personal individuality in response to the culture.

The notion that African hair texture and styles are imbued with aesthetic value and symbolic meanings did not originate with colonization and enslavement (Sieber, et al. 2000). For example, Sieber points out that when Europeans first came into contact with West Africans they documented the myriad forms of hairstyles on display in the population (Sieber, et al. 2000; White and White 1995). Africans were engaging in elaborate hair grooming techniques that included activities like shaving, braiding, curling, knotting, wrapping, and coloring. They were also known for weaving supplementary materials into the hair for lengthening, twisting, and adding ornamental shells, silver, leather or gold to various styles (Sieber, et al. 2000:18-24).
Hence the rituals of hair care engaged in by enslaved and contemporary people of African
descent are strikingly similar to the procedures used by pre colonized Africans (Sieber, et al.
2000; White and White 1995).

Shane and Graham White’s (1995) essay on slave hair reveals that an enslaved African
woman’s beauty was integrally tied to her hair texture and grooming procedures (White and
White 1995). The Whites also discuss how the slaveholders’ wives would punish female slaves
by shaving their hair, particularly if it approximated the White beauty ideal. They advance the
notion that the coiffure processes of enslaved people could be read as acts of resistance. The
rationale behind their argument is that the enslaved challenged the predefined notion that they
were ugly, less humane, and unkempt by crafting palatable appearances. The Whites work is
important because they acknowledge the importance of translating the meanings behind hair
signification and also recognize the immense difficulty of the task. They note that reading the
messages produced by culturally and ethnically diverse groups of Africans in Diaspora is
difficult if our goal is to uncover the Africanisms associated with the symbols they employ.
However documenting Africanisms in the Diaspora is not my goal. In my research I focus on
understanding what hair signifies among contemporary African-descended women. I do not
speculate about the African origins of hairstyles. Instead my goal is to document the lived
experiences of contemporary African-descended women because only they can tell me what they
think and feel about hair and how it impacts their personal and public lives.

African Hair, specifically, African American women’s hair has been and continues to be a
contested matter. The emotional baggage that our hair carries is readily evidenced by the
brouhaha that erupted in 1997 over Carolina Herrons’ book Nappy Hair. This children’s book,
which extols the virtues of loving your own natural hair, was protested by Black parents, some of
whom, incidentally, had never examined the book. The parents were simply outraged by the title of the book. Eventually, the White teacher, Ms. Sherman, was physically threatened, suspended from her job, and forced to transfer to another school (Heyden 1998). This violent reaction of the parents stemmed from the use of the historically pejorative word “nappy”.

The books *Good and Bad Hair* by Bill Gaskins (1997) and *Dreads* (1999) by Mastalia and Pagano, probably fared better on the bookstand because they serve as visual documentaries of contemporary hairstyles. But, in 1998 teenager Michelle Barskile, who wears dreadlocks, found out that critics of Black hairstyles are not always White, when a chapter of the oldest African American female sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, banned Barskile from participating in their debutante ball because they disapproved of her dreadlocks (Fullwood 1998; Hutchinson 1998). To understand why Black women have generated such a wide range of emotional responses to hair I must explore the history and meaning of Black hair as a cultural symbol. I have already discussed some of the contemporary dialogue about hair. In the remainder of the chapter, I will conduct a historiography\(^1\) of Black hair, and will review some of the most pertinent literature, research, and social commentary on Black hair.

**Black Hair Historiography**

The controversy surrounding the concept of straight versus nappy hair is not just a contemporary concern. In 1859 a New York Times article recounts the public demonstration of a hair straightening process conducted by Mr. Hodgson, a White man, who was also known as, “the great African hair unkinker” (Bundles 2001; Harris 1974; Lester 2000; Author Unknown 1859). After the successful conversion of nappy to straight hair, a woman exclaimed that, she would not desert her race for straight hair and Indian features (Author Unknown 1859). This

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\(^1\) Historiography is the study of the corpus of body of historical works (de Chadarevian 1997).
statement is but one of many examples of how hair texture has been linked to biology and notions of racial affiliation.

After emancipation African-descended women in America turned to various techniques to assure their assimilation into dominant culture. During the early nineteen hundreds there was a prominent belief that the maintenance of proper conduct and appearance would elevate the status of the race and ensure our access to civil rights. Defining the notion of proper conduct and appearance became a major area of discourse among leaders in the African American community (Tyler 1990). The popularity of straightening hair among African American women can be traced to community leaders like Booker T. Washington, Alexander Crummel, and James Samuel Stemons. Booker T. Washington used his influence at the college he founded, Tuskegee Institute, to teach Victorian standards of personal appearance and public decorum to an entire generation of Blacks. Crummel advocated the assimilation of Victorian or White middle class values and codes of conduct for Blacks because he believed that European culture was the most advanced in the world (Moses 1978; Tyler 1990:237).

Stemons, a Black postal worker, spoke vehemently throughout the country at Black churches and organizations concerning his belief that mob violence was instigated by inappropriate Black appearance and conduct. He advocated the assimilation of Anglo Saxon manners and personal appearance as a way for respectable Blacks to separate themselves from those that were in the lower class (Stemons 1916; Stemons 1943). These men, who were sometimes called assimilationists, were in an ideological battle with Black nationalists who encouraged the development of a unique African American style.

Interestingly Marcus Garvey, who was the personification of Black self-consciousness, Black self help, and Black economic independence, was reportedly fascinated by his wife’s long
straight hair. In her memoirs, Garvey’s second wife Amy Jacques Garvey who, unlike his first wife, possessed light skin and long wavy hair, writes,

My hair let down, thrilled him. It was long and naturally wavy, he asked me never to cut it. The first time he saw it down, curiously he felt some strands and said, 'why it is soft,' as I tossed my head, he exclaimed, 'Oh, but it is so live' (Garvey 1963:186).

Hence while in public while Garvey was galvanizing people of African descent to feel racial pride and seek cultural redemption though new definitions of Black beauty, he was privately thrilled by long naturally wavy straight hair. Garvey’s own proclivities indicate that the battle between straight and nappy hair is both public and extremely private. I would also argue that in the 21st century many people of African descent still struggle with this internal conflict over issues of hair.

Historian Leon Litwack wrote about how M.H. Freeman was one of the first African Americans to assume that emulating White beauty ideals should be seen as pathological when the result is what Freeman called the, “ludicrous anomaly of Indian hair over Negro features” (Litwack 1961:182-183). This assumption of pathology and the debate about the value and meaning of straight or nappy hair stretches from the late nineteenth century to contemporary times. Among African-descended women in America straight hair is synonymous with being in a higher social class while nappy hair associates one with a lower or non mainstream social class (Banks 1997). Moreover the straightening comb became an icon in the quest to establish the new Black middle class (Douglas 1997).

When straightening hair was first made available to the masses of African American women, the intent was not to injure our psyches, but to enhance Black women’s confidence as we interacted in a hostile segregated environment (Blackwelder 2003). Women of African descent in America were interested in crafting an alternative image of Blacks through physical deportment and good grooming. One of the pioneers in this area was Annie Turnbo Malone
founder of the PORO system and the PORO Beauty College. According to anthropologist Evelyn Phillips, Malone selected PORO as her company’s name because it is a West African Mende word that originated from a covert mutual aid society (Phillips 2003:4). The word PORO symbolizes mutual aid, community uplift, spiritual and material growth (Phillips 2003:6).

In the late 1800s Malone began researching the development of non-damaging hair straightening products, hair growers, and conditioners. Malone’s interest in hair textures helped her to develop one of the first straightening combs marketed to women of African descent. Malone may have developed this product in an effort to resolve the cognitive dissonance experienced by women of African descent in America. This cognitive dissonance is brought on by being caught between who we are and how our images are constructed by White racism and beauty ideals (Philips 2003:9). Eventually Malone trained over 75,000 women at her beauty colleges. She held conferences to teach her methods to women of African descent in Cuba, the Bahamas, Mexico, and Haiti, and she is reported to have been worth more than 14 million dollars. Malone’s message of African centered economic empowerment, community outreach, and personal uplift was carried forward by Sara Breedlove, who later became Madame C.J. Walker (Bell-Scott 1994; Bundles 2001; Colman 1994; Philips 2003).

Madame C.J. Walker utilized her experience as a saleswoman with the PORO company to launch her own beauty supply and procedures company. Further testament to the importance of Black hair is evidenced by Walker’s phenomenal economic success. As hair culturist, Walker and Malone, were among the first American women to become self made millionaires (Bell-Scott 1994; Bundles 2001; Colman 1994; Philips 2003). Black women had been straightening their hair with flatirons since the 1820s but Madame C.J. Walker is often erroneously credited with and simultaneously critiqued for inventing the straightening comb (Bundles 2001; Tyler
She is usually given this title because in 1905 she patented a version of the straightening comb that she had modified to suit Black hair. However, Walker’s prior employer, Annie Malone, also held a patent on a straightening comb. Researchers now say that Walker’s hair oils, cold curling on pressed hair procedure, and straightening combs were meant to uplift the race (Bundles 2001; Ottley 1943) by assisting Black women in deifying the stereotypes that racism had imposed on them (Bundles 2001; Ottley 1943). She offered Black women an opportunity to shed the negative images of “nappy” hair in favor of “good” hair which opened both economic and social doors. Walkers’ sales and training techniques foreshadowed the marketing strategies employed by companies like Avon and Mary Kay. Walker gave Black women the first opportunity they may have ever had to control their financial destinies (Peiss 1998).

The Walker method and the hot comb dominated the Black beauty industry until the 1930s when Sara Spencer Washington secured the first patent for a long lasting chemical hair straightening process she called the Apex system. The social and overwhelming economic successes of Madame CJ Walker and Annie Turnbo Malone are evidence of the power and political economy of hair in the lives of African-descended women.

As important as hair seems to be among African-descended women, it is difficult to find social science literature that specifically addresses its culturally specific symbolic meanings. It seems as if researchers are apprehensive about trying to unlock what I call the “grammar” of hair, by which I mean the symbolic language transmitted when women in this group view each others hair. Thus while social scientists vehemently argue that hair is of integral importance because of its political, public, and inherently personal nature, few studies have investigated how these political, public or personal meanings are actually articulated. My research investigates
these shortcomings by offering an explanation of the meaning associated with various hairstyles that can be used to understand the lived experiences and culture of African-descended women.

**Literature Review on Black Hair**

When psychologists William Grier and Price Cobbs published their book *Black Rage* (1968) they argued that the Western world had crafted the Black woman as the antithesis of beauty. Hair and skin were the fundamental markers that prevented the Black woman from being seen as ideal beauties. They stated, “her Blackness is the antithesis of a creamy White skin, her lips are thick, her hair is kinky and short. She is in fact the antithesis of American beauty. However beautiful she might be in a different setting . . . in this country she is ugly” (Grier and Cobbs 1968:33). Grier and Cobbs also noted that for Black women hair was particularly important because it was a constant source of pain that mothers inflicted on daughters in hair combing rituals. They proposed that Black women learned from childhood that hair must be painfully transformed in order to create an acceptable public image. Grier and Cobbs said that young girls must think, “If mother has to inflict such pain on me to bring me to the level of acceptability, then I must have been ugly indeed before the combing” (Grier and Cobbs 1968:35). Furthermore, they theorized that while Caucasian women endure pain for beauty African American women endure pain just to be presentable on a daily basis. Ultimately, they argued that, “long, straight hair and a fair skin have seemed to be the requirements for escaping the misery of being a Black woman” (Grier and Cobbs 1968:37). Grier and Cobbs’ theories represent a major departure from the traditional notion that hair symbolizes genitalia which had been advanced by other social scientists.

In *400 Years Without a Comb*, hair stylist Willie Morrow (1973) provided readers with a historical overview of Black hair and hairstyles. Morrow argued that hair texture served as a primary indicator of their link to Africa. Unfortunately, this link was viewed as negative because
it was also a sign of slavery and inferiority. Morrow argued that among Africans in the Diaspora hair forms that were celebrated in Africa were quickly despised in the New World. Curly and kinky hair became synonymous with servitude and inferiority. So while hair may still be linked to gender and sex for women of African descent it has additional meanings that need to be explored. My work specifically investigates these meanings. I depart from the arguments produced by Greer and Cobbs in an effort to develop a grounded theory about the meaning of hair and hairstyles among African-descended women.

In his book *Slavery and Death: A Comparative Study*, Orlando Patterson (1982) echoes Morrow’s assertion that hair was more important than skin color during slavery. In fact Patterson states that, “hair became critical as a mark of servility in the Americas” (Patterson 1982:61). He argues that miscegenation muted the importance of skin color and, “hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery” (Patterson 1982:61). Patterson recounts an 1836 court case where an octoroon² slave is sentenced to have her head shaved for disrespecting her mistress. The slave’s hair was long and wavy and apparently had the appearance of Caucasian hair. The slave quickly replaced her missing hair with a wig.

This story could be interpreted to mean that for the octoroon hair was symbolic of her approximation to Whiteness. Effectively her punishment was to be rendered less White. I think that this forced haircut seems to be just as traumatic as the symbolic castration theories advanced by Freud, Leach, and Berg. My analysis of the event is that the enslaved woman’s castration was not of her genitals, but of her social standing as being nearly White. Furthermore, I read this

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² The terms mulatto, quadroon, and octoroon were used predominantly in the 19th and 20th century to describe people of mixed ancestry with a certain level of mathematical precision in America. The term mulatto indicated that a person had one Black parent and one White parent. The term quadroon indicated that a person was 1/4th Black, having only one Black grandparent. The term octoroon was used to indicate that a person had 1/8th Black ancestry, or that they were descended from one Black great grand parent (See Merriam Webster Dictionary On-Line Edition 2003, Painter 1919: 414).
incident to mean that her hair texture had imbued her with a level of social Whiteness and once it was removed she also lost her status. With this story Patterson taps into the belief system, values, and symbols regarding Black hair that I interrogate in my research.

Esi Sagay uses her book *African Hairstyles: Styles of Yesterday and Today* (1983) to document the complexity of hairstyles worn on the continent of Africa. Her work primarily focuses on the ethnomethodological description of various styles. She also discusses the effects of colonialism and hairstyling practices of modern Africa. For example she argues that African leaders who were educated in European schools brought back to their countries European hairstyles that were quickly emulated by the less privileged citizens (Sagay 1983:46). Sagay’s work is particularly interesting because it shows how the ritualized production of hairstyles has not significantly changed since being transplanted to the New World. I argue that these hair rituals stem from a combination of social, cultural, and economic practices.

In his article, “Black Hairstyles, Appearance, Conduct and Cultural Democracy,” historian Bruce Tyler (1990) discusses the origin of African American women’s beliefs about hair and hairstyles. Through a content analysis of advertisements targeted at Blacks, comments by historical figures, legal cases, and magazine articles, Tyler reconstructs the political and historical background for modern African American hairstyles. Tyler refutes Grier and Cobbs’ argument that women who alter their hair are struggling with self-hatred issues. Instead he theorized that women might be following European beauty ideals in an effort to secure their financial status. Once again we see that when social scientists focus on African American women’s hair they open up the potential for alternative theories about hair symbolism.

While Tyler’s article explores the social construction of beauty that causes African Americans to choose particular hairstyles, he fails to investigate whether there is any perceived
correlation between socioeconomic status, educational attainment, politicization, religious affiliation, personality traits and hairstyle choice. As informative as Tyler’s article is, he still seems to assume that the meaning of hair among African-descended women is clearly defined. Like Taylor, I question theorists who assert that anytime women of African descent select European inspired hairstyles they are engaging in acts of self-hatred and internalized racism. My research goes beyond this simple binary to investigate reasons why women choose either a natural or straight hairstyle instead of assuming a spurious correlation between their politics and hairstyle choices.

In the essay, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” Kobena Mercer (1992) asks why so much time, money, and energy is used to produce the art form of hairdressing. I believe that Mercer begins to answer his own question when he characterizes hairdressing and styles as forms of art. Following his logic African-descended women would appear to have an affinity for creating aesthetically pleasing forms. Mercer suggests that Africans Americans should recognize hair as a raw material that is being processed by culture. Biological determinism and racism have politicized Black hair by using it as a racial signifier and vesting it with the same negative connotations that are carried by the race. Mercer’s argument gives credence to the development of theories about hair being synonymous to race for people of African descent.

His assertion that hair is a raw material that is being processed by culture (Mercer 1992:249) points to the following logic: If hair is a raw material processed by culture, and women in the African Diaspora are practicing the same rituals and producing the same hairstyles, then is it possible that they are part of the same culture? However, there is the theory of diffusion that allows for the development of similar cultural forms in different places without cultural contact that may account for these phenomena.
Thus although Mercer seems to be arguing that hair should be deemphasized among African-descended people, his work has the opposite effect. Mercer’s arguments for depychologizing hair and investigating it as a specific cultural practice are central concepts in my work. Guided by Mercer I view hair as a powerful racial and cultural signifier that is crafted through ritual practice and community performance. I argue that African-descended people have instituted a, “textureocracy” for hair that mirrors the “pigmentocracy” utilized to separate Blacks based on skin color in plantation societies (Mercer 1992:250) Hair texture comes to symbolize socioeconomic status, educational attainment, political beliefs, religious affiliation, and personality traits. As such a powerful signifier, hair texture along with hairstyle can also directly influence an individual’s personal and political economy. I follow Mercer’s suggestion for research by actually asking people what they think about the “textureocracy” that has been imposed by our culture.

Despite the fact that Russell and Wilson acknowledge hair as an issue tantamount to skin color among African-descended people the book, The Color Complex: the politics of skin color among African Americans, only spends one out of nine chapters discussing this fact (Russell, et al. 1998). Russell highlights the significance of hair when writing, “how an African American chooses to style his or her hair says everything there is to be said about that individual’s Black consciousness, socioeconomic class, and probable life-style, particularly when the individual is a woman” (Russell, et al. 1998:84). They even assert that, “a certain level of Black consciousness would seem necessary before a woman dares to go natural” (Russell, et al. 1998:85). However, these statements are never explored by the book. Without seeking empirical or ethnographic support Russell’s work reifies the argument that wearing straight hair is a sign of mental illness.
as articulated in books like *Black Rage* by Grier and Cobbs (1968) and *Black Skins, White Masks* by psychologist Franz Fanon (1967).

In *The Color Complex* Black women are pathologized and depoliticized based on their hairstyles. Russell never asks whether there is actually a level of Black consciousness that must be reached to acquire natural hair. He simply asserts that there is one. Reading this work made me wonder if some level of Black consciousness is actually required for a woman to wear natural hair. Moreover, I wondered what happens if a woman reaches that mystical level of Black consciousness and she does not choose a natural hairstyle? Would her failure to convert to a natural hairstyle negate her Black consciousness? What if women wearing natural hairstyles have less Black consciousness? The book merely regurgitates stereotypes without questioning their validity. Since *The Color Complex* fails to address these central questions my research examines these issues because they were identified in the book as pivotal issues among Blacks. Through my study I hope to understand the symbolic meaning attached to various hairstyles and textures and answer questions about politics of hair and personal choice.

The personal remains political because this type of personal choice has occasionally been made in response to what people believe is appropriate for women who are socially conscious. For example, in her essay “The Making of a Permanent Afro” Gloria Wade Gayles states that,

> An activist with straight hair was a contradiction. A lie. A joke . . . never again . . . would I alter my hair . . . In its natural state, my hair would be . . . a symbol of my self-esteem and racial pride (Wade-Gayles 1993:213).

This type of sentiment was foreshadowed by Alice Walker's address to a group of college graduates when she explained why she began growing dreadlocks (1988). Yet, Angela Davis discusses her anger over the fact that young African Americans have reduced the entire Civil Rights movement into a hairstyle (Davis 1994).
These may seem like strong sentiments but, this level of importance may make sense to some women like Lisa Jones who writes, "hair is the be-all and end-all. Everything I know about American history I learned from looking at Black people's hair... It's all in the hair" (Jones 1994:11-12). Jones' work *Bullet Proof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex and Hair* (1994) unapologetically focuses on understanding what we do to hair, how we do it, and why. Although her book does not hold true to its single-minded focus, hair remains a salient character throughout her essays. Her essay "the hair trade" (1994) is particularly valuable because she investigates the origin of the human hair products that are the foundation for a multitude of African American women's hairstyling practices. This essay inspired me to research the international hair trade and analyze its impact on African-descended women. The objectives she set forth in her essay were directly incorporated into my inquiries about the origins of synthetic and human hair purchased by women of African descent in America. This essay also encouraged me to examine the work other social scientists have done on Black beauty products and advertisements.

In her dissertation, *Hair-Raising: African American Women, Beauty, Culture, and Madame C.J. Walker* (1994) Noliwe Makada Rooks examined advertisements for hair products published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries. Although she discusses the debates about hair straightening, and explains the importance of the look and feel of African American hair, she fails to examine why the look and feel of hair are important issues or how hair and hair texture function as signifiers among contemporary African-descended women.

One of the most comprehensive collections of empirical data regarding African American women and hair can be found in Sonja Peterson-Lewis' (1994) essay, "Aesthetic Practices Among African American Women." Peterson-Lewis historicized the concept of beauty ideals and tests three propositions for the rationale behind African American hairstyling practices. The
Aesthetic Variation proposition argued that African American women are simply practicing aesthetics. Her Derision of Africanity proposition argued that these practices are an effort to approximate White beauty ideals. I applied Peterson-Lewis’ model of beauty ideals as an aesthetics scale to create my hair survey. I use my hair survey to elicit data from a large pool of women who are connected to the Internet.

Hair for African American women is so important that in Aloina Gibson’s book *Nappy: Growing Up Black and Female in America* (1995) it actually appears to be a real character in her memoir. Her hair memories are as strong as the memories she has about real people. Gibson’s narration confirms my findings that hair is of primary concern to African American women, and maybe even more important than the issues of body image and weight. Gibson’s work and the Hair Stories performance by the Urban Bush Women encouraged me to collect hair stories for narrative analysis.

All of the works I have discussed so far could be summarized in Ingrid Banks book, *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women’s Consciousness* (2000). Based on the findings derived from five focus groups and forty-three interviews Banks is able to link hair to broader social and cultural values for Black women. Further, her ethnographic approach demonstrates how Black women can explain in their own words why hair matters for them individually and socially. Banks confirms the persistence in the Black community of strong beliefs about the existence of “good” and “bad” hair textures. This is despite the positive influence of the 1960s “Black is beautiful” movement that emphasized self esteem during that time and today has introduced the wearing of natural hairstyles among the proponents of Afrocentric cultural values. Her findings reveal that Black women who wear natural styles are more likely to agree with assertions that straightening hair is a form of self hatred, though women with straight hairstyles
are less likely to agree. Banks’ study is one of the most sophisticated qualitative inquiries into the importance of hair among Black women. My work builds on Banks’ investigation by combining interviews and participant observation with survey data. I further extend these studies by investigating the material culture and production of various styles and interrogating the shared meaning of these styles. Whereas Banks’ interviews delve into the individuals’ psyche regarding hair, my research is about the collective knowledge held by women of African descent. For these women hairstyle choice serves as a personal symbol which can be read publicly if you know the symbolic grammar of the particular culture (Firth 1973b; Leach 1958; Obeyesekere 1990). Hair ultimately is a symbol of racial identification, political affiliation, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status.

Another important contribution is the work of Obiagele Lake who goes beyond Russell and Banks by combining the issues of skin color and hair texture. In *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America* (2003), Lake highlights the importance of naming (nomo), skin color, and hair among African-descended people in the Americas. She recognizes these three areas as key factors in identity production among Blacks. Her most significant contribution is the historicizing of the intra-racial policies of elitism, segregation, and pigmentocracy practiced by Blacks in North America. Lake argues that just because scientists have determined that race is not a biological reality does not mean that the concept has lost its social power. She points out how race has retained its’ social power through the overt devaluation of African culture and beauty ideals in Western culture. Lake’s work echoes the scholarship of Carter G. Woodson (1933) who theorized that internalized and intra-group racism among Blacks should be viewed as more threatening than the overt racism initiated by Whites. For example, Lake discusses how a group of Blacks with lighter skin split from the African
Methodist Episcopal Church in 1870 in order to form the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. She also documents how intra-racial segregation became the primary goal of Black social groups like the Blue Vein Society and the Brown Fellowship Society, which created strict membership guidelines to exclude people based on skin color and hair texture. Lake’s work is an excellent historical explanation for the contemporary beliefs associated with the value of hair and hair texture among Blacks.

The final work of significance in this emerging field of Black women’s hair is that of historian Elizabeth Johnson. She recognizes the need for feminism and semiotics to be used in the investigation of, African American Women’s Hair as Text (Johnson 2004). Johnson reviewed photographs, enslavement narratives, runaway enslavement notices, and conducted a content analysis of magazine articles to understand the symbolic meaning of women’s hairstyles. My own ethnography research follows Johnson’s methodology as I explore the lived experiences of contemporary women. My research departs from Johnson’s historical investigation of Black women’s hair, and focuses on discovering the current boundaries of Black hair culture. While Johnson reviewed the historical significance of hair as text, my goal is to reveal the contemporary grammar of hair and read it as text.

In this chapter I have reviewed the cultural construction of the body, the anthropological literature on hair symbolism, why hair matters to African American women, the socio-political history of Black hair and conducted a literature review on Black hair. In the next chapter I will discuss the methods and methodology I used in my investigation of hair among women of African descent.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

... we "natives" cannot maintain hypothetical neutrality in the field. Even if we are not indigenous to the specific ethnic community, shared histories, and differential relations to power as well as a personal identity that may fluctuate between incorporation into and resistance away from the dominant cultural hegemony creates a set of issues which must be confronted early on — (McClaurin 1990).

Hair matters to us because you can change you whole image just by changing your hairstyle. For example you can be lookin’ like a stockbroker with a real straight perm one minute and turn into a Ghetto hoochie with a waterfall weave after an afternoon in someone’s chair —[Cosette Walker Interview with author February 8, 2005]

How long you been growing your hair?—[A question asked of me by 164 different women from 8/1/04-4/01/06 concerning my dreadlocks]

Methodology

This chapter begins with an explanation of the rationale and theoretical assumptions that guided my research and thus influenced the methods I selected to collect my data. I believe that understanding my epistemological views and methodology is important for any researcher who might wish to replicate the study. After a description of the methodology, I review the settings, the sampling techniques I used, the characteristics of the sample, and finally the various methods I employed during my data collection.

The statements that open this chapter highlight the complex nature of two issues: conducting research as a native anthropologist and studying hair as a cultural domain. This qualitative research project emanates from my positionality as a native researcher combined with my interest in Black feminism, the African Diaspora, and symbolic anthropology. In order to interrogate the shared meaning of hair and hairstyles as it relates to the existence of a cultural domain; I use Black feminism to substantiate my inquiry into women’s lives. Then I rely on the conceptual framework of the African Diaspora to interrogate ideas about group identity. Finally, I use symbolic anthropology to guide my analysis of the symbolic meanings I encounter, and my
status as a perceived insider as an entryway into an intimate belief system that has not yet been
fully investigated by scholars. I will discuss my use of each of these concepts briefly and then
move on to discuss the methods I utilized for data collection in this project. As mentioned
previously this research began with two research questions:

- Are there shared symbolic meanings that women of African descent associate with their
  hair texture and hairstyle choice?
- If shared meanings exist, do they form the basis of a cultural belief domain among
  women of African descent?

To answer these questions, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, a form of qualitative research
that traditionally involves varying degrees of qualitative and quantitative description of groups or
phenomena (Handwerker 2001). Denzin and Lincoln offer the following description:

Qualitative research is multimethod in focus…this means that qualitative researchers study
things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in
terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use
and collection of a variety of empirical materials--case study, personal experience,
introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactions, and visual texts--
the described routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives (Denzin

Ethnography, then, involves the construction of a holistic picture through the analysis of the
various types of data described by Denzin and Lincoln above (Creswell 1998; Denzin and
Lincoln 1994). My methodology included interviews, participant observation, digital
storytelling, and the collection of visual materials such as ethnographic film and photographs.
Since my focus was on the body and more specifically hair, this research was primarily based on
the use of ethnographic photography and film. This methodology emanates from the field of
visual anthropology (Collier 1967). William Wood writes that:

Visual Anthropology complements other methods of imaging and recording and, therefore, cuts
across the entire field of anthropology. It provides methodologies particularly suited to the study
of material things, whether materials of the habitat, artifacts of the culture, or postures of the
human body, and these can be shown in process of movement, pattern transformation, or
interaction. The physical expression of feeling and emotion can be recorded, and the dynamics of
interpersonal and group interactions can be studied to yield data unavailable through any other methodology. Visual methods then are particularly suited to demonstrating certain relationships between material and non-material and among the various aspects of cultural systems and of cultural-ecological systems (Wood 1989:30).

So the methodology of visual anthropology added to my project by allowing me to study the material presentation of hair. As Wood discusses my use of ethnographic film gave me access to feelings and emotional responses to hair and hairstyles that would have been unavailable without this method.

This is also a multi-sited project based on interviews and participant observation and data collected through the less conventional virtual ethnographic filed site on my computer, which led me to explore the “electronic, mass-mediated community of those involved in discussions” (Constable 2003:3), about Black hair. According to Bruce Mason a “virtual ethnography is simply an ethnography that treats cyberspace as the ethnographic reality” (1996:4). Virtual ethnographies can involve techniques such as the monitoring of online chat rooms, blogs, online interactive interviews, focus groups, email interactions, or online surveys (Constable 2003; Crichton and Kinash 2003; Hine 1998).

Utilizing a multi-sited research design involves gleaning information from several different research settings. Marcus describes multi-sited ethnography as a research design best suited to exploring the “circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995:79). Marcus outlined multi-sited ethnographic practices that, “would allow researchers to investigate people, things, metaphors, plots, stories or allegories, lives, and conflicts for new and better understanding” (Gille and Riain 2002; Marcus 1995:99; Marcus 1998). Following Marcus, I crafted my investigation to include participant observation of women in beauty shops, the collection of material culture used by these women, the documentation of stories or folklore they have about hair, and an investigation of the virtual
community organized around the topic of African-descended women’s hair. I selected this multimethod, multi-sited ethnographic research design in an effort to create a holistic picture of African-descended women’s lived experiences and elicit the symbolic meanings associated with their hair and hairstyle choice.

Another aspect of my methodology involved operationalizing the African Diaspora as a conceptual framework consisting of history, experience, and a common ancestral origin. Within this framework, identity is constantly producing and reproducing itself anew, through transformation and difference (Cohen 1997; Diop 1974; Gilroy 1991; Luke 2001; Palmer 2000; Simms-Hamilton 1990). Consequently instead of grouping my participants by my perception of their geographical, national, or political affiliations, I asked them to self identify as members of the group I called African-descended women. Subsequently, my research site is defined by each individual’s self definition as a woman of African descent. So although I generally frame my work in terms of women of African descent in the United States, I actually had research participants from all over the world. It is this global level of participation that encouraged me to classify the women as being of African descent. I needed this general non-geographically specific term because some of my participants were still physically located in Africa. But, these women in Africa, the South Pacific, and Europe saw themselves as being connected to women of African descent in Diasporic communities throughout the world. Thus, I view the participants in the study as women of African descent, who are not bounded by nationality, political affiliations, or geography. They represent Africa, North America, Europe, Canada, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, and South America.

This flexible definition of my research group also allowed me to investigate my research questions from an emic perspective, because I define myself as a member of this group.
Essentially, I am what Cheryl Rodriguez calls a “homegirl studying homegirls” or a native anthropologist (Haniff 1985; Hastrup 1987; Hastrup 1993; Jones 1988; Nakhleh 1979; Narayan 1993; Rodriguez 2001). Crafting an identity as a native anthropologist is tricky when you are a member of a profession where the hallmark method is to seek the native point of view, but natives are not considered valid researchers (Harris 1999; Hastrup 1987; Kondo 1990; Schneider 1991). Native researchers face assumptions that they are inherently biased, have easy access to the research site, and are immune to culture shock. In reality native researchers are often perceived as outsiders by members of their own communities. Educational level, socioeconomic background, and life experiences make the native a cultural outsider (Narayan 1993). So although I may be perceived as a native by other anthropologists, I still faced some of the same challenges encountered in the field by non native anthropologists. Even natives are forced to prove themselves and craft identities as legitimate insiders.

Natives are also faced with more complex ethical issues, because their informants may include friends, relatives, and community familiars (Hastrup 1987). The native may have more responsibilities to the research participants during and after the research project (McClaurin 1996). My method for addressing these problems involved systematic reflection on how my personal experiences shaped my study and acknowledgment of my biases, values, and interests. Furthermore, to ensure my participants are protected, I completed the University of Florida Institutional Review Board procedures for research on human subjects. Moreover, I only viewed

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1 The formal portion of this research began in October of 2004 with my submission of an Institutional Review Board Application at the University of Florida. Unfortunately, due to the unfamiliarity with my topic my proposal was submitted to two different reviewers before finally being sent to the chair of the department. The reviewers cited their primary concern as being that my research would be offensive to African American women. After numerous calls to the office I informed the administrator that I was an African American woman and she admitted that she was also. At this point she told me that she did not understand what the delay had been with my approval because she had taken my survey for fun and passed it on to one of her girlfriends. She informed me that she would talk to the director and give him this information. I can only assume that the information included my race and within hours I was notified that I had been conditionally approved. The final condition was that I change three words in the
myself as an “assumed” native because my hairstyle choice of dreadlocks and decision not to have them maintained professionally decreases my level of interaction in much of the shared beauty shop ritual associated with this culture.

Another framework that I employed in the study was that of Black feminist anthropology. In defining myself as a Black feminist anthropologist, I assume the lived experiences of Black women to be valid sources for epistemological inquiry, whose experiences yield data and who engage in the active production of theory (McClaurin 2001). Using Black feminist anthropology my research questions presumed that gender and race are the basic organizing principles that shape the lives of women of African descent. My aim was to highlight the marginalized, distorted and often invisible experience of women of African descent (Lather 1991; McClaurin 2001). Given the marginality of the participants my data collection procedures were designed to unmute their voices and bring their experiences out of the shadows. This was accomplished through the use of interactive dialogic interviews digital storytelling, ethnographic photography and film, and focus groups that required self-disclosure to foster a sense of collaboration (Creswell 1998).

My standpoint as a Black feminist, studying women of African descent, enriches my ability to interpret and analyze the lived experiences of Black women in the Diaspora. By documenting the existence of a cultural domain of hair for women of African descent in African and in the African Diaspora, my ethnography will assist future scholars in analyzing the complexities of identity formations in the African Diaspora. The stories and folklore I have

Photograph release form. I was instructed to change the words, “waive my right” to “I understand that I will not be compensated.” With this change I was granted approval from the Institutional review board. This experience is interesting because up until the point that I made my race a factor in the review process my application was delayed. One could infer that the reviewers assumed that I was a non-Black and that they were concerned about letting a non-native into the personal space of African American women. But, upon learning that I was an authentic African American, or a native, I was granted access to the group. Approval of protocol number 2004-U-784

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collected so far reflect values and beliefs that are socially acquired and patterned to serve women of African descent as guides for behavior. Ultimately, I question whether these stories and folklore serve as evidence of a shared culture among women of African descent worldwide (Mintz and Richard 1992). However, in order to fully answer this question I rely on symbolic anthropology to analyze the beliefs and rituals associated with hair.

The major focus of symbolic anthropology is on how members of cultural groups perceive, experience, create, modify, and interpret rituals and other public performances in their surroundings (Carrithers 1992; Deely 1990; Dolgin, et al. 1977; Shore 1996; Turner and Bruner 1986). Symbolic anthropology is a field that utilizes theories and methods for deconstructing the outward appearance of rituals and public acts (Braarvig and Krogh 1997; Ridington 1979). As a symbolic anthropologist I am interested in deconstructing the rituals and public acts surrounding Black hair. Symbolic anthropology is an approach that assumes, “the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs” (Deely 1990:5). Symbolic anthropologists also believe that culture is a multidimensional system of symbols and meanings shared by a group of people (Deely 1990; Dolgin, et al. 1977). Raymond Firth, a twentieth century anthropologist, developed a methodology on how to extract meaning from a group’s complex system of meanings. According to Firth, symbolic anthropology should include the following objectives:

- description and analysis of symbolic acts,
- evaluation of the importance of those acts,
- elucidation of the meanings informants attribute to those acts, and
- the creation of a conceptual framework that relates how these acts function in a particular culture (Firth 1973b).
I have incorporated Firth’s objectives into my research methodology and subsequently my methods.

Janet Dolgin builds upon Firth’s work and asserts that there are two key principles governing symbolic anthropology. The first principle is that the only way to understand beliefs is to examine them within the cultural system from which they emanate (Des Chene 1996; Dolgin, et al. 1977). The second key principle is that people act based on their interpretations, and that symbolism assists people in making their interpretations (Des Chene 1996). Thus, symbolism is extremely important because it directly influences individual action (Dolgin, et al. 1977; Firth 1973b; Joshi 1992; Napier 1996; Ridington 1979). Grounded by Firth’s objectives as a research framework and Dolgin’s principles of symbolic anthropology, I selected my ethnographic methods that are described below.

Methods

The key questions I focused on during my data collection were:

- Are there shared symbolic meanings that women of African descent associate with their hair texture and hairstyle choice?
- If shared meanings exist, do they form the basis of a cultural belief domain among women of African descent?

Utilizing Firth’s model encouraged me to investigate hair culture in three different settings. My first level of inquiry was descriptive. This in turn led to my inquiry into the meaning and importance of these acts to my research participants. Finally after gathering the descriptions, seeking their meanings, and evaluating the importance of the acts, I began to formulate a conceptual framework for analyzing data that could document the existence of a cultural domain of hair among African-descended women (Firth 1973b). I will discuss each setting and method in detail below but the research design flowchart (see Figure 3-1) provides an overview of the work.
Research Settings

Researcher as the Instrument and Initial Setting

As a woman of African descent, this research was undoubtedly influenced by the public display of my own hair (see Figure 3-2). I wear my hair in long dreadlocks that extend past my hips. I grappled with the notion that I should cut or cover my natural hair to avoid initially giving my participants the impression that I harbor biases either for or against their particular hairstyles. I was extremely concerned that women would assume that my true hypothesis involves proving that women who wear chemically relaxed hair are not socially conscious. To correct this perceived obstacle in the research I investigated the economic and logistic feasibility of hair weaving techniques that would cover my dreadlocks. Since none of the beauticians I approached were able to offer a solution, I eventually purchased a long relaxed style wig that amazingly covered all of my hair (see Figure 3-3). I planned to don this wig during my official fieldwork outings. However, I had a difficult time separating my fieldwork time from my everyday lived experiences. My fieldwork spilled over into the checkout lanes at Wal-Mart, the produce areas in grocery stores, and the dressing rooms in clothing stores. Because I wear my hair in light brown dreadlocks that are approximately 43 inches long, many of my participants initiated contact with me (see Figure 3-2). Invariably women of African descent begin conversations with me by asking, “How long did it take for you to grow your hair” or “Is that really all yo’ hair?” I usually think to myself, “I have been growing hair all my life, haven’t you?”

Truthfully in the past I considered these types of questions intrusive and rude. I always wondered why other women of African descent insist on characterizing my hair, as if it were a plant I had purchased and specially cultivated to grow to this length. Consequently in the past few years, I have concocted a litany of evasive and occasionally rude answers as responses to these frequent inquiries. I always feel as if people were asking me how long it took for my hair to
gain its current length because of their fascination with long hair and their belief that “real” women of African descent are somehow genetically precluded from growing long hair. This belief inherently implies that my hair must be artificial or that I am not authentically Black. Over the years I have had numerous women and men, who were perfect strangers, accuse me of having artificial hair because of its length. No matter what I might say to reassure them or how much they manipulate my hair and squint at my scalp and carefully examine each individual lock, many people leave our encounters unconvinced that my hair is authentic and indeed natural. Despite the fact that I have proudly worn artificial hair in the past, I found myself profoundly offended by the thought of being labeled as a wearer of an inauthentic natural hairstyle.

Reflecting on the significance I obviously place on having “authentic” long hair helped me to recognize the role my hair could play in the research. I discarded my coy and negative responses along with my fifty dollar wig and began to utilize my lived experiences as a point of entry into the research field. I developed a business card to give women my contact information and direct them to my web based surveys and experiments (see Figure 3-4). I also diligently collected phone numbers and contact information from women who inquired about the authenticity of my hair. I began utilizing my palm pilot telephone to log these inquiries and collect data from my lived experience as fieldwork. From August 1, 2004 to April 1, 2006 164 women approached me in public and asked me “how long I had been growing my hair,” twelve of these women agreed to videotaped interviews with me, twenty of them participated in my focus groups, and countless others completed my online survey and online experiments. Ultimately, I was able to utilize my physical appearance as an essential component in my research because it allowed my body to serve as my initial research setting. In this setting, my
sample selection was opportunistic but I was able to make contact with participants who directed me toward my next setting, the beauty shop.

**Second Setting: The Beauty Shop**

My formal research began with my identifying several local beauty shops where I could conduct participant observation. I selected beauty shops as a setting because some of the symbolism associated with hair texture and styles is still transmitted within the cultural space of beauty shops. Therefore, it made sense for me to recruit women who are actively participating in this cultural space because just being in this space implies that they have the cultural expertise that would aid my study. I decided to focus on three shops in the Columbia, South Carolina area. I selected the shops based on the most frequent recommendations I received from the women in my first setting.

The first shop specialized in natural hair care. Although this shop specialized in natural hair care, they do not exclude women with other styles. This shop has business from clients with natural, relaxed, and weaved hairstyles. The second shop specializes in braids and what could be characterized as more artistic hairstyles. They had a very small clientele of women who wore their hair in natural styles. The third shop does not specialize in particular hairstyles but I considered it a different type of shop because of the large number of services available such as massages, aromatherapy, manicures, and pedicures. This shop also had a more economically affluent client base. As a worker in these shops I was privy to the conversations conducted between the hair stylists and the conversations held among the clients, their stylists, and other women in the shops.

**Third Setting: The Virtual World**

A critical component of my research involved the use of the Internet as a research setting. During the past twenty years the Internet has developed into an international infrastructure where
people can collaborate and interact without regard for geographic location (Leiner, et al. 2003). This medium has broadened the concept of community and even muddled ideas about identity as people delve into alternate egos and personas online (Butler 1993; Haraway and Randolph 1997; Miller and Slater 2000). The Internet is a nascent and evolving virtual geography with its own language, protocols, and societies (Butler 1993; Crang, et al. 1999; Haraway and Randolph 1997; Miller and Slater 2000). As a means of interaction the Internet provides people from all over the globe with alternative modes of representation and within this virtual geography there are a multitude of societies and cultures (Crang, et al. 1999; Dibbell 1994; Jordan 1999). Virtual societies have begun to mirror real geographically fixed societies in their levels of complexity (Gille and Riain 2002; Hume and Mulcock 2004). The investigation of these societies is similar to traditional ethnographic inquiry because, as Jordan states, “virtual societies are marked by political, technological and cultural patterns so intimately connected as to be nearly indistinguishable” from the real world (Jordan 1999:2). Researchers are recognizing that virtual communities are far from the 'imagined' or pseudo communities explicated by C. Calhoun in is essay “Indirect Relationships and Imagined Communities: Large-Scale Social Integration and the Transformation of Everyday Life” (1991). In fact, social scientists acknowledge that these communities are real in the way that they reflect the changing nature of human relations and interaction (Thomsen, et al. 1998). Eventually, these changes are going to result in a shift in ethnographic perspective for anthropological research (Gille and Riain 2002). My online research and perception of the virtual world as a valid site of inquiry are examples of this gradual but inevitable change.

My work targeted women of African descent who have organized themselves into groups around the concept of hair and beauty treatments. To locate these communities I used a search
engine called Google, www.google.com, which is currently the largest database of Web pages and other documents (Barker 2006). Google allows the use of Boolean logic searches to retrieve Web pages that have been ranked by computer algorithms for relevance to my keywords. However, the Google database only contains links to about half of all of the Web pages in existence (Barker 2006) I also relied on a meta search engine called Kartoo, www.kartoo.com. Meta search engines draw information from multiple search engine databases and then compile the information. Kartoo’s specialty lies in the program’s ability to categorize the users search results into relevant concepts and sites and display these results on a graphical map. Combining these two types of search engines allowed me to more fully explore the virtual communities of women of African descent.

**Sample Selections and Descriptions**

All of the samples in my research were generated by some form of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is the general name of a set of non-random sampling techniques that allow the researcher to focus on information rich cases and sample size where the qualities are determined by the needs of the research (Patton 1990). There are approximately sixteen sub-types of purposeful sampling and in my work I made use of four of these techniques: opportunistic sampling, snowball sampling, criterion sampling, and maximum variation sampling (Creswell 1998; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Johnson 1998; Patton 1990).

Opportunistic sampling is a technique where the researcher is encouraged to follow leads in fieldwork and pursue flexible paths that lead to data collection (Patton 1990). My sample selections in my personal setting and the beauty shop setting were opportunistic. In the initial setting where I was the research instrument, I allowed women to approach me and then I took the opportunity to invite them to participate in my research. I also asked them to recommend beauty shops and then I simply selected the three shops that were mentioned most often. Describing my
participants at this point in my research is difficult. During this phase of my work I did not formally collect demographic data from the women who approached me. However, I can say that of the 164 women whom I documented after approaching me, 160 of them appeared to be of African descent. I did not ask the women how they perceived themselves so I can only give my observation of their group affiliation based on skin color, hair texture, and their knowledge of Black culture.

When I began my participant observation, I employed snowball sampling and maximum variation to identify focus group and free list exercise participants. Snowball sampling is a technique that involves identifying participants in the culture who can then refer you to other reliable experts and participants (Patton 1990; Schensul, et al. 1999). This form of sampling is particularly useful when you are attempting to retrieve data from populations that are difficult to define or locate. Maximum variation sampling involves the intentional selection of a wide range of variation based on predefined dimensions of interest (Maykut and Morehouse 1994). I used the hairstyles identified by my participants as the way to define my sample group. Hence I sought women to represent each of the eight main hairstyles.

I structured my participant observation by asking women to play free listing games with me while they waited for their hair stylist. Free listing is a data elicitation technique that involves asking informants to make lists that represent their indigenous cultural knowledge (Schensul, et al. 1999). Collecting free list data is one of the basic starting points in defining a cultural domain (Bernard 1998; Borgatti 1996; Furlow 2003; Johnson 1998; Weller 1998). Free listing allowed me to glean definitions about hairstyles and textures from women in an effort to answer my first research question which interrogates the symbols, origin, and boundaries that constitute the symbolic meanings for hair in the African Diaspora. I recruited ten women from
each shop to engage in these free listing exercises via maximum variation sampling based on their own hairstyles. Thirty women were asked to provide me with a list of the different categories of hairstyles in one exercise and a list of the different hair textures in another exercise. These thirty women also appeared to be African-descended. However, I did not formally investigate their demographic details. This free listing technique helped me to craft my online survey and begin to answer my second research question of whether or not the symbolic meanings are evidence of a cultural belief domain. The free listing exercise also helped me create my interview and focus group instruments by determining which hairstyles I should discuss and how I should approach the concept of different hair textures.

Eventually, I returned to the beauty shops and requested that thirty women complete pile sorting exercises of the photographs I used in the online experiment. Pile sorting is an elicitation technique that elicits judgments of similarity among items in a cultural domain and the attributes that distinguish between the items (Bernard 1998; Borgatti 1996; Furlow 2003). Subsequently for my research the beauty shops served as a recruitment tool for cultural experts.

In order to collect data online I employed criterion sampling for my survey and survey experiment instruments. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases or participants that meet specific predefined parameters (Patton 1990). Focusing on women of African descent allowed me to utilize this group affiliation as the organizing parameter for my sample. In the personal setting that I described above this translated into a situation where I invited women of African descent who approached me in public, with questions or compliments about my hair, to participate in my online survey. I created a business card that I would hand the women and a personal website that would direct them to the online survey suite (see Figure 3-4).
In the online setting I targeted one main group of African-descended women and I sent an email invitation to the members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc, founded in 1908 on the Howard University campus, is the oldest Greek letter organization founded for and by women of African descent. Currently, this organization boasts over 185,000 college trained members in the United States and abroad (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority 2004). In this organization, 63 percent of the women report having at least a Bachelors degree; 57 percent have a Masters degree, 9 percent have a Doctorate; and 7 percent hold professional degrees or certifications (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority 2004). The sorority is organized into ten major regions and I specifically targeted the largest South Atlantic Region, which encompasses South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. I sent an email invitation to the director of the South Atlantic Region and requested that she forward my online survey information to the 103 graduate chapters and 53 undergraduate chapters under her control. I cannot gauge how many of the 156 chapters actually received this request. However, my request was probably facilitated by the fact that I have been a member of this organization for 18 years, my mother has been a member for thirty four years and my grandmother has been a member for over sixty years. Responses to my online survey were collected anonymously however, this was the first group I invited to participate in the survey entitled “Black hair is . . .” that was deployed on March 9, 2005 and by March 31, 2005 I had 76 responses.

The second wave of criterion second sampling I used for my online work involved targeting web pages that encourage online Weblogs or blogs and chats about women of African descent and hair. Blogs are websites where entries are made in a journal type interface that may include photographs, links to other web pages, and text. All of this information is displayed in reverse chronological order so that the most recent information is displayed first (Doostdar 2004;
Goodwin-Jones 2003). Blogs have enormous potential as a tool to capture fieldnotes for researchers in anthropology. The Blog can provide an electronic record that encompasses all of the researchers experiences interlaced with photographs, digital recordings, and text. However, researcher’s will need to overcome some obstacles concerning confidentiality and ethics before proceeding with the use of this new form of technology.

When I began my project this technology was not as accessible; however, it is now readily available and relatively cheap if not free on many web spaces. I contacted Dee, the webmaster of www.Nappturality.com, and requested permission to join her site as a member who was conducting social science research. This site is dedicated to celebrating hairstyles that highlight the natural hair texture of women of African descent. As a member of this website I was able to send out email invitations to the 54,216 members through the webmaster and read chat room postings about my research topics. This was the second major email recruitment effort that I made to collect my basic survey data. Again, I cannot be assured that all of the members received the email requesting that they participate in the survey. However, I ended the recruitment process with a total of 298 completed responses to this first survey. In this survey, 98 percent of the respondents identified themselves as female; 82.55 percent said they were African American or Black; almost ten percent were from somewhere in the Caribbean; ten respondents or about four percent of the respondents said they were from Africa; and the remaining respondents said they were from a combination of places like Canada, Great Brittan, and South America. Fifty seven percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 30; twenty six percent were between the ages of 31 and 40; and only 17 percent stated that they were over 40 years of age. Interestingly, despite the youth of the group, 53 percent said they earned between $30,000-$100,000 dollars per year. Thirty seven percent of the respondents said they earned
below $30,000 per year and 11 percent of these respondents said they earned over $100,000 dollars per year. This more economically affluent group may be the result of emails targeting the Alpha Kappa Alpha group, whose members report higher than average income and education for African American women.

For my second survey, “Black Hair an Experiment,” I primarily passed out invitation cards and sent emails to prior respondents. Although, I still passed out business cards inviting to women who approached me about my hair to participate in the online survey, I primarily relied on the experiment gaining momentum through word of mouth on the Internet. In this survey 73 percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, 95 percent identified themselves as being female, and the majority indicated that they live somewhere in the U.S. South. Despite this fact some of the respondents also indicated that they were from places like the Fiji Islands, American Samoa, and Nova Scotia, Canada. I am sure that some of these respondents are a part of the snowball sample because they probably received email invitations from people who I came into contact with here in the United States. When it came to race the majority of these respondents also said they were African American or Black but some of them identified themselves as Black Hispanics and two percent, were Fijian, Black Native American, and Moroccan. Forty seven percent of this group identified themselves as being primarily poor or working poor with a yearly income of less than $15,000. Twenty nine percent of the respondents reported that they were working class earning $15,000-34,999 dollars per year, and 22 percent said they were lower or middle class earning $35,000-99,999 dollars per year. Only one percent of the respondents reported that they were rich because they earn over $100,000 dollars per year. These statistics may be linked to the fact that only 17 percent of these respondents reported having at least a Bachelor’s degree and 83 percent did not have a four year college degree. Only
five percent of the respondents in this group reported having an advanced degree beyond the Bachelors. Eighty three percent of these respondents were also single with only 12 percent reporting that they were currently married.

Finally, I used the results from my free listing exercises and participant observation to conduct maximum variation sampling as defined above for my dialogic interviews. I used the results from my participants’ free listing of hairstyles to identify eight different hairstyles as dimensions of interest. Relaxers, braids, weaves, twists, cornrows, jheri curls, short naturals, and dreadlocks were the styles that my participants identified as most salient to women of African descent. I confirmed the relevance of these during my participant observation through questions to women about their perception and definition of these styles.

**Data Collection Techniques**

**Participant Observation**

My formal research began when I entered the beauty shops discussed above to conduct participant observation. I completed eleven months of participant observation, averaging twenty four hours per week in three beauty shops. During the last six months of the project, I spent all of my time in one single beauty shop. Participant observation is a form of intensive listening, observing, and interacting where you watch yourself and others simultaneously (Wolcott 1988). This form of participation is marked by the researcher’s ability to be explicitly aware of things that others take for granted, to look beyond the obvious, to negotiate the feeling of being both an insider and an outsider; engage in reflexive introspection, and to keep detail records of their experiences (Spradley 1980).

My experience as a participant observer began in three beauty shops and as a conference attendee at two national hair shows. In order to enter this setting I initially approached the owners of the beauty shops. I introduced the owners to my work and explained that I wanted to
participate in their shops as a clean up assistant. One of the shops accepted my offer to work as an assistant and the second and third shops simply allowed me to sit in the shop with my tape recorder and notepad in plain view. The latter beauty shop owners felt I would not cause any disruption in the shop because I simply appeared to be a customer working on some type of project. Often they proudly introduced me to their customers, as if my presence as a researcher validated their professionalism as stylists. In the shop where I actually worked, I answered the phone, made trips to the hair supply store, configured computers, fetched meals, swept the floor and escorted women back to the shampoo bowl. I was willing to do anything required to make myself useful to the beauty shop owner as I intruded on her space. However, because I was not a licensed beautician I could not perform any actual hair dressing tasks.

All of these experiences were mediated by the fact that the women seemed to perceive me as a valid participant in this particular space. Oftentimes customers would ask me questions about my hair and what procedure I was having done in the beauty shop. These types of inquiries created opportunities for me to ask women to complete my free listing and pile sorting exercises as they waited for their beautician. My participant observation resulted in 30 responses to each free list question. The two questions I asked were;

- Please write down as many words as you can think of to describe the texture of Black women’s hair. Don’t be embarrassed to write down any term you have used or heard, even if you don’t agree with its use. Thank you.
- Please write down as many hairstyles you can think of that are worn by Black women. Don’t be afraid to write down names of styles that you may not think I know. Thank you.

Following Firth, these free lists were gathered to begin to describe the elements of the Black hair domain. These lists assisted me in identifying the main hairstyles and textures recognized by Black women. Moreover, these exercises were crafted to uncover the meaning informants
attribute to hair, and assist in the creation of Firth’s recommended conceptual framework that relates how hair functions among women of African descent.

Overall, during my work I found, as Werner and Schoepfle predicted, participant observation in ethnography has changed and “instead of investigating an exotic foreign culture I ended up examining the subtle and elusive cultural differences of consultants” who were similar to myself (Werner and Schoepfle 1987:61). Moreover, the recognition that: “modern ethnographic work has taught us that human beings know little about cultures right around them, and that at least in substantive cultural knowledge . . . great discrepancies may exist between next-door neighbors,” motivated me to carefully document my experiences with these women who looked like my relatives (Werner and Schoepfle 1987:68). But, I remained cognizant that the very act of participation may have influenced the experiences and reactions I encountered in my setting. In this ethnographic setting I found that the data I collected helped me to compose my research questions. The field experiences were an integral part of the study and helped me to begin the process of triangulating my data. Participant observation helped me to locate my initial participants for my focus groups, interviews, and online surveys. I stepped away from the method when I began inviting women to participate in focus groups.

Focus Groups

To further investigate my question of whether or not there are shared symbolic meanings associated with hair and hairstyle choice, I conducted two group discussions. They consisted of eight women of African descent. Focus group interviews involve meeting with research participants and guiding them through a discussion on a particular topic (Schensul, et al. 1999). My focus groups assisted me in interrogating the social and cultural messages surrounding Black hair. Inviting women I met during allowed me to target those interested in the topic and willing to speak with me at length. I conducted these focus groups in a conference room at Benedict
College and provided participants with light snacks as they talked. I led the focus groups and guided women through a discussion based on a flowchart of open-ended questions. The women began calling these focus group meetings “hair parties” because they felt as if the sessions provided them with a certain level of “hair catharsis.” The sessions were emotionally charged and occasionally women would break down and cry based on both memories of pain and joy. The women reported these emotions were caused by the revelation that other women had similar experiences and feelings about their hair. The focus group also reviewed my survey questions, helped me create new questions; and helped me select the format and photographs for the hair experiment.

**Dialogic Interviews**

I conducted 27 video taped in-depth interviews with 8 women who wore relaxed hairstyles, 4 women who wore braids, 3 women who wore weaves, 3 women who wore twists, 2 women who wore cornrows, 1 woman who wore a jheri curl, 2 women who wore short naturals, and 4 women who wore dreadlocks. These interviews were dialogic in nature meaning that both the interviewer and the participant take part in shaping the structure of the interviews (Brettell 1993; de Chadarevian 1997; Grele 1991; Morrissey 1987). The dialogic interview process facilitates researcher reflection and a more accurate depiction of research participants (Crapanzano 1990; de Chadarevian 1997). Most of the interviews lasted for an hour; however on occasion they lasted several hours when women were inspired to continue discussing their beliefs in depth. My dialogic interviews also spawned the collection of what I call “hair stories” and “hair folklore.”

**Hair Stories as Data**

Hair stories are emotional narratives of my participant’s most vivid and memorable experiences with their hair. Similarly, what I called hair folklore consisted of warnings, myths and legends concerning the treatment of hair among women of African descent. During the
interview process I would ask the women to tell me examples of the folklore about hair that they had heard as children or even adults. Sometimes this area of questioning would prompt the participants to tell me one of their experiences with hair. However, as a final component of my interviews I specifically requested that women tell me the first story about their hair that came to mind. Since I was videotaping these interviews often times women would ask to tell their stories multiple times in an attempt to give the camera the “full effect.” Conversely I was occasionally asked to stop the tape when women said things that they thought were inappropriate or they lost their composure. The women were extremely conscious of the video camera and this may be because, “many research participants have become more jaded, and have seen enough reality TV to know that video can be used to either make them look foolish or to further their cause” (Hasbrouck and Faulkner 2006:265). This concern for the use of their images prompted me to engage in a deeper level of self disclosure with my participants in order to earn their trust. Two research participants even insisted that they would only participate if they were allowed conduct a videotaped interview of me before they would consent. I explained to my participants that although I wanted to create a documentary from the images I collected they would not end up being exploited on television or the Internet and that, “video footage and photographs shot in the field are used primarily for data analysis, design research ideation, internal communication of findings, and external presentations, conferences, and publications” (Hasbrouck and Faulkner 2006:265).

As my investigation into this vernacular culture expanded I became interested in how hair is viewed by women in their everyday environments. This prompted me to utilize my connection to Benedict College, as a professor to collect ethnographic film data from college students. Benedict College is a historically Black college located in Columbia, South Carolina. The school
serves approximately 2,552 students, consisting of 1292 females and 1260 males (Benedict 2005). At Benedict 99 percent of these students are of African descent. From spring of 2003 to spring of 2005 I allowed my three sections of introduction to sociology to complete an extra credit project called, “view our hair story.” This project was developed to engage the research participants following the advice of visual anthropologists like Jay Hasbrouck and Susan Faulkner who write that the use of ethnographic film and video should be a creative endeavor. In crafting these creative ethnographic film projects Hasbrouck and Faulkner suggest that:

Some examples might include arranging photo exchanges, engaging with visual collections of research participants, involving research participants in the manipulation or electronic transfer of their image, reversing the gaze, etc. In addition, strategies like these are more likely to include research participants in ways that produce much richer ethnographic experiences than simply snapping a photo of them (Hasbrouck and Faulkner 2006:268).

To create these types of rich ethnographic experiences I used “digital storytelling.” Students were instructed to purchase a disposable camera and take photographs of the hairstyles in their environment (see Appendix A. Digital Hair Story Instructions). This form of “digital storytelling” allowed the students to express their experiences in visual and written terms.

According to Leslie Rule of the Digital Storytelling Association:

Digital Storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid color to characters, situations, experiences, and insights (Rule 2007).

I asked students to tell their stories digitally so that I would be able to explore their experience and insights about hair. The students were also required to complete a written analysis and explain their rationale for selecting the particular photographs. Written instructions were given the students to guide them in their analysis of the photographs and they were encouraged to think about what the hairstyles meant to them and to others in their community. This data can be found at the end of each chapter and is labeled digital storytelling assignment. When the student who
turned in the work wrote their names they are identified, otherwise they are listed as unidentified student at Benedict College. This data represents un-edited words of the participants as they expressed their views about the meaning of Black hair. Ultimately, the students were asked to produce their completed digital stories as a final project. This process elicited over 900 photographs and statements from the 115 undergraduate students enrolled in my courses. This process was essential in my investigation of the personal and public meanings attached to hair and hairstyle choice because it revealed what women thought was important about other women’s hair. This method of narrative and visual data collection provided empirical data that confirmed that African-descended women shared meaning about hairstyles and hair textures and that these meanings could be said to constitute a cultural domain.

**Online Survey**

The World Wide Web (Internet, or Web or WWW) and electronic mail (email), have created entirely new ways in which to conduct survey and qualitative research. Online surveys can be delivered via email or entire web pages can be created to capture data from your target population. Furthermore, focus groups can be run online that incorporate photographs, video, music and text to capture each participant’s thoughts in an electronic transcript.

In my research I initially created an online survey that was crafted to elicit attitudes about Black hair culture from women of African descent. “Black hair is . . . ?,” is a survey instrument that consists of fifty questions designed to further investigate the cultural domain of Black hair. These fifty questions include seven demographic background questions, five open ended questions, six ranking exercises, seven multiple choice questions, and twenty five likert scale questions. I used an online survey tool run by a company named Zoomerang at [www.zoomerang.com](http://www.zoomerang.com). This company provides students with access to its zPro program for a reduced fee. The zPro program allows the user to receive an unlimited number of survey
responses, create an unlimited number of surveys, download reports to Excel, add images, logos, and external links to the survey, send personalized email invitations to participants, and create your own or use their survey templates in forty languages. The survey tool also does reporting and data summary including the ability to cross tabulate responses, filter the responses, view the results online, and save reports. Furthermore, the program allows the user to deploy the survey selectively by only allowing one response to come from each computer Internet address. This prevents users from completing multiple surveys at the same computer.

The survey was designed with the help of my interview and focus group participant’s. The research participants provided cultural expertise—they read my questions, edited them for cultural clarity, and gave me suggestions for additional questions. Traditionally some of the key characteristics used to judge surveys have included a review of the response rate, timeliness, data quality, and cost (Fricker and Schonlau 2002). I will discuss these aspects of my survey in the abovementioned order.

A standard way to gauge survey performance is to review the response rate, or the number of surveys that are completed versus the number that have been distributed. In an Internet based survey like mine it is difficult to calculate a response rate in the traditional fashion, because there is no way to calculate how many individuals received invitations to participate in my survey. However, in my research I can calculate a form of response rate by evaluating the number of people who actually visited my webpage and looked at the survey versus the number of people who completed the survey. Seven hundred and twenty people visited my survey page. This page was not accessible via web searches so I can assume that these 720 people received some type of email invitation, or that they met me personally and I provided them with a business card inviting them to participate in the research. Out of this seven hundred and twenty people, 298
provided me with completed surveys and an additional 99 submitted partial responses. These numbers give me a response rate of 55 percent.

The “Black hair is . . . ?” survey was available online from March 9, 2005 to March 8, 2006. The timeliness of the survey was not computed as it related to how quickly participants responded to my requests because the survey was advertised online and there was no way to track how long the participants took to respond to the email invitation. However, despite the fact that this was not a primary factor in my survey, I was able to calculate that during the first month of deployment, from March 9, 2005 to April 8, 2005, 119 participants responded to the online survey. During the second month 147 participants completed the survey, the third month had 48 completions, 14 completions were done in the fourth month, sixteen 16 completions were done in the fifth month, and eight only surveys were done during the sixth month. Consequently at the end of six months 88 percent of the competed surveys had been obtained. Therefore 66 percent of the completed, “Black hair is . . . ?,” surveys were obtained during the first two months after I posted the survey website. This indicates that the survey was completed in a timely manner.

Data quality is an issue in any online survey due to the problems with controlling coverage error, sampling error, non-response error, and measurement errors (Fricker and Schonlau 2002). However, tracking the majority of these types of errors was immaterial in my research because of the nature of my sampling technique and the fact that I was targeting a specialized population who had already established access to the Internet. Accordingly evaluating the quality of my responses involved focusing on issues of item non response, completeness of responses, honesty of responses, and the quality of transcription into an electronic format (Fricker and Schonlau 2002).
Only ninety nine participants were unable to provide me with compete responses to the survey instrument. All of these respondents failed to answer the ranking questions and provide an answer to the final open ended question about their personal hair story. Because all of the partially completed surveys stop at the same point, it is highly probable that I had incomplete surveys because of some type of computer error during the times that these participants were attempting to complete their surveys. Another possibility may be that the respondents were not willing or able to rank the hairstyles. Several respondents said they could not decide on these rankings because they wanted to list some hairstyles in two areas. However, even if these 99 respondents simply got tired and stopped the survey at this point, they still answered the majority of the questions in the survey.

Gauging whether participants are being honest is also an issue that any researcher may encounter with survey data. In my research several of the questions were gauged to evaluate the participant’s honesty by asking the same question in different ways. Despite the fact that I explained to participants that there were “no right or wrong answers” I did attempt to ascertain whether or not they were answering consistently about their beliefs. Additionally, these answers can be compared to the responses given during my dialogic interviews to gauge the veracity of both groups of participants. This technique added to the reliability of my data as it provided me with a way to cross-reference my interview responses with the online responses. This information gave me a broader view of Black women’s beliefs about hair. Of the methods I used, participant observation, hair stories, and dialogic interviews were designed to answer my first research question about the shared symbolic meanings of hair. Whereas my pile sorting, focus groups, and experiment methods were crafted to address my second research question about whether there is evidence of a cultural belief domain. This general survey provided me
with insight to answer both of my research questions; moreover it spawned the creation of the final phase of my research a hair survey experiment.

**Hair Experiment**

The final method I employed in my research involved an online experiment. “Black Hair…An Experiment,” was conducted online from October 9, 2005, to October 8, 2006. This portion of my research attempts to replicate the work of Marvin Harris, who explored the cultural domain of racial classifications in Brazil with a similar ethnographic experiment (1970). This method was employed near the end of my formal research in an effort to organize the emerging cultural domain into a visual map. Like Harris, I attempted to gauge my participants’ perceptions by asking them to view an image. Harris used a series of standardized facial portraits that could be used to gauge the participants’ understanding of the concept of color (Harris 1970). He asked participants to group these facial portraits and assign them to categories based on their perception of the faces. His work showed that a person’s perceived color or race depended on what combination of facial features and hair textures they displayed (Gravlee 2005; Harris 1970).

Following Harris’ techniques, I asked my participants to assess portraits for certain characteristics. However, instead of relying on a drawing of a person’s face, I was able to utilize photographs of a single woman who appeared wearing different hairstyles. It was important to use the same woman’s face with different hairstyles in order to prevent participants from responding to changes in facial features instead of hairstyle changes. The model appears with a standard expression on her face and the only major change from photograph to photograph is her hairstyle. My participants were then asked to respond to a series of questions regarding their opinion of the woman based on how she looked in each of the photographs. At the end of the survey the participants were asked to address questions like which photograph was most attractive, most professional, most unappealing, and which one was most likely to be the model’s
actual hairstyle. As a result my participants were exposed to a single face wearing a series of 12 different hairstyles (see Figures 5-17 to 5-28).

My use of this method also closely follows Clarence Gravlee’s work. Gravlee investigated the core emic categories of color, the dimensions of semantic structure, and the cultural model of color across age, sex, and class in Puerto Rico (Gravlee 2005). Gravlee used free lists to elicit the terms used for color and then like Harris he used facial drawings to find out which color category each face would be assigned to by his informants. In my experiment I address the core emic categories of hairstyles and hair texture, the dimensions of its semantic structure and the cultural model of hairstyles created by my participants. This experiment proved to be so fruitful that it serves as the bulk of the data used to elicit the meaning of hairstyles and textures and create the conceptual framework for the cultural domain of hair. Overall the survey, the hair experiment, and the digital stories became the central data collection techniques used to answer my research questions. I returned to the beauty shops and asked women to conduct pile sorts with the online experiment photos. The pile sorting exercise involved the use of twelve photographs mentioned previously. The participants were asked to group the photos into piles based on what the hairstyles say about the person. Then they were asked to give me an explanation of why they selected the particular piles. The instructions were,

Please sort the photographs into piles based on what the type of hair style tells you about the person. There is no right or wrong answer, just be honest. You can make as few as two piles and as many as six piles, because no photo can be alone.

This exercise revealed the frequency photographs appeared together and thus how women viewed the hairstyles as similar or dissimilar.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have discussed the methodology that informed my choice of methods, the ethnographic settings, the sampling techniques used, and the characteristics of my samples. The
data collected using these methods are central to my being able to answer my research questions. In the next chapter I will analyze and interpret the data collected in this research as structured by my interpretation of Firth’s set of objectives for investigating symbolic anthropology. I will begin by discussing Black hairstyles and texture and their associated meanings. Then I will move on to analyze the importance these symbols are given by Black women and finally I will show how these symbols can be organized into a conceptual framework.
Figure 3-1. Research Design Flow Chart.
Figure 3-2 Researcher Sybil Dione Rosado and her mother Dr. Sybil Johnson of real hair
Photograph courtesy of Dr. Irma McClaurin.
Figure 3-3  Researcher Sybil Dione Rosado giving *buena presencia* (good appearance) with wig covering dreadlocks photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 3-4  Business card created to recruit research participants.
GOOD HAIR: I remember watching my Aunt Kitty, the official family beautician, who had actually trained at the local beauty college when she was young; comb and brush my cousin Kathy’s naturally straight hair. She had “good hair” I had heard the women of the family say. It was long with deep waves ending in a tangle of soft curls at the end. I wondered why her hair was so different from mine. I wondered why she smiled and talked softly to me while her hair was groomed, like a proud horse being brushed by his loving owner. Long sweeping brush strokes, gentle plating, only one or sometimes two of those “parts” that I hated so badly separating the hair into great masses of soft easily manageable sections which would sometimes be secured with bright ribbons or a rubber band, allowing the hair to fall to her waist like the tails of twin ponies.

I soon learned that good hair represented beauty and freedom. Kathy could quickly run out and play and was sometimes even allowed to “do” her own hair! She was only a little older than me it seemed, but my hair even though I thought it was “strong,” was considered “bad” by the rest of the family, and the rest of the world, as I was soon to learn. Unlike Kathy, my hair had to be tamed by a trainer the reins pulled taught, before I could be released into the fields to play. The center part and rubber bands were reserved for special occasions and on those occasions, the clumps of hair stood stiffly, on either side of my head. Instead of looking like Kathy’s twin ponies running in the wind, my hair looked more like sticky cotton candy puffs at the school Halloween carnival.

Mama had good hair too. It wasn’t as good as Kathy’s but it was better than mine. Moreover, it was long, very long for her skin color, and this was a very important aspect. According to her she only let Aunt Kitty straighten it a little with the hot comb barely warm because she wanted to, not because she had to. She could simply just wash it and go if she wanted to, but she was a professional lady and needed to look presentable! I began to understand that presentable meant looking more like White people. Bad hair was bad because it didn’t look like White people’s hair. Soon I learned that Kathy’s hair was good because her daddy was an Italian man that we didn’t know. My daddy’s hair was good too, and I wished I had gotten some of his hair instead of the forest of thickness that covered my head. Why had Kathy gotten hair like her daddy and not me? I felt cheated! Why was mama’s hair better than mine? Often I thought about how the goodness of their hair made them somehow better and more superior than me. Except for her hair, she was just a plain skinny girl, I couldn’t understand why, but I knew that everyone looked at Kathy like she was extra special. I, on the other hand was just ordinary. Long flowing hair was to be envied and desired. Boys wanted to touch her hair and girls hated her for having it. Suddenly it became apparent to me that being presentable and beautiful was all connected to the goodness or badness of hair. Hair was the single most important determiner of becoming presentable. So if I wanted to be presentable I would have to allow my hair to be pressed into submission, in order to achieve the ultimate level of acceptability and success.

The texture of my hair unlike anything else about me was mutable and must somehow change from its natural unacceptable state into a relaxed and acceptable shape. It must be
somehow be set free from the bonds that held it, it must be allowed to swing when I turned my head like the White girls at school and like Kathy. At that reckoning I was at last introduced to my first perm, and I welcomed the change with open arms! My hair could now appear, at least for a while to be not itself but a thing of beauty.

When my mother told me about the appointment I was so excited. The permanent chemical straightener would be applied by a real professional in a licensed salon. Not in the kitchen by Aunt Kitty with the trembling hands whose reputation for burning ears and various other body parts with her red hot iron weapons named “hot combs and curlers,” was legendary. These ingot like weapons had been fired in the ancient ovens of old and sheathed in a White towel bearing the battle scars of several scorch marks. They were hidden carefully in the kitchen drawer. That drawer which remained untouched until time for the ritual would begin. Hidden with the weapons were the curling wax and pressing grease, essential ingredients for a successful fry job. —(Johnson 2006)

Exploring the Shared Meanings of Hair: Rituals, Symbols, and Beliefs

Investigating the iconography of hair reveals that not all hair transmits the same messages. Hairstyle and hair texture both hold multiple meanings that vary based on who is viewing the hair. The hair story at the beginning of this chapter was collected from Dr. Sybil Johnson, and it documents some of the symbolic acts associated with hair that are important to a woman of African descent. The symbolic rituals she engaged in as a child are still poignant memories for her as an adult. This story is connected to a series of stories collected from her and the women in her family, who all participated in the same hair rituals. Despite the fact that these incidents occurred over thirty years ago, they still formulate the basis of her beliefs about hair and hairstyles among African-descended women. It is important to note that her memories and experiences are not isolated events. Following Firth, who recommended that symbolic analysis begin with a description and analysis of symbolic acts, this chapter is organized around the survey participants’ descriptions of the rituals, symbols, and beliefs they have about hair.
Hair Rituals

Ritualized Pain Makes You Beautiful!

The type of socialization rituals that Dr. Johnson describes at the beginning of this chapter are repeated when Respondent number 77 recounts how getting her hair done made her feel about herself:

I remember sitting in the stylist's chair one day, getting my hair done for a class photo. The perm was BURNING like no tomorrow. I've asked her to rinse it out twice. My grandma is there and won't say anything, so the perm stays on my head, burning. And I'm crying. And the stylist tries to soothe me by saying "You want to be pretty, don't you?" Tears are streaming down my face and I'm thinking "If this is the price to pay, then I don't want to be pretty." I'd never felt so angry, nor so ugly.

This hair story is evidence of the ritual of pain and endurance that seems to be an integral factor in Black hair culture. For women in this culture the ability to acquire beauty is contingent upon one’s pain threshold. Respondent 77 internally renounces her desire to be pretty, but notice that she does not make this statement “out loud” to her grandmother or her stylist. Even as a child she has already learned that it is unacceptable for her to complain about the pain associated with her hair. Her experiences are shared by respondent number 89 who told me this story:

I remember my 1st relaxer, My aunt put it in while we were in her kitchen. The minute it started burning, I let her know it was burning and she kept saying I'm almost finish baby, and you gonna look so pretty. Well after it was rinsed, dried and curled I really thought I was pretty but I had a head full of burns.

When examining the hair stories recounted by my participants the theme of pain being inextricably connected to beauty kept emerging. These women learn through the rituals associated with hairstyling that pain is expected and should be silently endured. When respondent 59 discusses the hair rituals she experienced with her mother and sisters she also relates a story of beauty and pain. She says,

I vividly remember having my hair “straightened” by my mother. My sister and I only went to the beauty shop on special occasions, usually Christmas, Easter, or funerals. Having my hair straightened was a painful process that resulted in burned ears and neck, if
I didn’t sit perfectly still, and crooks in my neck if I did. My mom used “Long Aid with K-7” that was supposed to prevent my hair from reverting to its naturally kinky state.

Similar stories of pain and beauty were reported by respondents’ number 32 and 79.

Respondent 32 says,

My hair story would be when I attended college in the 80’s a lot of the young ladies were trying to get bone straight hair, because that was the popular thing, well the trick was to use a SUPER relaxer, well every morning I would wake up and wonder why I would see so much of my hair shedding on the pillow, eventually I learned that I was slowly burning out my hair, and let me not forget the pain I endured with letting the relaxer sit for a long period of try to achieve this task, only to have a severely blistered and pussed scalp but still I endured because I wanted bone straight hair.

Whereas respondent 79 states,

I remember crying every time I had to have my hair washed and hot combed as a child. I would try to find any reason to get out of having it done. Usually, I could avoid it for a month or so. But eventually, my mom would wrestle me down and wash my hair. She was infamous for being impatient to hurry up and straighten it since it was such a chore. Usually, there was still moisture present and the straightening comb would sizzle and burn as it passed through my hair. Although my mom was a wonderful mother, I remember she would treat my hair like the enemy and my tears would not keep her from battling the enemy into submission. I usually left the kitchen with red eyes and a burnt scalp and earlobes. By the time the scabs would fall off, I was again forced to use the usual diversionary tactics to keep away from THE COMB.

Overall, the association of pain and beauty are common themes reported by my research participants. Moreover, a careful review of my own hair story also reveals this theme:

As much as I enjoyed the soft warmth of my mothers embrace, and squeezing as close as possible to her to smell her sweet odor and feel her soft skin against mine, and climbing into bed with her when the night was too scary; it was never a pleasant occasion when she called me over to her to “do” my hair. My earliest memories include being held fast between her strong knees, squirming and whining like a like a hurt puppy. I was overwhelmed with utter helplessness. The smell of Royal Crown pomade hung in the air as she slid fingerfuls of hair onto the perfectly drawn “parts,” she called them. These almost artistic lines formed an intricate patchwork design, creating order within the thick unruliness that was my hair. They must be never crooked but always straight, which sometimes required second and third painful tries. The endless parade of braids were pulled and drawn tightly, lifting my scalp with them as they stood at attention across the battlefield. You see, my hair, like me was strong; It resisted being pulled and pushed into submission! It didn’t like being forced to sit quietly and behave! This was war! A battle of will. This was the microcosm of a war that I would continue to fight for the rest of my life.
This was my will against the way of the world. It all began then as I fought for my right to disagree with the taming of my hair.

My sweat and tears blended with my opponents until my knee shackles loosened and I began to slide, almost escaping only to be caught again by small strong hands which, when slapped against my arm, or thigh could metamorphose into pincers, a formidable weapon which stung worse than any bee. The battle continued, with each small triumph followed by utter defeat. After what seemed like hours, the voice of the General rang out. “Dione, be still or I’ll give you something to cry about!” She would say this, resonating in a high pitched voice that pierced my skin like only her angry words could. She didn’t understand that she was already “giving me something to cry about.” After all she was only doing what her mother and grandmother had done for her. In the midst of my cries of agony my grandmother or some other “adult” would sometimes interject, “that girl tender- headed”, and my mother, still a teenager, trying to assert her own woman-hood, would insist that I was not tender- headed! As if that particular ailment was tantamount to being somehow imperfect. She wanted me to be perfect and that meant my hair, like my behavior, had to be well managed and controlled!

After her retort I would feel the tension ease in her knees and feel her hands relax trying not to hurt me even though she wanted the onlookers to believe that she had not taken their advice. It was our secret, like many we would come to share. She would speak bending down and, turning my ear to her lips in her soft voice “am I really hurting you baby?” She couldn’t imagine how I could be in pain. This was just a rite of passage, a necessary level of suffering required of all little Black girls with “strong hair.” I would answer, nodding my head through my tears, and those little hiccups that come when you have cried much too long, “yes mommie it hurts.” She would relax even more and try her best to make the experience less painful. I would smile inside. Even though it still hurt I would soften my cries and stop my squirming, after all I really was tender-headed, no matter how strong my hair was. So, this is where I first learned how to act strong (Johnson and Rosado 2006).

It is important to note that pain is a component of the hair care ritual for Black women not only when chemicals are used, but also when braiding, washing, and combing occur. For example, respondent 113 says:

Once I let my aunt twist my hair in two-strand twist with fake hair. She did the twist so tight that my head hurt for a week. She did all this, because she didn’t like my hair in natural hair braids. Since my hair is natural and stronger than her permed hair my hair recovered from the incident. She however went bald in the front.

Thus merely manipulating the hair into twists seems to create a painful experience for this respondent. But, even washing can produce similar experiences for women. Respondent number 154 discusses how just washing her hair created anxiety for her as a child. She says,
I hated wash day as a child. It was the day I was yelled at the most and tortured the most because of my natural nappy hair. Getting a relaxer was pain full too, but it only happened once a month so wash day became 3/4 more bearable. For years I lived through what I thought was necessary pain. It was the one day a month I prepared for two weeks in advance and recovered from one week later. Hitting my head so I wouldn't scratch and hiding in the house so I wouldn't be seen.

Hair Rituals=Happiness

However, pain is not the only emotion associated with the hair ritual, and many women reported the festive nature of the hair combing ritual they participated in with their mothers. An example of this type of positive experience can be found in respondent 86’s statement,

I remember when I was a child, getting your hair done was like a holiday or something extra special like that. I would be so excited to come home from school or wake up to any given Saturday morning to have all of my aunts and cousins come over to my house to get there hair done. I couldn’t wait for my turn. I’d sit between an aunt’s legs and get my hair braided or curled. It would be a grand affair.

Similarly, respondent 172 says that,

Something I remember about my hair was my “pressing comb days.” I had very thick coarse wavy like hair. It took about an hour and a half to two hours just to straighten it. Then as soon as I would walk outside it would frizz up. I hated that. My hair was so unmanageable. When I was about ten years old my beautician decided to give me a relaxer so I could manage my hair better. This was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. My hair never fell out actually it grew even longer and it was so manageable. I didn’t have to worry about pulling all my hair out because it was so tangle. I thank God everyday for relaxers because of it my hair is more manageable. It has nothing to do with trying to be White, but it has every thing to do with being able to manage my hair.

It seems as if the ritual of perming or relaxing hair for respondent number 172 was a pleasurable experience that she equated to helping her manage her unruly hair. Her happiness is not associated with what she perceives as attempts at assimilation, instead it is based on the freedom she experiences being free from tangled and unmanageable hair. Respondent 68 also reports fond memories of her hair rituals when she says,

My hair is very course and “wire-ry”. I have 3-4 textures and it grows like crazy. I used to sit in the kitchen on Sunday mornings before church and dread the times when my grandmother, I call her gran-gran, had to press my hair. That comb was so hot, and my ears could not take it. she would set the old Black comb on the gas range for some time, wipe it
down with a paper towel to remove excess oil and hair, and take it through my kinks. This of course was not a quick process, but after it was down, I looked good, gran-gran thought so at least. I miss that Sunday ritual. I have gone through my perm day as child and my Black pride stage with one true understanding. Our hair is only as beautiful as we are, as a whole. If we spend more time loving ourselves, our individuality will surface and we will begin the process of creating and developing our own perfection. By the way, I am getting a perm after 7 years, and it will be as beautiful as my afro, locks, and twists. Much love and thank you for creating this survey.

It seems as if for respondent number 68 the hair ritual was painful, but this pain is mitigated by the pleasure associated with being groomed by her grandmother. This participant has gone through several hairstyles ranging from relaxed to natural styles and like respondent number 172 she sees her hair as a beautiful expression of personal identity.

Thus, evaluating these hair stories reveals that on one level hair is symbolic of both pain and pleasure for women of African descent. Many times the actual ritualistic procedures are painful but the experiences with other females prove to be rewarding and memorable. These rituals and the spaces they take place in foster intimacy, female bonding, and a formal induction into Black womanhood. As such I suggest that we consider these rituals as integral components of identity construction for women of African descent. It is within these rituals that young Black women craft their sense of identity and self worth (hooks 1989; hooks 1992). Given the importance of these rituals it seemed fitting to examine the symbolism associated with hair as reported by my respondents.

**Hair Symbols**

**Hair as a Signifier of Racial Difference**

Throughout the hair stories I collected from women, hair texture and hair length envy was a common theme. For example respondent number 6 to my hair survey entitled, “Black hair is . . .” says,

When I was growing up in New Jersey, predominately Puerto-Rican and African American community, I remember going to school and kids making fun of me and telling me that I
was not Black or Puerto Rican and they would pull my hair and tell me that I was different and that I could not relate to them because I wasn't neither Black or Puerto Rican, this experience affected me because it confused me, especially when the Black girls would pull my hair and tell me that I was not pretty and I better not think I'm pretty because I was ugly. I don't know if the pulling of my hair was a reaction of violence or some sort of denial I'm not sure all I know is that it made me feel unaccepted and alienated. Today I question why when I walk around campus, Black females always look at my hair first and then my face and keep walking (not all do this but quite a few)

This childhood memory reveals how hair functions as a way to identify this woman racially and socially. Her peers from both racial groups excluded her based on her hair texture and length.

Despite the fact that her skin color marked her as being of African descent, her hair texture and hair length served as a way to exclude her from this group. While her hair texture hair may have excluded her from being perceived as African American her inability to speak Spanish may have excluded her from being accepted as Puerto Rican. Similarly, respondent number 57 said,

Growing up I was identified as a Black girl who had abnormally long hair for a Black child. I can recall being out with my mother and people would stop to run their hands through my hair. At the time my hair looked like a cross between Chaka Khan and Diana Ross. Many people would ask my mother and myself if my father was “White” or what was I “mixed” with. My mom would tell people that I was full Black. At one point I asked my mom if I was different and why did people talk about my hair so much? She told me that not everyone has the length and thickness of my hair and that is why people would ask questions as it was something “different”. My mother’s father was Black and her mother was half Black and half White. My father’s mother was Black and his father was of East Indian descent. So as a result I got a combination of the length and texture of both of their hair types.

It wasn’t until I got a little older that people would then ask why I had an East Indian last name when I clearly looked Black. At that time as I approached my teenage years and went into high-school many guys would call me horsehair or call me weave head. Mostly Black males would question if my hair was real but eventually I would even have White and Chinese guys questioning the authenticity of my hair. There were a lot of times where I had low self esteem & wanted to just cut off all my hair so that no one would question my race and naturalness of my hair.

I eventually got to the point to realize that there are always going to be people in the world who will make ignorant comments and think that the only way someone of African descent can have long hair is through synthetic means. I am now 26 years old and have since learned to accept who I am instead of hiding who I am in an effort to avoid being called fake.
Again reviewing respondent number 57’s story reveals how hair texture can symbolize race and what she calls authentic group membership. This woman was ostracized because of her hair texture, it was used to determine her identity for her by other people of African descent. These narratives support the thesis that hair texture and length are powerful symbols that Black women use to evaluate each other and authenticate group membership. The story was similar when Sili Recio, of the Dominica Republic responded to the survey and said:

Also the term "greña" is used for my kinks ;-) . It is highly derogatory, kind of like nappy is here. And, I can't tell you how many times people in my own family (in-laws and such) refer to my hair as that in order to remind me that I am not like them (though I've never said I was) and basically using the term as a slur. Of course, I knew to start taking these terms as a slur when my mother felt the need to explain to anyone that would listen that my hair (like me) was mixed and that really only half of my hair "needed" relaxing. This was another reason why I didn't wear my hair curly until after I was in college and found the social acceptance to show others that my blackness (whether they liked it or not) was part of who I was. The other term is "jabá" which classifies me as a light-skinned girl with kinky hair. Of course, if my hair was NOT kinky, I would be cat-called in the streets as "rubia" meaning blonde regardless of the actual color of my hair but stating that blonde and straight is "good". Of course, when I straighten my hair, it's anybody's guess what the cat call will be. If I'm walking with my sister, it's jabá for me and morena for her.

Sili and her sister are clearly racially marked by the texture of their hair. She remains jabá, while her sister with more kinky hair and a slightly browner complexion becomes a morena. Another poignant example of this reality can be seen in respondent number 51’s statement,

In elementary school another Black girl came up to me and asked me what race I was. I said "Black." She looked at my hair and said, "Do you have Indian in you?" I said "Yes." She said, "Oh, you're not really Black."

This childhood memory provides a clear statement about how Black women interpret hair texture. Respondent number 51 was specifically excluded from authentic race membership by another child. This socialization technique can be found in many of the stories that women related to me. Repeatedly, the proverbial line was drawn between racial groups by children in elementary and high school settings, based on hair texture and hair length. Therefore based on
the data collected in this research hair texture and lengths seem to be used as signs that signify racial affiliation.

**Good-n-Bad Hair**

The perceptions about the relationship between racial identity and hair texture are translated into notions of good and bad hair. As I have discussed previously good hair has been defined as being straight with less curls and kinks and bad hair is kinky and coiled (see Figure 4-1). This dichotomy is racialized when we realized that good hair is most often associated with not being of African descent and bad hair is associated with Blackness.

Respondent number 84 discusses her memory of having bad hair when she says,

I remember having a big bushy head of hair that if pulled it went to the middle of my back. I grew up in the military so almost everyone was mixed. I would get teased about my texture and people all me Rudy Huxtable. I hated it. Since I wasn't one of the kids w/ "good hair" a lot of boys didn't like me for that and for not being "a red bone". So I would come home crying for a perm. My mother finally broke down and gave me one at age 10. When I moved to another place I was accepted and was really popular because I had long hair. I hid behind the perm quickly covering up any kind of new growth until I was 18.

Respondent 84 outlines her position as having been placed in both the bad and good hair categories. Here we see how having good hair grants the wearer social advantages and not having good hair puts her ad a social disadvantage. When her hair was not relaxed she was on the bad hair side, but once she cajoled her mother into the perm she was given entry to the good hair category by her peers. This change in her social standing or social capital is evidence of the power hair has among African-descended women. Good hair or the approximation of good hair grants the wearer social and cultural capital that can be used to gain entrance to a host of social activities and possibly economic capital.

Another example of how the good and bad hair line can be traversed is given by respondent number 137. She posted this poetic narrative about the times when her hair has been good versus the times when her hair has been bad. She writes,
Peace and Blessings,
Below is a story I posted on a yahoo natural hair group regarding my hair experience. Hope you enjoy . . .LOL! Ooooooh you went there. You're taking me with you! O.K. Here's my story.
GOOD HAIR- I was raised by my grandmother who among other jobs worked part time in her home as a beautician. She maintained my hair, VAIN MOMENT ALERT!-----from birth to puberty and my hair looked like the princess in Eddie Murphy's Coming To America movie. You know the one Arf! Arf!. Yep my hair was natural, thick, long, Black and so on!
BAD HAIR- But I hit puberty and developed an unhealthy self esteem complex because I didn't look like the lead in Vanity Six! (God the things you'll say over the internet. O.K. I was 11, it was the 80's, everyone was in love with Michael Jackson for God's sake! (give me a break!) So I begged and got a perm! That thinned out my hair year after year until college. My hair was long, but stringy, (you know how you pull the back and say "See its still got length!). Yep! That was me! Then . . .
GOOD HAIR- I chopped it all off!. Yes! Teeny Weeny Afro! I didn't look bad. I washed it and felt so free, I wanted to sing! But, my mother said to me "Girl ain't no man gonna want ya with no hair. And it's kinky too!" And I'm going . . . um . . . mom.. You gave it to me. But you ain't supposed to talk back to yo mama and I almost got back slapped. I was 19. I'm from the South O.K.? Soooo
BAD HAIR- I was in DC (at Howard University; philosophy major-sort of). Many African women were just creating a boom in the braiding industry. But, O.K. love my sisters, however rule #1 if the woman about to do your hair has none in the front . . . That's A SIGN! Of course I let her do my hair. I was 19. Rule #2 if African women start laughing at your hair before they began styling it . . . That's A SIGN! Of course, I ignored them and waited patiently for them to pull my skin out of my scalp into a lovely style that hurt so bad, I cut all of it out my head because I was beginning to see stars my head hurt so bad! Soooo
GOOD HAIR- I went to see a professional who hooked me up. I wore individual bob braids for 4 months until all at the same time, I was proposed to, got married and discovered shoulder length beautiful cotton hair. I wore my hair in a cornrowed twisted chignon that I designed myself, got many compliments on and it required no extensions or trips to anybody's salon.
BAD HAIR- SOOO after marriage, I got pregnant 4 months later and my hair began to talk back to me during my first pregnancy. What it had to say wasn't nice. Something like can you please wash me? I was too sick to notice. Until . . .
GOOD HAIR- The midtrimester glo . . . and so on. Ever since then my hair and I have made peace with each other. And my crowning glory is no longer a struggle.

So, the passage from respondent 137 reveals that her personal ideas about good and bad hair are related to numerous factors. In her youth she acknowledges her perception of good hair as being long and straight like a princess. But, then she also recognizes her own pathology when she admits to desiring hair like Vanity 6. In both of these situations the hair textures and styles are
similar but the way she felt about those symbols had changed. Her story really is an explanation of how she transformed her own perception of good and bad hair away from the meanings she learned in African American hair culture.

However, this concept of good and bad hair moves beyond personal settings and into the public arena when women begin to compliment each other for what is perceived as good or long hair. Moreover, the social capital associated with having good hair results in women being viewed and treated differently because of their hair texture and length. Respondent 60 discusses her disappointment with this fact when she says:

I recently received a compliment on my hair. The Sister said, "Your hair is so pretty. If I had good hair, I'd want it to look like yours". My response, "Thank you for the compliment but I don't believe in the term "good hair". We come in all shapes and sizes and none is good or bad". The Sister said, "You know what I mean". I said, "Yes, unfortunately I do. You've bought in to the White man's version of good and bad". I find this to be a common sentiment among our Sisters. No matter how we sport the natural, braids, cornrows, or locks to express our sense of style, that good/bad thing continues to prevail. It makes me very sad. When I was a kid, getting my hair shampooed was always a painful process. My mother had bone straight silky hair and did not know what to do with my hair that had a kink to it and tangled as it dried on its own. She didn't know of blow drying or rollers back then and had never used oil or grease to tame her own hair. Thank God for the invention of Alberto VO5 and Clairol's Hair So New. The application of either made the kinks melt away and the comb out process so much easier and less painful.

Another example of the good versus bad hair dichotomy is found in an excerpt from one of the digital hair stories collected from Ryan Santoo, one of my students, who interviewed a girl named Nashini Khan (see Figure 4-2). Mr. Santoo says,

Nashini has been growing her hair for a little over five years. Her hair texture is not similar to a person of African-American heritage. Her heritage is also distinctly different and she considers herself as colored rather than Black. She is constantly being paid compliments by males and females alike on her “pretty” hair.

Interestingly we see that Nashini does not consider herself to be Black and that she prefers the term colored. This may be related to the fact that Nashini is from Trinidad where the Black--White racial dichotomy is different. However, as a student at a historically Black college her
perception of herself as colored does not prevent her from benefiting from the social capital granted to her by her hair texture and length. As Mr. Santoo points out she is, “constantly being paid complements by males and females alike on her ‘pretty hair’” because she is still participating in African American culture. Nashini’s hair is symbolically pretty because it does not appear to be kinky and this type of hair is usually held up as an example of “good hair.”

The socialization concerning good and bad hair that occurs in school often influences how young girls feel about themselves and interact with their mothers. For example respondent 198 revealed that the pressure she experienced at school concerning her hair made her ask her mother for a straight or good hairstyle. She writes,

My mother didn’t let us perm our hair when we were growing up. I lived in Atlanta and I went to small Afrocentric schools and the children there hair locks, braids, and twists. When I moved to Memphis, I was in a city where people didn’t believe natural hair was beautiful at all. The kids at my school didn’t think so, anyway. My sister and I were teased for having natural hair. We were called African Booty Scratchers. I cried and cried trying to convince my mother to let me get a perm. Finally she allowed me to get a perm! I was so happy. I remember getting my first perm. My cousin who was in beauty school did it. She sat me down in a chair. I wasn’t use to that, I was use to getting in between my mothers legs. Well, I sat down in a chair and watched her put something chemically potent in another bottle and stir it up. I couldn’t believe that it was about to go in my hair. When my perm was done I was so happy that my hair was straight. But, I was really sad that a lot of my hair fell out and a lot of the beautiful thickness was relaxed right out of my head.

Respondent 198 shows how a parent’s attempt to instill a positive image about natural hair can be thwarted by a child’s interaction with her peers at school. Until her family moved to a new social setting she was content with having natural hair, but since her new social group did not support natural hair she quickly asked for changes to be made in her appearance. Her self perception was negatively impacted by her interaction with this new social group until she could conform to their beauty standards. These types of standards form the basis of much of the symbolic socialization that occurs among African-descended women. Furthermore, women are
granted access to social rewards or social capital based on their ability or inability to conform to the Black beauty ideal.

**Symbolic Socialization and Social Capital**

While investigating the shared meanings associated with hair I found that much of the meaning and importance was transmitted through seemingly innocuous socialization activities and interactions. African-descended women learn what hair means and how important it is, not only from their mothers and peers but from a host of strangers who arbitrarily take part in this socialization exercise. For example respondent number 202 admits,

I was running in a political election, and at the time wore dreadlocks. Most of my letters or phone calls, had nothing to do with my political position, but my hair. Other Black women telling me I needed to get a perm. I was surprised, but it was my first realization of the emphasis we put on hair.

So instead of focusing on her political platform, other African American women were actively engaged attempting to re-socialize respondent number 202 into a presentation of good hair. This theme of intra-group monitoring is a prevalent topic and respondent number 97 reports that throughout her life women have approached her in attempts to tell her how to manage her hair.

She writes,

Wow, so many so tough to choose. Probably the thing I remember most about my hair is being made fun of when I wore it natural as a young person. The theme of my "hair life" seems to be so many people (mainly other African American women) telling me "All that pretty hair, and you just don't know what to do with it . . . Why don't you get a relaxer??" Then, I would always give in, and start trying to flat iron or relax it, which never really "worked" because my hair was resistant to the relaxer, so it would end up damaged and half straight.

Unfortunately not all of these encounters are benign and sometimes they are reported to be rude and upsetting. Respondent number 141 writes,

I was buying a hair piece, a fake afro puff, at the hair store. My hair was out-- kinky, full, long and glorious. Two women approached the counter with their hair permed within an inch of its life. The edges were beaten back from years of braids and tight pony tails. They'd both slicked their hair into a pony tail with no more than 1/2 inch hanging out of
the band. One of the girls looks at my afro puff and says to the other, loud enough for me to hear, "That is not cute! I would not put that ugly nappy hair in my head." I laughed because this "ugly nappy" hair was already in her head. If she would let it go, stop perming and straightening, it would grow and give her the length she stood in line with a Beverly Johnson wig trying to purchase.

Instead of producing laughter from the respondent this scene might have been, a not so subtle attempt at shaming respondent 141 into social compliance. By stating that the hair she was purchasing, which was very similar to the hair on her head, was ugly and nappy these women were actually attempting to make her reconsider her entire choice of hairstyle. I think the respondent understood that they were not just saying that her purchase was ugly; they were calling her own hair ugly! An even more disturbing reality is revealed by the story respondent number 191 tells me. She says,

I was in a shop in Miami and the people were from the DR. They were working on my hair, pre lock times, and they were talking about how nappy my hair was in Spanish. My boyfriend, he is Cuban, came in and sat down to wait for me and they did not know he was with me. They kept talking and he got up and said let's go! I was in the middle of getting my hair blown out. Because they really know how to blow your hair straight and I did not want to miss out, I protested. He got really mad at me and went outside. I let the girl finish and then I went outside and got in the car. He asked me was I happy with my hair and I said yes. He said he hoped so because the women had been saying that I had nappy hair like a monkey and that the hair on my head was as nappy as pussy hair. I got so mad but I was embarrassed that I had let the woman finish my hair. I had also tipped her to boot.

This story illuminates the negative stereotypes associated with having nappy hair and how the social hierarchy is structured around hair texture. I contacted this respondent and she explained to me that having grown up in Miami, she speaks Spanish and the women did not know this because she is African American. She says that she caught the comments about her hair being nappy, but the sound of the blow dryer had prevented her from hearing the comments that were being made by the other women in the shop. Moreover, she admits that she had, in part, assented to being demeaned by these women because she knew that Dominican women have the reputation for being the best at blow drying hair absolutely straight. So she had ignored the fact
that they were referring to her hair as nappy, which for her has negative connotations. However, she did not consent to having her hair being compared to a monkey or certain not someone’s pubic hair. Additionally, the African-descended Dominican women she was patronizing had assumed that because of her hair texture she was from a different social background which would preclude her from being attached to the Cuban man who had clearly accompanied her to the shop. In this small experience with other African-descended women she was denied the social status and capital they would have otherwise afforded her had her hair been straight; because her skin was as light as theirs. Research participant Tonya Hatton sheds more light on this type of situation when she says:

I think that hair means more to African Americans than anybody else. I feel more pressure from my own people than I feel from outside concerning my hair. The looks the stares or whatever comes more from us than an outside race. Uhm I don’t think it would be an issue if I went to work with locks or went to work braided and worked with an all Caucasian or Asian or whatever have you staff versus me working with a complete African American staff. If I went there a fade or a short do it would not mean as much to them as it would to the Black staff. I think in some ways we feel that processed hair is more acceptable. We put the pressure on ourselves I think versus outside society. I think there is some there but not as much as we put on ourselves. I don’t know why that it but that is just the way I feel [interview with author February 2005].

All of the experiences recounted by the research respondents should begin to illustrate the importance hair has for African-descended women. However, some of the women submitted hair stories that speak directly to the importance of hair.

**Why Hair Really Matters**

Some women said that their hair did not really matter to them, but when presented with the interview question that asks them how they would prepare for a trip away from home and all known beauticians, many women balked at the idea. Some women gave accounts about how they would “pack an entire bag full of hair care products” for the trip, and several women said they probably just would not go [Carol interview with author March 25, 2005]. It is important to note
that these are some of the same women who initially stated that hair was not that important to them! One example of this phenomenon can be observed when research respondent number 165 says,

\[
\text{What I remember most about my hair when I permed are the scalp burns I got. I remember one time it took 2 months for my scalp to completely heal. I also remember how panicked I felt when I moved to Norway and discovered that relaxers were almost impossible to get. I spent hundreds of dollars and traveled 2 to 3 hours to have my hair done.}
\]

She admits that maintaining hair in the required symbolic form is important enough to her that she spends hours and hundreds of dollars to achieve the appropriate hairstyles. Yet, she is not alone in her quest for symbolically acceptable hair. Respondent number 125 says,

\[
\text{Almost every year for the last 7 years I've cut off all of my relaxed hair, let it grow out, gotten frustrated due to style limitations and relaxed it again. This has primarily been because I've lived in Asia for several years, could not do my own hair once it passed the short afro stage and couldn't find anyone to do it for me. I got tired of the afro but couldn't think of anything else to do with it due to the length. Right now I live near Chicago, and there are really good hairdressers that are working with me to grow out my relaxer and style my natural hair. I met a Korean girl from Chicago while I was in Egypt. I'll never forget her comment, "My family has been able to make a lot of money (selling Black hair products) because Black women hate their hair."}
\]

So respondent 125 points out that even though some Black women may say that hair is not important their purchases indicate that it is very important. Black hair care is a billion dollar industry that relies on the sale of relaxers, oils, human and synthetic hair, and an assortment of other products that promise to extend the length of African hair. Yet, hair and hairstyle choice have more meaning than simply a monetary commitment. Another item that my research participants repeatedly mentioned is that hair is linked to sexual attractiveness and even sexual orientation.

**Hair=Sexual Attractiveness and Orientation**

Beyond the monetary influence that African-descended women wield on a global level as it relates to the purchase of hair care products, hair is important because within their cultural
domain African-descended women in America use the symbols imbued in hair and hairstyles to mark their sexual orientation and proclaim their sexual attractiveness. For example respondent 19 admits to changing her hair for her husband in order to make him happy,

For the last ten to fifteen years, I had been wearing a short natural. My hair is what many call naturally curly. When I met my husband, my hair was natural. After about two years of marriage, he began making statements like: I sure would like to see you with long hair. I have only seen you with long hair on pictures at your mom’s house. I wonder what you look like with long, poofed out hair, meaning curls and long. So after ten years of wearing my hair in natural styles, I decided to let it grow and in 2003 I put a relaxer in my hair. My husband loves it and I don't. He says it is my hair and I can do what I want, but every time I mention cut, he gets that quiet attitude. I think Black men have a thing with hair also.

So although she did not agree with his desire for her to wear her hair in a straight style she completed this transformation in order to make him happy. This desire to please the opposite sex with hair is not an isolated story.

Cosette Walker reports a similar experience in her attempt to please her fiancé and his family. Walker she says,

My lesson learned was that I was natural for five years and I got engaged and my fiancé and his entire family wanted me to get a perm. So finally I gave in and got the perm. My entire scalp was burned and my hair was damaged for two and a half years to three years for my scalp to heal. It was the same chemicals that I had used before but my body reacted differently and that was my lesson learned [Cosette Walker interview with author, February 8, 2005]

Alternatively, when it comes to sexuality Cosette says, “I think I am guilty of…if I see a sister with a fade it makes me wonder about her sexuality. If she has cornrows I also wonder, cornrows that are short” [Cosette Walker interview with author, February 8, 2005].

So, having long straight hair seems to be seen as a way to attract and keep a man, whereas short or short cornrowed hair is perceived as a sign of lesbianism. Following this line of thought, the argument can be made that African-descended women see long hair as a sign of femininity and short hair as a sign of masculinity.
Hair=Level of Professionalism

One of the most compelling arguments women of African descent have relied on when it comes to socializing each other about hair is that certain hairstyles are not professional. Mothers and grandmothers tell their daughters that in order to make it in the world they will need to have a professional appearance (see Figures 4-3 and 4-4). For example, when I finished law school and started looking for a job, I went to several interviews sporting my quarter inch long hairdo called a fade when my grandmother approached me with a wig. She told me that I would never get a job looking like a radical lesbian (see Figure 4-5). I of course disagreed and argued with her about the job market being depressed. So I wore the wig on the next interview to prove to her that it did not matter. I was hired that same week (see Figure 4-6). Respondent number 125 echoed my grandmother’s beliefs when she says:

Black hair can be more difficult to style than naturally straight hair if you want straight styles. Whether a woman should be expected to wear her hair naturally depends on the job she has/wants. Here are the following situations where I don't think it really matters if she has natural hair: If she is working academia or maybe certain artistic fields, If she has knowledge/skills that are rare and in high demand, (3) If her hairstyle will not have a negative impact on sales, profits, etc . . . Whether this is fair or not is of little practical importance. This is the price Blacks pay for not working together to strengthen our own communities/businesses/institutions and depending on everyone else to hire of us.

Two issues arise from respondent number 125’s statements. First it seems problematic that only one or two styles, which are based on relaxers or extensions, are seen as presentable professional images. The second issue is that respondent 125 seems to believe that the pressure for Black women to have a certain hairstyle is coming from the outside community and business world. She does not acknowledge the amount of intra-racial hair policing or socialization that goes on to prevent women from ever appearing in the corporate world with “nappy” hair. Although mainstream society has probably influenced the initial creation of some of these beauty ideals, African-descended women seem to be setting, perpetuating, and enforcing their own hair
beauty standards. This form of community policing curtails any deviation from these norms with silent disapproval and sometimes overt criticism as illustrated above by respondents’ number 141 and 191 stories. Also, this type of community policing is not limited to informal enforcement, Hampton University in Virginia, one of the nation’s premiere historically Black universities just recently instituted a policy banning dreadlocks, braids, and cornrows from the attire of its 5 year MBA students. The school stated that these styles were not acceptable in the business world and therefore they would not be accepted for the students. However, the ban against braids only applies to male students. These types of actions help to create young women’s ideas about what is and is not an acceptable hairstyle. But, also it is important to note that this belief is rooted in the reality that appearance does matter in America and Black women have been discriminated against because of their ethnic hairstyles. For example respondent 45 says,

I worked for the state as a correctional officer. I was told that because I wore micro-braids that my hair was a security threat. I had to remove them in order to continue as an employee. I removed them and went to a mid size afro. A week after I removed the braids, it was found discriminatory for them to have insisted that the braids be removed.

Numerous lawsuits have been filed against employers for their discriminatory practices regarding African-descended women’s hair. But they have not always been successful.

For example one of the first lawsuits filed against an employer came from Renee Rogers who worked for American Airlines in the late 1970s [Renee Rogers v. American Airlines, Inc., 527 F. Supplement 229 [1981]]. Rogers worked as an airport attendant and she was prohibited from wearing braids at work by a company policy against the hairstyle. In dismissing her claim the Court held that since her hair was not an immutable characteristic, like her race, it could be easily changed to conform to her employer’s dress code requirement. This attitude towards unacceptable Black hair has not changed much since the Rogers case. Hair unlike skin tone and facial features is viewed as the one venue that can be transformed into a palatable appearance for
mainstream culture. Black hair has the ability to be molded and crafted into an assortment of shapes and designs (see Figures 4-7 to 4-10 from Bronner Brothers Hair Show); however unusual hairstyles are often viewed as shocking or threatening in mainstream culture. It is here that African-descended women’s fears are confirmed when hairstyles are censured by employers, exacerbate legal problems, or mark individuals as otherwise socially dangerous. This fact is further illuminated by respondent number 118 who says that,

I wear my hair in twists and I was following my aunt in a highly secured area in DC and the police officer just asked her what she was there for and allowed her to go through, but once I pulled up to the security check he asked me to pop my trunk. He did not ask my aunt, who relaxes her hair to pop her trunk.

Alternatively respondent number 159 says,

My hair is loc'd and has been since my husband and I started dating. He is thoroughly convinced that my shoulder length, clean, styleable locs are unprofessional. I disagree. These locs aren't going anywhere anytime soon. I call him Uncle Ruckus (from the Boondocks cartoon). I'm not going to start hating myself or doubting myself because of him.

Perplexed by this seemingly high level of animosity against natural hair I asked my interview participant Cosette Walker for some clarity about how professional hair is crafted and why it matters. Walker says that, “We are up against a lot of questions if we select a natural hairstyle. People question your competence, they automatically think you are a radical troublemaker”[Cosette Walker interview with author, February 8, 2005]. This perception of what is and what is not professional hair was also closely linked to what people believed was an indication of social class.

**Hair=Social Class**

When I asked Tonya Hatton whether or not a Black woman’s hairstyle could tell you her social class the dialogue went as follows:

Rosado: What does someone’s hairstyle tell you about their socio-economic status?
Hatton: Well if I were to see someone with the waterfalls and the all different color then I would probably be like they are very ghetto fabulous.

Rosado: What is Ghetto fabulous?

Hatton: Just Man Just, I would define someone as being ghettofabulous as someone who thinks Ebonics is THE American language. Ahm thinks that having five kids by different fathers is an every day way of life. That believes that the only way they should get a check is from the government. Doesn’t believe in owning anything but a car with rims that’s a Cadillac is ok, . . . is acceptable. That thinks that their maintenance is first before their children’s. Doesn’t believe in education, or doesn’t have any. Doesn’t have a GED. GHETTO FAB!”[Tonya Hatton interview with author, February 8, 2005].

Tonya’s description of the type of Black woman she would expect to have one of the more flamboyant hairstyles was an honest description of the beliefs held about these styles and their symbolic meanings among some African-descended women (see Figure 4-9 Bronner Brothers Hair Show Bingo Hair). Often during my interview sessions women would sit quietly after being asked this question and they would ask me what I meant. They seemed to want to avoid saying what they really thought and after the camera was off they would launch into vivid descriptions of how, “ghetto” some hairstyles could make a person look. One example of this reluctance can be seen in the prelude to the hair story that one survey participant respondent number 76 gave me when she decided that she could not limit herself to my survey questions about professionalism and social class. She said,

This survey serves as just another reminder of how far I've come from the days where I believed, like most Black women, that I had the kind of hair that HAD to be relaxed. Not only do I no longer believe that (I've been natural for 9.5 years now), I find natural hair to be FAR more beautiful and versatile than relaxed hair. In fact the only thing that keeps me from being completely amazed by women who prefer unhealthy relaxed hair to healthy nappy hair is the simple fact that I too was once blind like them. And yes, it IS a form of blindness when you consider that most Black women have NO CLUE how to care for their natural hair because they have (practically) NO EXPERIENCE with it.

The last part of this survey was hard to complete because, as I said, I don't view Black women's hair the same way as most folks. But because I do live in this world and in this country (USA), I answered certain questions (what's more professional, socially acceptable, etc.) based on my experiences as a woman who chooses not to relax her hair. In my experience, most Black people would never know by looking at me that I've worked in
corporate America for the last 17 years. People see me and automatically assume that I'm a vegetarian tree-hugging radical Black Panther, even though I eat meat and dress pretty much the same as everyone else! Well . . . now that I'm going to be a full-time graduate student at the age of 40, I guess I'll fit in more easily in the academic world. *sigh*

I don't believe every Black woman needs to go natural and stay natural forever (though I'd love to see it). I do believe, however, that every Black woman ought to at least know how to care for her natural hair even if she CHOOSES not to wear it naturally. Along with quick-weaves, jheri curls, and extensions, relaxing is supposed to be a CHOICE, not a NECESSITY. I don't think I'll ever see a massive mind-shift amongst my people in my lifetime, but in the meantime I'll continue to enjoy my natural naps.

In general the interview research participants were apprehensive about labeling certain hairstyles as ghetto or even using the word ghetto, until I turned off the camera. So I have used Tonya’s description to represent all of the women who used this term under their breath and after the “official” videotaped interview had ended. So I essentially had to rely on what Robert Adams calls “hidden transcripts” or discourse that takes place “off stage” (Adams 2006: 57) to help to provide me with a clearer understanding about how Black hair is given meaning in this domain.

My research participants were reluctant about demeaning other Black women in a forum where they thought those comments were being recorded. This concern for protecting the Black female image adds to our understanding of how hair is seen as a powerful identifying marker in this group. Furthermore, this attempt at protecting the Black female image is also a testament to the fact that Black women are cognizant of the fragility associated with this often abused image.

One participant even said, “well you never know nowadays, the girl with the waterfall do could have a Ph.D.; it is not right to judge” [Cosette Walker interview with author, February 8, 2005]. Additionally, I began to think that my interview participants were not sufficiently stratified economically. So I actively sought more women from various economic backgrounds.

My research participants have strong beliefs about the meaning and importance of hair but because they possess a tacit understanding about how powerful these beliefs are, they attempted to shield the public from their more caustic views. So my field notes were used to extract the
comments made by my participants which reflect the difference between what was said “for the public” and what was said to me, as member of the cultural domain.

Hair Beliefs

Hair Beliefs, Identity and Folklore

All of the hair rituals and symbols lead to the fundamental system of beliefs African-descended women hold about Black hair. Black women believe hair is important because they have learned that it symbolizes their social affiliations, their sexuality, their professionalism, and ultimately their individual identity in public (see Figures 4-11 to 4-15). The hair rituals they learn as children reinforce the symbolism and their beliefs about how hair should be viewed and interpreted. They believe that Black hair is hard to manage, will not grow long, nappy hair is bad and good hair is really good. Evidence of one of the more disturbing beliefs about the importance of hair can be found in respondent number 181’s hair story.

As a teenager I tried to commit suicide by overdose on OTCs. In my first (and only) drug induced haze I was heard to have said that I wanted to have babies with my then Portuguese boyfriend so that I didn't have to spend hours combing her hair.

You'd think my potentially last moments would have been spent thinking about more important matters. Mind you, out of all the things I said, I'm surprised that stuck out the most in my mother's mind.

Now, more than 15 years later, I have a daughter (toddler) and a son (newborn). After finding the right products for her hair, spending time with her every morning is less of a chore and more of a bonding experience. Not sure what my sub-conscious was afraid of way back when.

How's that for a hair story?

She is right, how is that for a hair story! It is a story that reveals some of the innermost negative beliefs held by Black women concerning our beauty, identity, and self worth. It is the same belief that is embodied in the statement one participant made to me after seeing my husband’s photograph on my laptop, “girl your husband’s gonna make some pretty babies with some good
hair, you so lucky.” This participant had removed any possibility that my contribution to the gene pool would make our babies have bad or nappy hair. She meant it as a compliment, but she was referring to the deep rooted obsession and belief that good hair is more desirable than nappy hair. During my participant observation I was privy to conversations in which women would evaluate the desirability of partners who could give their babies good hair. Sometimes a man’s hair texture would balance out bad traits such as infidelity, employment status, or prior commitments (read girlfriend or wife).

Hair functions as a powerful identity marker for women of African descent in America. It tells other Black women who you are and what type of personality you might have. Hairstyles are imbued with messages in each strand. Cosette Walker speaks to this issue when she says,

> When I permed my hair I fit in a lot easier, I just didn’t know who I was. I use my hair to express myself, for example when I first started working at the Y [MCA] I wanted them to know I was an individual, I was not going to conform and play along. I was able to get the job done without being a cookie cut out. Hair matters to us. I think it matters to us. I think it is does, I think it is the loudest voice. I think it is a lot louder than our tongues can speak. Because if you uhm if you want to make a statement, you can make all kinds of statements with your hair. Women that wear lets say weave and they wear ah for the fourth of July red White and blue weave. You are making your statement. I think that every style that we wear makes a statement. [Cosette Walker interview with author, February 8, 2005]

For African-descended women hair is a statement about social class, professionalism, sexuality and identity. It is a form of cultural shorthand that women in the Black hair domain use to evaluate the status of the women around them. They use it to size each other up in social situations and they try to enforce the cultural standards on all who don’t comply. These beliefs are so engrained that the Black hair domain has its own set of folklore tales. The women admonish each other:

- When you get your hair done, don’t say thank you or your hair will fall out.
- Don’t let a lot of people touch your hair or their bad spirits may transfer to you.
- Don’t let two women do your hair at the same time or your hair will fall out.
• Don’t let pregnant women do your hair or it will fall out.

• If you cut your hair carefully dispose of the clippings or someone may use your hair to bring you harm

• Don’t wash your babies hair for at least six months after birth and you might help them keep their good baby hair.

• A woman’s hair is her glory and it should not be cut

Ultimately, Black women use these types of cautionary tales to cajole each other into hairstyle and texture compliance.

Conclusion

In this chapter my research participants to speak with their own voices and I have simply organized their narratives into the themes I identified when listening to all of their stories. This chapter discusses their rituals, an explanation of some of the symbolism associated with black hair and present a brave foray into the intimate beliefs held by Black women about their hair. During the first phase of my data collection I focused on talking to women and observing them during their interactions. I discussed their beliefs and ideas during my dialogic interviews, and focus group discussions or “hair parties.” From my analysis of these interactions I created the themes that organize this chapter. These themes are:

Hair Rituals
• Pain=Beauty
• Hair ritual=Happiness

Hair Symbols
• Hair=Race
• Good-n-Bad Hair
• Hair= Sexual Attractiveness and Orientation
• Hair=Social Class
• Hair=Professionism and SES

Hair Beliefs
• Hair=Identity and beliefs
The core rituals, symbols, and beliefs listed above form the basis of the cultural domain of Black hair. However, in order to further explore these themes I created an online survey and an online experiment that tap into each of these key symbols for Black hair culture. In the next chapter I will discuss the political economy of hair and results of this second phase of my data collection efforts where I attempted to elicit the parameters of the cultural domain of hair from women of African descent.
Figure 4-1 Washing that *Good Hair*-Craig and Nicole Rosado. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-2  Nashini Khan with good hair. Photo courtesy of Ryan Santoo and Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-3  Aunt Betty Beaver with Professional hair circa 1960. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-4  Grandmother Sybil Barnes with professional hair circa 1970. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-5  Radical Lesbian hair Sybil Dione Rosado1992. Photograph courtesy of Don L. Johnson.
Figure 4-6  Sybil Dione Rosado with “professional” hair circa 1994. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-7  Bronner Brothers Hair Show Feb 20, 2004. Photo courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-8  Bronner Brothers Hair Show Red Quick Weave Feb 20, 2004 Courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-9  Bingo Hair Bronner Brothers Hair Show Feb 20, 2004. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 4-10  Hat weave Bronner Brothers Hair Show Feb 20, 2004. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Some hairstyles have different meanings. This particular hairstyle is called a “bob.” This is the long version of the “bob.” Different hair lengths in this photo really don’t have a meaning, the hairstyle and the length of the hair fits her face. Does hair say anything about her politically? I don’t think it does. I mean she’s not doing anything as a politician or anything of that matter. But if she were to participate in something political, there may be some judgments about her hair. Does hair say anything about her socially? Yes, it does, it says I don’t feel like doing my hair in the mornings, I just want to get up and go. I chose this photo because it is one of the many unique hairstyles that I would wear myself. The photo doesn’t mean anything except of having the choice to wear braids when you want to. I think that in my community, having braids means you want your hair to grow more. Because, people say that if you keep your hair braided it will grow. Braids can also mean other things such as wearing them in a certain season of the year. Some may wear braids when it is cold. This is my analysis of this photo.—Unidentified undergraduate student response to digital storytelling assignment at Benedict College.
Different hairstyles have different meanings. Kourtney has the goddess braids, she has the Afrocentric look. She got extra length so her braids could hang long over her shoulders. She got her natural color to match the weave in her hair. Different texture are within your race, she has thick hair. Hair is your personal image, it represents you, and also your personality. African Americans usually get braids with weave attached, it helps grow your hair, and it’s a nice style. —Samantha Cromer response to digital storytelling assignment at Benedict College.
Figure 4-13  Daphnie Turner. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado. The next picture is of Daphnie Turner. She was a classmate and was working on the assignment just as well. Her hair was long natural, healthy, and black. You can tell that she is a simple person because she doesn’t change up her hair a lot. She keeps the long sleek look just like herself. —Unidentified undergraduate student response to digital storytelling assignment at Benedict College.
CHAPTER 5
SURVEY, EXPERIMENTAL AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION DATA

The presentation of data in this chapter is organized around the core themes of the Black hair domain that were revealed by the first portion of my research. I begin by discussing the data gleaned from an online survey that I conducted entitled, Black hair is . . . ? After reviewing the demographic data concerning the respondents who completed this survey I will move on and discuss the key themes generated from the women’s rituals, symbols and beliefs, these themes are:

- Hair Pain=Beauty
- Hair ritual=Happiness
- Hair=Race
- Good-n-Bad Hair
- Hair= Sexual Attractiveness and Orientation
- Hair=Social Class
- Hair=Professionalism and SES
- Hair=Identity and beliefs

Once the themes created from the survey are explored I will discuss the experimental data and how they relate to women’s beliefs about hair. Finally, this chapter ends with a discussion about how the political economy of hair combined with the rituals, symbols, and beliefs employed by African-descended women in America helps to shape the domain of Black hair.

Demographics

This research was restricted to gleaning the beliefs of women of African descent. Despite this fact numerous men approached me and asked why my research excluded them because they wanted to complete the survey. Eventually, I duplicated the online survey and created an alternate site that men could visit but, for dissertation purposes I will only focus on the women who responded. Of the 298 surveys completed, 292 respondents identified themselves as women.
Age by Geography

The first question I attempted to answer was how old my participants were and where they were from. This prompted me to create a cross tabulation chart of age by geographical origin. (see Figure 5-1). This chart shows that the women from the south were represented in all age groups and some older women in the North East participated. This chart also shows the U.S. Territory and foreign participation in the study. This chart shows that the majority of my participants were between the ages of 18 and 30, but despite the fact that I primarily handed out research request cards in the American South I have a healthy amount of participation from other geographical areas.

Age by Income

The next cross tabulation I performed was age against income (see Figure 5-2). This calculation reveals that the majority of the respondents were young and middle class or poor. 74.60 percent of the women under age 30 also earn $50,000 dollars or less per year. Here we can see that the women who were 18-30 had less money and as the age of the women increases so does their income. So the next question I asked was how women spend this income when it come to hair care?

Income by Hair Care Expenditures

When I conducted my participant observation I saw women spend hundreds of dollars at the beauty supply stores and at the hairdresser. Black women had also reported that they spent a lot of money on their hair when I did my preliminary research. So I decided to ask how much women were spending during a month on hair care products and beauty shop services in two different questions. Surprisingly, the majority of my respondents indicated that they spent very little money on their hair care products, and very little on their hair care services. So despite increases in income the majority of women reported only spending $11-20 dollars per month on
hair care products. However this monetary amount did not match my observations nor my interviews with black beauty supply store owners who said that the average bill in their stores was about $25 dollars per customer [interview with author, Feb 12, 2005]. So even the majority of women who reported earning over $100,000 dollars per year said they only spent about ten dollars per month on their hair care products.

Similar incongruence was found when I examined women’s reported expenditures on beautician services. Women who earned less than $10,000 per year reported that they spend about ten dollars per month at the beautician. However, this trend in low expenditures continued for women who earned up to $50,000 dollars per year. Based on this reporting only women who earned more than $50,000 dollars per year spent $21-40 dollars per month at the beautician. These data did not match my observations in beauty shops or my interviews of stylists. Stylists reported to me that they earned an average of $65 dollars per person for chemical procedures, $35 dollars for weekly maintenance procedures like a wash and set, $125 dollars for twists, and $150 dollars and up for weaves. These prices did not include tips or raw materials like human or synthetic hair [interview with author, March 15 2003].

I could conclude that either my research population has drastically changed its habits, that they were not reporting their true expenditures, or that large percentage of the sample of women who responded to my online survey have natural hairstyles or care for their hair themselves. Because I was not sure which of these dynamics was influencing my results I was glad that I had asked the women to list the name of their current hairstyles in the survey instrument. I coded these hairstyles and then sorted them for frequency. I found eleven major hairstyle categories. The women listed weaves (12), twists (52), perms (105), press and curl (8), naturals (23), knots
(3), hot combed (3), dreadlocks (15), cornrows (10), braids (16), and Afros (45) as the styles they were currently wearing.

A review of the women’s reported hairstyles reveals that although the largest group of women reported having a perm or relaxer based style, which traditionally cost more money than a natural style, there were an unusually high number of women who reported natural hairstyles.

Recoding the data to group the natural hairstyles and the processed hairstyles together reveals that my survey sample was heavily influenced by the fact that the majority of women who answered the questions were wearing natural hairstyles (see Figures 5-3 and 5-4). This means that they may have been answering accurately when they said that they did not spend a lot of money on their hair, as many of these styles could be created at home by the women themselves without the aid of beauticians or stylists.

So these demographic details are important for understanding why the data in the online survey do not necessarily correlate with the interview and focus group data. This also may be a reflection of the two populations targeted for this survey. The Alpha Kappa Alpha group reports high incomes and education group and we can assume that the natural hair forum members were more likely to have natural hairstyles. The split in hairstyles may be related to the differences between these two groups. However, it is clear that the sample produced by the online participants did not have the most common hairstyles found in the target population. So they were not actually representative, when it came to hairstyle, of the target population. Now I will focus on some of the data gleaned from the respondents’ answers to the fifty question survey.

**Survey Data**

**Hair Pain=Beauty**

The respondents were asked five questions that related to their experiences with hair that could be classified as painful. Not all of these questions deal with physical pain because pain was
coded to include difficulty and discomfort. The key here was to attempt to uncover how women felt about their hair. The first question is, “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. Black women have to pay more for hair care services than White women because our hair is harder to care for.” On the chart this question was coded as HCare as an abbreviation for the concept of Black hair being harder to care for (see Figure 5-5 Hair =Pain Chart). The second question is “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. As far as Black women’s hairstyles go hair that is not relaxed is extremely difficult to care for.” In the chart this second question is coded as HNotRelax, this is an abbreviation for the concept that hair which is not relaxed is hard to care for. The third question in this theme is, “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. Natural Black hair is as easy to manage as natural White hair.” This is recoded in the chart as Heasy to represent the concept that natural Black hair is as easy to manage as White hair. The fourth question is, “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. As far as Black hair care goes, hair relaxers are one of the best things that ever happened to Black women.” This question is coded as RelaxerG to represent the concept that relaxers are good. Finally, the fifth question was related to the pains associated with Black hair. I asked “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. As far as Black women’s hair goes, hair that has no chemical or heat applied to it is more difficult to care for.” This question is coded NatBad on the chart to represent the concept that natural hair is harder to care for and therefore bad.

This chart reveals that 75 percent of the women disagreed with the concept that Black hair is harder to care for in the NatBad category. Similarly, 85 percent of them disagreed with the concept that natural Black hair is hard to care for in the HNotRelax category. But, when the question about Black hair being more difficult to care for is asked differently, the women don’t
agree as clearly. Only 53 percent of the women agreed that natural Black hair is as easy to manage as natural White hair in the Heasy category. When the women are asked about the relaxer being one of the best things, their numbers realign clearly and 75 percent of them disagree with this statement. Finally, when the NatBad category is reviewed we find the women’s beliefs are more clearly aligned again. When the women are asked whether natural hair is more difficult to care for 81 percent disagree with this statement. So while the women seemed reluctant to say that natural hair is difficult or bad, they were more willing to admit that they perceive Black hair as being “not as easy” to manage as Caucasian type hair.

**Hair Ritual=Happiness**

In the hair ritual equals happiness category I only tried one survey question about the women’s daughters. It seemed important for me to ask the women how they feel about relaxing their daughter’s hair. Since the beauty shop ritual seemed to be such an important factor for so many women I wanted to know what they felt was an acceptable entry point for their daughters into this world. The question is, “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement. It is best to start relaxing a little girl’s hair when she first starts elementary school.

Ninety six percent of the respondents disagreed with this statement. Looking back at the questions now I think I should have taken a less provocative stance. I had seen the elementary school aged girls in the beauty shop and I had assumed that their mothers were allowing them to get relaxers, in reality these girls may have been getting their hair pressed and curled (see Figure 5-6). Little girls seemed to revel in replicating their mothers adult hairstyles, in the United States and in Ghana, West Africa (see Figure 5-7). I found numerous grade school girls who were having adult styles crafted on their small heads. So my perception of what was happening in the field may have been tainted by my assumptions, which are reflected by the respondents
overwhelming disapproval with this concept. Additionally, I should have asked more questions specifically about whether hair rituals are rewarding.

**Hair=Race**

For this theme the question that was asked is, “Please tell me how you feel about the following statement, No matter what a person looks like I can usually figure out if they are Black by looking at the texture of their hair. Interestingly, despite the fact that this was a common statement during the interviews and focus group the women who responded to the survey were divided on this issue. Fifty one percent of the women disagreed with this statement and 49 percent agreed. So again the survey data failed to support the interview, focus group and participant observation data.

**Good-n-Bad Hair**

In this thematic unit two questions are asked to gauge the respondents’ perceptions of good and bad hair. First the women are asked their level of agreement with the statement that, “In the Black community “good” hair has been defined as hair that is easy to comb because it is straight, silky, and does not have tight curls” (see Figure 5-8). The second question they are asked is, “In the Black community “nappy” hair is defined as hair that is difficult to comb because it is very curly and cotton like.” Eighty eight percent of the women agreed with the first statement about the definition of good hair and 86 percent of the women agreed with the definition of nappy hair (see Figure 5-9). Moreover, 93 percent of the respondents did not think that any Black woman would desire nappy hair and 72 percent of them believed that Black women would actually prefer having what they call straight or good hair.

**Hair=Sex**

The question that was used to engage this thematic unit was, “Generally speaking, Black men seem to be more attracted to women with straight or relaxed or straightened hair than to un-
straightened hair.” Fifty nine percent of the women agreed with this statement. This indicates that the women believe that men find straight hair more attractive than what is perceived as nappy hair. In order to more fully understand these phenomena I input the data I received into a multidimensional scaling program, called Permap, to uncover the hidden structure residing in the data set (Heady and Lucas 1997). This perceptual mapping software conveys information about the perceived relationships between the objects and it reveals object to object relationships based on their proximity (Heady and Lucas 1997). The visual map shows that Jheri curls and weaves are grouped together when it comes to attractiveness (see Figure 5-10). Then twists, natural hair and dreadlocks are together, next micro braids and relaxers and finally cornrow styles are alone. This map show that the women perceive the styles that are grouped together to be of similar attractiveness. These survey results matched the data gleaned from the participant observation and interviews. Future research might ask men if they actually prefer straight hair to see if the women’s assumptions are valid.

Hair=Professionalism

In this section of the data it becomes even more evident that the respondents are most likely wearing natural hairstyles. Most of their answers are in direct opposition to the statements made by women during interviews and focus groups. The survey women agreed on almost all of the questions regarding hair and professionalism. First when they were asked whether or not a woman who relaxes her hair is trying to look more professional; 85 percent of the women disagreed with this notion. Ninety six percent of them said they would hire someone who had dreadlocks, 91 percent said that they did not believe a woman should remove her braids for her employer, 98 percent said she should not relax her hair at her employers request and 88 percent said that they did not believe that you had to conform in order to move up in the work world. But despite all of these positive beliefs the respondents espoused about natural hair and employment
they were split when it came to whether or not they agreed that natural hair is acceptable in the workplace. For both of the questions that address the acceptance of natural hair by people in the workplace, the respondents were split in half. So although they indicate that they personally believe that natural hair in the workplace is good and acceptable they admit that they are unsure about how the workplace views these types of hairstyles. Here we see the split between the personal and the public perception of hair. Inputting the data regarding the social acceptability of hairstyles from the survey into the Permap program showed that the women felt Jheri curls and relaxers had the greatest proximity difference. Twists were closer to relaxer, which probably indicates that this style is seen as more acceptable. Weaves, short hair, and cornrows are grouped together in the center of the graph, indicating their similarity and dreadlocks are near the center but they pedunculated away from the main group (see Figure 5-11). When I input the data regarding what the women thought were professional hairstyles into the Permap program the results were more clearly grouped (see Figure 5-12). Jheri curls and dreadlocks were away from the main group and so were weaves and cornrow hairstyles. The hairstyles that were grouped together as professional were relaxers, micro braids, twists, and the short natural. This indicates that women may see styles like cornrows, dreadlocks and weaves as being socially acceptable (see Figure 5-11), but they do not see these hairstyles as professional (see Figure 5-12).

Hair=Identity

Once again the survey answers contradict the focus group and interview participants. Based on the answers provided to these questions hair is not related to identity.

Seventy two percent of the women disagreed with the statement that the way a Black woman wears her hair is an indication of her racial pride. This category is H=Pride on the chart (see Figure 5-13). Furthermore, 89 percent of the women disagreed with the statement that hairstyle is an indication of political activism. Finally, 90 percent of the women disagreed with
the statement that having a relaxer means that a woman is trying to deny her racial heritage. The Permap shows that women grouped their hairstyles into two main categories, ethnic and not ethnic (see Figure 5-14). Interestingly, relaxed hair is grouped together with cornrows, twists, micro braids, and dreadlocks while weaves and jheri curls are seen as being less ethnic. This data would seem to indicate that having relaxed hair does not symbolize a loss of identity because relaxed hair is seen as a natural style (see Figure 5-15 to 5-16).

The conflicts between the data collected during participant observation, focus groups, interviews and the survey data prompted me to explore other ways to ask my participants about their beliefs. I also realized that I needed to recruit from a more diverse population. I believe that a large number of my respondents in this initial survey were recruited from www.nappuality.com a natural hair discussion forum. I also believe that these women responded more readily because they were already on the Internet discussing their beliefs about hair. These reflections guided my creation of an online hair experiment.

**Hair Experiment Data**

The Black hair experiment consists of an online survey where respondents are asked to make judgment statements about a woman based on her hairstyle. There are twelve photographs that the respondent reviews, answering the same questions about each photograph (see Figures 5-17 to 5-28). The woman’s face and demeanor remain the same in the photographs, and the only stimulus is that the hairstyle changes. Demographically this group did not vary as much as the initial survey. Seventy six percent of the respondents earn less than thirty four thousand dollars per year and this is probably related to the younger age of this sample. Seventy three percent of the respondents were between the ages of 18 and 24, but women from each age group answer the survey (see Figure 5-29).
Furthermore, because I did not deploy this survey online with the same Web Site, I ended up depending on snowball and convenience sampling. So, these respondents primarily came from the American South, where they encountered me, or one of their friends sent them the survey. It is important to note that even though I did not actively recruit outside of the state of South Carolina this survey was transmitted via the social network of women discussing hair to areas all over and beyond the geographical bounds of the United States.

Seventy eight percent of the respondents in this experiment have less than one year of college education and 87 percent are single. The women classified themselves as predominately Christian, (89 percent), and politically liberal (38 percent), or Black feminist (24 percent). These demographics become important because the respondents are asked to judge these same socioeconomic questions about the woman in the photograph. The respondents were given the following instructions,

This survey involves you giving your honest opinion of a woman in a photo. The woman will be the same but her hairstyle will change. There are 8 questions about you, 12 photos to view with 9 questions to answer about each photo. Then finally there are 7 summary questions and 1 final question for you. Detailed Instructions: In total there are 125 questions and the survey should take about 45 minutes to complete. Remember it is important to honestly evaluate each photo and tell me what her appearance says about her. Think about it like this--If you saw her on the street and you had to answer these questions, what would you think of her in your mind? Honesty is the only correct answer! Scroll down the page and answer the questions. If you need to look at the photo again, scroll back up the page. Don't press the back button on your computer. If you skip a question, the computer will notify you and ask you to answer it for the survey. When you reach the end of the page hit the submit button and it will turn to the next page. Once you click on the submit button at the bottom of the page you will not be able to go back. There are six pages to complete in the survey. When you are finished you will see a collage of all the photos and a thank you message. You will also be able to review other participants’ responses to the survey. If you are a student at my college, then this final collage is the page you will be required to print in order to earn bonus points for your class.

**Photo Number One: Short Relaxed with Tint**

Photo number one displays the woman with short relaxed hair that is slightly tinted on the edges (see Photo 5-17). The data from photo number one revealed that women believed her to be
a student (30 percent) or a food service worker (21 percent), politically apathetic (36 percent),
with less than one year of college (41 percent), a Christian (93 percent), whose primary form of
entertainment is going to dance clubs (26 percent) or talking on her cell phone (24 percent). She
has a relaxed personality¹ (52 percent), she is probably from the south, and she is between the
ages of 18 and 24. Overwhelmingly, the respondents thought that economically she was poor or
working poor (60 percent).

**Photo Number Two: Medium Relaxed Bob**

Photo number two shows the woman with medium length permed or relaxed hair in a cut
that is usually referred to as a bob (see Figure 5-18). The data from photo number two reveals
that the women believed she is working class (38 percent) or working poor (31 percent). She
works in the retail industry (24 percent) or customer service (17 percent). She has one or more
years of college, but no degree (26 percent). She is a contemporary Black feminist (36 percent),
Christian (91 percent), who spends her leisure time going to dance clubs (18 percent) and having
her nails done (17 percent). She has a type B personality because she is probably from the south
and she is about 18-24 years old (65 percent).

**Photo Number Three: Short Relaxer with Burgundy Streaks**

Photo number three shows the woman with a short perm or relaxer that is highlighted with
burgundy streaks (see Figure 5-19). The data from photo number three reveals that the women
believed she is poor (46 percent) or working poor (33 percent), She works in the food service
industry (35 percent) or she is unemployed (21 percent). She has a high school degree (39
percent) or she is still in high school (24 percent). She is a politically apathetic (30 percent),

¹The personality types used in this experiment were adapted from the psychological literature (Azibo 1983,
The traditional type A, B, C, and D typology was presented to two focus groups and during these interactions the
research participants crafted agreed upon definitions for the different personality types they thought were pertinent
to the research.
Christian (83 percent), who spends her leisure time going to dance clubs (54 percent) and watching television (24 percent). She has a type B personality because she is probably from the south and she is about 18-24 years old (61 percent).

**Photo Number Four: Medium Length Curly Natural**

Photo number four shows the woman with medium length curly hair that could be natural (see Figure 5-20). The data from photo number three reveals that the women believe she is working class (32 percent). She is currently a student (32 percent) who has either one or more years of college but no terminal degree (39 percent). However, twenty one percent of the women believe she has a terminal graduate or professional degree. She is a Black Feminist (34 percent), Christian (69 percent), who spends her leisure time reading (37 percent). She may have a type B (28 percent), or type A (27 percent) personality, because she is probably from New York (21 percent). She is about 18-24 years old (48 percent) or she may be a little older like 25-30 years old (40 percent).

**Photo Number Five: Blonde Shoulder Length Asymmetrical Cut**

Photo number five shows the woman with a shoulder length asymmetrical cut perm that is highlighted with blonde streaks (see Figure 5-21). The data from photo number three reveals that the women believed her to be working poor (30 percent) or working class (30 percent). She may be a student (20 percent) or she works in retail or customer service (15 percent) each. She has a high school degree (22 percent) or she just might be in college (40 percent). She is a politically apathetic (27 percent), Christian (85 percent), who spends her leisure time having her hair and nails done (29 percent) and going to dance clubs (21 percent). She has a type B personality (43 percent) because she is probably from the south and she is between 18-24 years old (51 percent) or 25-30 years old (38 percent).
Photo Number Six: Burgundy Braid Extensions

Photo number six shows the woman with braid extensions that are highlighted with burgundy dye (see Figure 5-22). The data from photo number six reveals that the women believed she is poor (43 percent), she works in the food service industry (31 percent) or she is unemployed (21 percent). She barely has a high school degree (31 percent) or she is still in high school (30 percent). She is a politically apathetic (35 percent), Christian (77 percent), who spends her leisure time going to dance clubs (21 percent) and watching television (20 percent). She has a type B personality (50 percent) because she is probably from the south and she is about 18-24 years old (57 percent).

Photo Number Seven Dreadlocks

Photo number seven shows the woman with dreadlocks or locks (see Figure 5-23). The data from photo number seven reveals that the women believed that she is working class (27 percent) or working poor (26 percent), she is a student (21 percent) who is currently working on a graduate degree (21 percent). She may even have her master’s degree (7 percent). She is a Black nationalist (37 percent), Christian (49 percent), who spends her leisure time reading (38 percent). She has a type A personality and this is why she has so much education. They are unclear about where she is from, but they think she is about 25-30 years old (51 percent).

Photo Number Eight Long Perm

Photo number eight shows the woman with long permed or relaxed straight hair (see Figure 5-24). The data from photo number eight reveals that the women believed that she is working class (34 percent) or middle class (21 percent), she has a professional career (24 percent) because she is a college graduate (23 percent). She is a contemporary liberal (30 percent), Christian (84 percent), who spends her leisure time having her nails done (21 percent) and shopping for new clothes (20 percent) when she is not at the gym (19 percent). She has a
type B personality because she is a southern belle. Finally (54 percent) of them think she is over 25.

**Photo Number Nine Curly Hair**

Photo number nine shows the woman with curly hair that could be a quick weave, or a Jheri curl (see Figure 5-25). The data from photo number nine reveals that the women believed that she is working class (30 percent), she is a student (22 percent) who is currently trying to graduate from high school (22 percent). She is a contemporary liberal (27 percent), Christian (80 percent), who spends her leisure time watching television (22 percent). She has a type B personality and she is probably about 18-24 years old (44 percent).

**Photo Number Ten Burgundy Layered Perm**

Photo number ten shows the woman with a perm or relaxed style that has been cut into different layers and then dyed burgundy (see Figure 5-26). The data from photo number ten reveals that the women believed that she is poor (32 percent) or working poor (32 percent), she works in the food service (21 percent) or retail industry (21 percent). She has a high school education (30 percent) but she is politically apathetic (32 percent). She is a Christian (78 percent), who spends her leisure time going to dance clubs (32 percent) and having her hair and nails done (24 percent). She has a type B personality which works out well in the south, and she is about 18-24 years old (56 percent).

**Photo Number Eleven Platinum Blonde Perm**

Photo number eleven shows the woman with a perm or relaxed style that has been dyed platinum amber blonde and cut into a bob style (see Figure 5-27). The data from photo number eleven reveals that the women believed that she is poor (33 percent) or working poor (31 percent), she works entertainment industry (22 percent) when she is not unemployed (17 percent). Her highest level of education is high school (52 percent) but she is politically apathetic
(31 percent). She is a Christian (76 percent), who spends her leisure time going to dance clubs (35 percent) and having her hair and nails done (21 percent). She has a type B personality which works out well in the south, and she is about 18-24 years old (53 percent).

**Photo Number Twelve Long Curly Perm**

Finally, when she appears in photograph 12 the woman has a perm or relaxed style that has been cut into different layers and curled (see Figure 5-28). The data from photo number twelve reveals that the women believed that she is working class (26 percent) or perhaps even middle class (21 percent), she has a professional career (27 percent) because she has graduated from college (24 percent), and she may have a Masters degree (15 percent). She is a contemporary liberal (32 percent) who comes from a strong Christian background (83 percent). She spends her leisure time reading (26 percent) and exercising (20 percent). She is the only type C personality in the group (31 percent) but she could be a type D seeking stability and security in life (28 percent). They are not sure where she is from but not only is she the richest, best educated, individual; she is also the oldest because she is probably 31-40 years old.

**Most Ethnic Appearance**

After the questions are asked about each of the photos individually the respondents are presented with all of the photos and asked to sort them based on what they thought of the women as a group. They were asked to vote on several key categories. When asked who was the most ethnic out of all of the photos 23 percent of the women selected photo number seven (see Figure 5-23). In this photo the woman has dreadlocks and the research participants seemed to believe that dreadlocks were the most ethnic hairstyle and that by wearing this style the woman herself became more ethnic. Nineteen percent of the respondents selected photo number four as the second most ethnic style (see Figure 5-20). This hairstyle appears to be more like what the women called nappy or natural hair, but it was not perceived to be as ethnic as dreadlocks.
**Most Professional/Conservative/Attractive Appearance**

In photo number eight (see Figure 5-24), the model was perceived to be the most professional (72 percent), conservative (30 percent) and attractive (50 percent). This is interesting because in photo number eight the model is wearing the longest and straightest hairstyle out of all the photos. So despite the responses received about natural hair being perceived as beautiful in the Black hair survey, the experiment data shows how women’s selected straight long hair as the main symbol of beauty and professionalism. Photo 12 (see Figure 5-28) came in second as the most professional person (36 percent), and second as the most conservative person (20 percent).

So here again we find the women in the survey validating long hair that appears to be relaxed as the symbol of professionalism. Women also believed that the wearer of this hairstyle was richer and more educated that the members of her cohort with shorter or colored hair.

**Most Ghetto Appearance**

In attempting to define professional hairstyles my questions went beyond what is professional into the concept of what appears to be unprofessional or what my respondents called “ghetto.” Thirty six percent of the women selected photo number 11 as the person the women thought was most “ghetto” out of the group of photos (see Figure 5-27), and 14 percent of the women believed it was photo number six (see Figure 5-22). Hair color could be influencing the women’s perceptions photo 11 and six, but photos one, two, three, five, and ten all have hairstyles with added color. Yet photos 11 and six are the only photos where the hair is fully lightened a significant shade. So perhaps color is a key symbol women look for when assessing social class and professionalism within the cultural domain of hair.
Most Likely Real Hair

Finally when the women were asked to state which hairstyle was the model’s real hair 33 percent of them believed that it was photo number four (see Figure 5-20), and 20 percent said it was photo number one (see Figure 5-17). The survey participants seemed to believe that the model has short or natural hair. It is unclear why they made this assumption, and many participants were genuinely surprised to learn that her real hair is depicted in photo number seven (see Figure 5-23).

The photos and the respondents’ perceptions of them reveal the symbolic meaning attached to hairstyles for women of African descent. During interviews when the women were asked to state the symbolic meaning of styles they were most often unable to articulate clear meanings. They were even reluctant to state their negative beliefs when they were questioned in person and on the survey. But, presenting these women with visual cues allowed me to tap into their true beliefs and uncover the symbolic meanings associated with hairstyles. The same women who said they did not think hair could be equated to politics also said the woman with dreadlocks was probably an Afrocentric Black nationalist (37 percent). Similarly, photo number four of the model with hair that appears to be a natural hairstyle, (see Figure 5-20), is assumed to be a Black feminist by 34 percent of the survey participants. So in direct contradiction to the survey data that said hair had nothing to do with politics we see that when the women evaluate another Black woman’s hair they assign political meaning to the style.

Participant Observation on the Political Economy of Black Hair

The symbolic adornment of hair has been in practice for at least 3000 years because it is well documented that the Egyptians used wool, cotton, and human hair to create wigs and hair extensions that served as indicators of their social status (Sagay 1983; Seiber 2000). This symbolic adornment has been and continues to be a widespread practice throughout all of Africa...
and the African Diaspora. So attributing meaning and status to individuals based on hair and hairstyles is not a new phenomenon. However, analyzing the meaning of hair based on the data collected in this project allowed me to reflect on the financial implications of hair as a business in America. Black Hair care products are a billion dollar industry in this country alone, so the meaning of Black hair is inextricably linked to money. Black women spend a lot of money on their hair and this is one of the reasons hair matters so much to them. So I began reviewing the global, political and historic processes that are manifested in local contexts regarding hair. This prompted me to explore the economic context in which hair is embedded in Black culture. To that end this chapter examines the political economy of hair through two foci, first the global human hair trade and second state imposed licensing requirements for hair braiders. Here the discussion turns to how daily life functions to create webs of meaning in a local and global arena. I used the data collected online to reflect on the meaning and valuation process attached to the hair and hairstyles Black women pay so much money to achieve.

**Human Hair Trade**

One of the most interesting components of the hair industry is the human hair trade that originates in Asia. Human hair is donated or sold primarily by Asian women and then this hair is transformed into wigs, human hair wefts for weaves, and loose human hair for braiding. This human hair trade is important to understand because the majority of the styles created and worn by African-descended women depend on human or synthetic hair as its raw material. For this research I focused on one route that the human hair trade takes out of South Asia. I traveled to the Tirumala Tirupati Balaji Temple - one of India's most conservative (and perhaps richest) temples. This is where I began investigating how women travel to fulfill their vows and offer their hair to Sri Venkateshwara, the presiding deity of the temple.
In this place of surrendering human hair to Lord Venkateswaraswami, about 4,000 of the 50,000 people who are tonsured, or undergo the practice of ritually shaving hair from the individuals head, are women (Messias 2005). Over five hundred barbers work at Kalyana Katta and tonsuring takes place 24 hours a day (Messias 2005) (see Figure 5-30). The hair from these women and other women like them who are devotees of Lord Venkateswaraswami are gathered together by the barbers in and around the shrine, given to the priests and then sold to hair factories. The ritual tonsuring itself is a symbolic practice of completely surrendering ones’ ego at the feet of the deity. Pilgrims undergo tonsuring as a way to fulfill vows, made to ensure the health of their loved ones, and ask for other blessings. Vows can be fulfilled by several methods including:

- tonsuring,
- walking from the foothills to the temple,
- angapradakshinam, a form of prostrating and rolling around the temple,
- tulabharam, offering ones weight in coins, food, or other valuables, and
- niluvudopidi, offering all one has at the moment including clothes.

Traveling to Tirupati from Chennai is a four hour journey via automobile. Many tours leave at 5 a.m. to make it to the tallest of seven hills where the shrine is located in time for a full day of standing in line for the darshan (viewing of the deity). Arriving at the shrine I am surprised that men are being routinely rousted from their vehicles and searched, while women are allowed to sit and watch this spectacle unmolested. As my driver and companion are searched I think about how fortunate I am to be a woman at this moment and precluded from suspicion of malfeasance. Then we began the long drive up the winging mountain road past the pilgrims who were walking to fulfill their vows.
The hamlet surrounding the temple serves as living quarters for the throngs of pilgrims who visit the shrine each day. Devotees are given a choice of locations for tonsuring and prior to approaching the barber they can purchase a small tonsuring kit that includes their own personal razor. Outside of the temple the barbers charge a small fee for tonsuring, but tonsuring in Kalyana Katta is free (see Figure 5-31). The barbers carefully inspected me as I entered their workspace. Having acquired permission from the local authorities to video tape, once I remove my slippers I am welcomed but the barbers are still wary about my motives. They kept asking me was I sure that I did not want to have a tonsuring performed. I assured them that I was going to make my vow by walking from the foothills to the temple, but they seemed suspicious.

The sparse barber shop has no seats and all of the barbers sit around the edges of the room with a small gutter separating them from the pilgrim. Devotees sit on the floor and stretch their bodies forward in supplication to the barbers who quickly dispose of their locks (see Figure 5-32). Standing on moistened and dank concrete drains I watched as hair and cleansing water swirled about my feet. Shorn hair is perceived as dirty and the pilgrims avoid touching the hair after it is clipped from their bodies. The hair falls into the gutters and is then swept together for collection and donation (see Figure 5-33).

Children are often brought to be tonsured in order to ensure their health and wellbeing. However, several of the children I observed being tonsured did not seem to enjoy the process, and they had to be held still by their fathers or mothers as they cried. However, after the tonsuring procedures were completed I was often enlisted to take photographs of the family with a child proudly displaying their shorn heads (see Figures 5-34).

Leaving the hamlet I began my journey into the shrine. Despite the fact that there was a long line to enter Kalyana Katta the assumption that I, an obvious outsider, was there to receive
tonsuring prompted temple authorities to usher me to the front of the line (see Figure 5-30). These actions may have also been the result of my status as an outsider who appeared to be the focus of a film crew. Upon entering the temple I began to explain my true intentions which caused a minor commotion. I was instructed to wait in the office while they attempted to secure permission for me to videotape the inner workings of the shrine. My request to do research had not specifically indicated that I wanted to enter the temple, and this is what caused the confusion. Eventually, I was told that I could not videotape inside the shrine, and I could only enter if I intended to be tonsured. So my tonsuring journey ended in the office of Kalyana Katta. This did not dissuade me from visiting the rest of the property and observing the other pilgrims. I went on to watch as pilgrims searched through the large number of hats available from vendors on the grounds (see Figure 5-35). Numerous people approached me touching my hair and then their own bald heads as if to ask, “when will you fulfill your vow, when will you be tonsured?” Asking women why they had selected tonsuring to fulfill their vows proved to be futile. The vows are personal and how you choose to fulfill them seem to be just as personal. One woman told me in an incredulous tone that if she told me she would risk not having her wishes fulfilled. Apparently, even though I appeared to be an outsider people expected me to know proper protocol regarding worship. After completing my walk to the temple, I ended my day with a traditional darshan. Outside the temple the barbers clean efficiently and collect all of the donations for transfer to the temple. Once the hair is gathered and the pilgrims are gone, the temple sells the hair to hair factories like Raj Impex: Pioneers in the Human Hair Industry (see Figure 5-36).

Raj Impex began as a simple minerals export company. But, after being contacted by Japanese and Koreans business in the market for human hair they changed the company focus to
the export of hair. Making contact with the company was difficult and securing an interview and
tour of the factory proved to be almost impossible. I submitted letters, made numerous calls, and
drove past the company headquarters in my efforts to make contact with the owners. Eventually,
however, my efforts paid off and I was granted an interview by the president of the company Mr.
Benjamin Cherian. Mr. Cherian allowed me to come to the main office and tour the small
satellite factory which is located in the headquarters. He explained to me that I had been
unsuccessful in attempting to secure an interview because I was calling the actual hair factory
which is located outside of town and not the corporate office. During our interview he said that
he believes India exports hair worth about $300 million each year. Cherian, a Harvard educated
accountant said that he never expected hair would be such a lucrative business. But, the long hair
from South India is in such demand that it keeps the prices high. Additionally, for years hair
from China was banned by the United States so the demand for raw hair from the Indian market
grew. Mr. Cherian also said that he believes that the majority of his products end up in the hands
of women of African descent. The bulk of his products come from the Tiruparti temple I visited
earlier in Andhra Pradesh. Donated hair is sorted into four classifications; straight, curly, wavy,
and silky (see Figures 5-37 to 5-38). But, the most expensive hair is know as remy because it is
cut directly from the scalp and the hair has a clear head and tail. Most of the hair collected from
donations ends up being mixed together so it is impossible to make all of the heads and tails
match, this causes the hair to tangle more frequently and appear wavier and less straight.
However, remy hair has never been mixed up so it is much more costly. Remy hair also tends to
be longer because women have waited for years to tonsure their hair.

Mr. Cherian explained to me that the remy hair he was showing me would probably be sold
to someone in Hollywood because the one weft of 48 inch long hair might cost upwards of
$1500 dollars (see Figure 5-38). He speculated that a famous star would purchase this hair via one of the salons he exports to for a long extension job or perhaps even a wig.

After the hair is sorted from head to tail and then organized for length it is processed and raked to ensure that it has a consistent appearance and texture (see Figure 5-39). This is necessary because the hair that eventually is sewn together to form a weft for weaving, braiding, or other types of extensions, is a combination of contributions from several different women (see Figure 5-40). When I asked Mr. Cherian how much of the $300 million in Indian hair exports his company was responsible for he laughed and, “not nearly enough.” He said that he simply hoped that people continue to desire human hair over synthetic blends. This million dollar industry translates into a billion dollar industry once the products reach women of African descent all over the world (see Figure 5-41)

One of the most tangible indications that hair is important to women of African descent is the fact that their obsession with the extension of their natural hair length has fueled a global market in the trade of human hair. To efface their egos women in South India sacrifice their hair after making sacred vows to their god. This sacrifice is a symbol of the erasure of their pride because even they prize their hair. The hair is processed, packaged, and sold globally to be consumed by women of African descent in local markets. So this very local and personal sacrifice from one culture becomes embedded in the economic reality and culture of African-descended women. Indian women use the hair to show humility and African-descended women purchase the hair to titivate themselves. With these diametrically opposed goals hair becomes the contact point between two cultures. So although women of African descent in the United States make up less that ten percent of the population they account for 70 percent of the wigs and extensions and 33 percent of the hair care products sold (Jones 2006; Ranen 2006).
When I asked my research participants if they knew where the human hair they covet so much originates, not one of them actually knew. Some women speculated that it may have come from Japan or Europe, and some even said that they had heard it was not really human hair, but horse hair. Then they would pull out a particularly coarse strand for me to examine as proof. But it doesn’t really matter where the hair comes from, because the women of African descent use the hair to, “transform their appearances and craft new identities” [Reena Goldththree interview with author, July 2005]. Human hair is a form of material culture that represents both sacrifice and transformation, it creates symbolic capital for the Asian women who sacrifice and the African-descended women who purchase it. Moreover, it creates real capital for the Asians who sell it.

One of the primary reasons that hair matters so much is because it serves such an important function both socially and economically. Hair matters because it makes and costs money and it makes and cost so much money because it matters. The circular logic involved in this thinking can only be defeated by revealing the true motives behind attaching so much meaning to hair. In America some of these motives can be traced to the fact that the beauty industry has been a fundamental financial component of many Black communities.

Historically, the hair care industry has helped to foster financial independence during times of segregation and support to Black communities by serving as a major source of income for women and men of African descent (Bundles 2001). The Black hair care market helped to create some of this communities first millionaires and the money made was oftentimes reinvested into the community (Bundles 2001). In 2004 sales of Black hair products exceed 1.7 billion dollars, not including synthetic and human hair (Jones 2006). Beauticians and stylists are still highly segregated and the money spent in these shops usually ends up in the hands of women who look...
like the purchasers. However, the traditionally Black-owned hair care supply industry has been inundated with Korean owners and it is estimated that in 2007 90 percent of the 8 billion dollar hair care and cosmetics industry is controlled by Koreans (Merritt 2007). A poignant example of this fact can be found in Tiffani Odige’s approach to purchasing hair from Koreans. Tiffani is a Black woman in Cambridge, MA who estimates that she spends $2,500 to $3,000 a year on hair and hair products and she jokes about having to “go to the Koreans to get her hair” (Jones 2006). So women of African descent are fully aware that the hair care industry no longer provides the same level of financial benefit to their community, but they have been unable to relinquish the symbolic value placed on hair. Currently, Koreans control 80 percent of the distribution of Black hair care products in America and 70 percent of the retail market (Jones 2006; Ranen 2006). So although women of African descent are still the primary stylists, Koreans control the market for Black beauty supplies. So the level of importance attached to hair has not declined even though it does not benefit their community in the same way it did in the past. This reality prompted me to investigate one of the last lines of revenue from human hair that is still situated within the Black community, hair braiding.

**Black Braiders Fight**

Hair braiding is one of the first cultural games you learn as a female child of African descent. Little girls are admonished, “baby don’t let anyone play in your hair,” as they go to meet their playmates [Angela Blalock interview with author and daughter, May 2005]. Angelica had to be told this because “playing in hair” is a favored game that occasionally results in hair mishaps. New styles are achieved that had previously only been tried on dolls, sometimes a lopsided haircut is given, but mostly the girls engage in attempts at hair braiding perhaps even undoing hours of their mothers hard work. This fundamental play serves as the starting point for indoctrination into Black hair culture. Little girls learn who has “good” hair and who has “nappy
or bad” during these interactions. They also begin to learn how to manipulate their ethnically derived hair texture. They emulate their mothers braiding styles and practice what they have experienced on their dolls and friends. This generational learning is the basis for the majority of the artistic cornrow and braid styles we see on display in African communities. It only makes sense then that the research data in this project show that braids are considered an ethnic or cultural hairstyle. So when I went to interview women in their homes I was not surprised to find little girls braiding each other’s hair in yards, and teenage girls earning fees for braiding younger girl’s hair. However, in many states these teenage girls who are practicing a fundamental element of their culture are breaking the law.

They are breaking the law because in many states this type of interaction has been deemed illegal without a state license. Seventeen states have created licensing programs which require anyone who earns money from braiding hair to be trained as a cosmetologist or have some other type of state certification in order to braid hair. The problem with this concept is that most states do not have institutions that offer training in these culturally transmitted techniques. So the states require braiders to be trained, but they don’t actually have programs to train them. Seven states, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, Oregon, South Dakota, and Wyoming, actually require hair braiders obtain a cosmetology or similar license which typically requires thousands of dollars in tuition and 1000-2100 hours of non related training [Valerie Bayham interview with author, May 2005].

This hair braiding conundrum has created a situation where thousands of women break the law each day in order to become economically self-sufficient and earn a piece of this billion dollar hair industry. The licensing requirements are not only incompatible with the cultural norm; they are costly and time consuming. In some states you have to train longer to braid hair than
you do to be a police officer or a fire fighter and the cost of the schools, who most often don’t
even teach the braiding techniques, range from five to 15 thousand dollars [Valerie Bayham,
interview with author May 2005]. Or the states have vague laws that require registration and
training that is not actually offered in the state. For example, in the state of South Carolina
section 1, Chapter 7, Title 40 of the 1976 Code has been amended to state:

Hair braiding registration requirements. (A) Only those individuals who are licensed to
practice barbering or cosmetology or who are registered to practice hair braiding in this
State may engage in the practice of hair braiding or perform hair braiding services in this
State. (B) All implements used in connection with hair braiding must be disposable or must
be sanitized in a disinfectant approved for hospital use or approved by the Environmental
Protection Agency for commercial use. (C) To practice hair braiding in this State an
individual shall: (1) apply to the board for registration in a manner prescribed by the board;
(2) provide satisfactory proof of successful completion of a one-day, six-hour board-
approved hair braiding course; (3) pass an examination administered by the board; and (4)
pay a twenty-five dollar registration fee. (D) The hair braiding course shall include
instruction regarding: (1) sanitation and sterilization including: (a) universal sanitation and
sterilization precautions; (b) how to distinguish between disinfectants and antiseptics; and
(c) how to sanitize hands and disinfect tools used in the practice of hair braiding; (2)
disorders and diseases of the scalp, including: (a) how to distinguish between these
disorders and diseases; and (b) when hair braiding services can be performed on a client
with disorders or diseases of the scalp; (3) where and when an individual may legally
practice hair braiding; and (4) the procedures, fees, and requirements for renewal of a hair
braiding registration. (E) Registration to practice hair braiding is valid for two years or
until the end of the biennial licensure renewal cycle in which the registration is first issued,
whichever occurs first. The holder of a registration to practice hair braiding shall renew his
or her registration by paying the renewal fee. (F) An individual currently engaging in the
practice of hair braiding on the effective date of this act has one year from the effective
date to complete the registration requirements as provided for in this section." . . . 'Hair
braiding' means the weaving or interweaving of natural human hair for compensation
without cutting, coloring, permanent waving, relaxing, removing, or chemical treatment
and does not include the use of hair extensions or wefts."

Now the first problem with this regulation is the fact that the state licensing agency does
not seem to be aware they exist. When I contacted the cosmetology board and requested
information about obtaining the proper training, certification, and paying the fee for licensure I
was informed that I did not need anything to braid hair in the state of South Carolina and I could
just practice the art of hair braiding in the state (see Appendix B). However, the beauty shops
where I conducted my participant observation were shocked by this email because they had already been questioned by the board of cosmetology about the hair braiders they employ in their shop. The second problem with the law is that at the time I requested information, there was no agency or school that offered a simple hair braiding course. I was told time and time again that I would have to pay thousands of dollars to enroll in the cosmetology school for the duration of the course, in order to gain the hair braiding instruction. Then when I asked about the extent of the instruction on hair braiding I was told that it was not actually a part of the training. Finally, the third major problem with the code is that it specifically prohibits the use of hair extensions by hair braiders. This prohibition makes the license useless for most women of African descent who are practicing natural hair braiding because the majority of the braiding techniques require human or synthetic hair additions. So in essence the law simply grants teenagers and other women who might be braiding hair as a hobby the right to braid hair with the appropriate training and licensure. Anyone interested in actually engaging in braiding the hair of women of African descent as a profession would be severely limited by their inability to utilize human or synthetic hair additions. Of course the law has not dissuaded women from engaging in this practice; however there is always the possibility that these women who are practicing a part of their cultural heritage may end up being investigated and possibly prosecuted. All of these state tactics have created a barrier to the individuals’ right to earn a living from the culturally transmitted practice of hair braiding. This has caused several lawsuits and slowly braiders are attempting to win back their rights to be economically self sufficient and independent business owners.

Interviewing Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah, owner of one of the oldest African braiding salons in the Washington, DC area, I learned that he and his wife had been victimized by the District’s
cosmetology board. Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah and his wife Pamela Ferrell began their business, Cornrows & Co., when braiding became popular among African American women in the 1980s. Wanting to provide African American women with the most authentic African braids possible, they made it possible for poor women from Dakar, Senegal in Africa to relocate to the Washington, DC area and work as hair braiders in their shop. This exchange program paved the way for many of the African braiders who still live and work in the United States today.

As Cornrows & Co. thrived it drew the attention of the local cosmetology board and in 1982 they were notified that they were in violation of a 1938 District ordinance that requires all stylists in a salon to have valid cosmetology licenses. In order to obtain the required licenses Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah would have to pay $5000 per braider who would then be required to complete 1500 hours of training and testing, none of which included African hair braiding [Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah interview with author, May 2005]. Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah fought against this requirement that was clearly culturally insensitive for over ten years. It simply did not make sense to them that they should be forcing women who had learned the cultural tradition of hair braiding from their mothers, sisters, and aunts to now be trained to apply chemicals to natural African textured hair. Hair braiding is an art form that they had brought from their villages and cities in Africa to share with African American women, but the District attempted to force these women to learn how to chemically alter hair in order to practice their art. Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah said, “they could fine me, they could put me in jail, but I was not about to force these women to destroy their culture to satisfy the board of cosmetology” [Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah interview with author, May 2005].

The board wanted to impose an antiquated law on the hair braiders, “even though the practices and techniques contained in the 1938 cosmetology statute have nothing to do with and
are in fact diametrically opposed to the centuries-old art of African hairstyling (Bolick and Legge 2004). Stacy Pyles, director of a film called *Combing Out the Kinks* which is about black hairstyling says, “It is ridiculous that the state is trying to regulate an act of culture, hair braiding is a cultural bond that is taught between mothers and daughters, aunts and nieces” (Hubbard 1999). The board cited the health and safety of the public as their rationale for attempting to enforce this regulation; however they were unable to show that unlicensed hair braiding had any affect on the health and safety of the public [Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah interview with author, May 2005]. An example of how these problems are continuing is highlighted by Sheron Campbell owner of World of Braids in Oakland, CA who says, cosmetology school is, “a waste of time . . . I went to cosmetology school for 1,600 hours and paid over $6,000 and they didn't teach one thing about braiding…I don't see how the state can enforce something they don't teach” (Hubbard 1999:1). Eventually, Taalib-Din Abdul Uqdah prevailed, with the help of lawyers from the Institute for Justice, a non-profit law firm that works to preserve individual liberty and economic freedom. During his fight Uqdah founded the American Hair Braiders and Natural Haircare Association (AHNHA) to help educate braiders and the public about natural hair care. Uqdah’s victory has been far-reaching and braiders all over the United States have been inspired to litigate their cases (Bolick and Legge 2004).

**Conclusion**

This chapter serves as a summary of the survey and experimental data collected during the research. This data reveal some conflicting messages about the Black hair culture domain. Some of the data gathered seems to indicate that there is no cultural domain for Black hair, while other portions of the data transmit exactly the opposite message. In this chapter I have reviewed the demographics associated with the two online data collection methods I employed. Then I summarized and discussed the data collected online and in the experiment. This section revealed
that although women say they don’t spend money on hair products and services when asked in a
survey, they have been observed spending an average of $190 every six weeks when they have
their hair relaxed and washed and set regularly. Furthermore, when women say that hair is not
symbolic of politics, religion, or socioeconomic class they may be answering in ways that they
think are appropriate instead of truthful. This chapter revealed that while women don’t believe
that relaxers are the best thing in the world, they don’t desire “nappy” hair and they believe that
“nappy” hair is unprofessional. The women said that they did not think hair is connected to how
you are perceived racially, but then they were clear that certain hairstyles, like dreadlocks
marked the wearer as being more ethnic, radical, and less religious. Ultimately, the experiment
results show that hairstyle, color, and length can radically change the wearers’ perceived
attractiveness, religion, education, professionalism and social class. In this chapter I also review
how women of African descent are tied economically to Asia via the human hair trade from India
and the Korean control of the beauty supply industry. Ultimately, documenting the political
economy of hair revealed how women of African descent struggle to earn their share of the
billion dollar hair care industry as professional braiders despite governmental roadblocks. All of
these issues point to the importance of hair for women of African descent and in the next chapter
I will discuss how these concepts work together to create a cultural domain of hair.
Figure 5-1  Age by Geography.
Figure 5-2  Age by Income chart.
Figure 5-3  Respondent’s Hairstyles.
Figure 5-4  Respondent by Hairstyle Type.
Figure 5-5 Hair-Pain Chart.
This is a photograph of 9-year-old Ashlee McCants. I choose this picture because it’s natural and very common for children Ashlee’s age to wear ponytails. The hairstyle to me means saving time and mother or hairstylist is very considerate of creating a hairstyle fit for a little kid. This say a lot to a community especially the black community often young girls grow up too fast this hairstyle allows young Ashlee to be cute while still looking her age. The ponytail is one of the oldest and convenient hairstyles known to hair. It is easy to maintain and very low maintenance. In this photo Ashlee adds a twist to her long “tales” she has rollers at the ends, which will create a curly effect. Perfect for a day at school or church. —Amber Smith, Benedict College Student response to digital storytelling assignment.
Figure 5-7  Girls in beauty shop in Ghana, West Africa. Photograph courtesy of Sybil Dione Rosado.
Figure 5-8 Level of Agreement for definition of Good Hair. Agreement with definition of Good hair: Hair that is easy to comb because it is straight, silky and does not have tight curls.
Figure 5-9  Level of Agreement for definition of Nappy hair. Agreement with definition of Nappy hair: Hair that is difficult to comb because it is very curly and cotton like.
Figure 5-10  Proximity graph for attractiveness of hairstyles.
Figure 5-11 Proximity graph for social acceptability of hairstyles.
Figure 5-12  Proximity graph for question, “What is a Professional Hairstyle?”

8 objects loaded in
Figure 5-13  Hair=Identity
Figure 5-14  Least Ethnic Hairstyles
Zena Solomon hairstyle is a different style of her usual fashion. She is a quiet single mom and does not partake in the current affairs of the world news. She mostly concentrates on the well-being of her young daughter. Her hair most of the time is very conservative and simple. I think that her hair on this night is the personality of someone else. She usually does not have much too say and stays mostly at home and stays to herself and daughter. —Unidentified undergraduate student response to digital storytelling assignment at Benedict College.
I selected this photo because this girl had very pretty hair. This particular hairstyle to me seems to make her look younger. The length of her hair suggests that she takes care of her hair. When a girl has long hair, it seems like her mother didn’t neglect her hair when she was younger. The color of her hair is black. This makes her appearance seem more natural. Julia’s hair is very straight and it seems she gets perms from someone who knows what they are doing. Her hair doesn’t say anything to me about her political standpoint. The neatness and freshness of her style makes her seem like a very sociable person. I seems like she has many friends and people she communicates with because her hair was really neat. The style of her hair says she is from a middle class family. Julia’s hair is very pretty and makes her look very attractive. — Marquise Jackson student response to digital storytelling assignment at Benedict College.
Photo 1 from online experiment. Photo 1 came in second as the hair most likely to be the model’s real hair (20 percent). Student (30 percent), Politically apathetic (36 percent), Less than one year of college (41 percent), Christian (93 percent), leisure activities dance club (26 percent) or cell phone (24 percent), and poor or working poor (60 percent).
Figure 5-18  Photo 2 from online experiment. Working Poor or working class (69 percent), retail worker (24 percent), College but no degree (26 percent), feminist (36 percent) spends time at club (18 percent) and doing nails (17 percent).
Figure 5-19  Photo 3 from online experiment. Poor (46 percent) or working poor (33 percent), Food service (35 percent) or Unemployed (21 percent), High school is highest level of education (63 percent), Politically apathetic (30 percent), spends time at clubs (54 percent) and watching TV (24 percent).
Figure 5-20  Photo 4 from online experiment. Photo 4 was believed to be the model’s real hair (33 percent). Working class (32 percent), college student (38 percent) who may have a terminal degree (21 percent), Black feminist (34 percent) who spends time reading (37 percent).
Figure 5-21  Photo 5 from online experiment. Working poor or working class (60 percent), college educated (40 percent), politically apathetic (27 percent) who spends time on hair and nails (29 percent) and going to dance clubs (21 percent).
Figure 5-22 Photo 6 from online experiment. Photo 6 was the second most ghetto person (15 percent). She is poor (43 percent), works in food service (31 percent) or is unemployed (21 percent), high school student (31 percent) Politically apathetic (35 percent), who spends her free time in dance clubs (21 percent).
Figure 5-23  Photo 7 from online experiment. Working Class (27 percent) or working poor (26 percent), student (21 percent), who may be working on a graduate degree (28 percent). Black Nationalists (37 percent), probably not a Christian (51 percent), who spends her free time reading (38 percent).
Figure 5-24  Photo 8 from online experiment. Photo 8 was voted as the most professional person (72 percent). Photo 8 was also voted as the most conservative person (30 percent), Photo 8 was also voted as the most attractive person (50 percent). Thirty four percent of the respondents thought she was working class, 21 percent thought middle class, 24 percent said she has a professional career, 23 percent said she was a college graduate, Contemporary liberal (30 percent), Christian (84 percent), spends leisure time getting nails done (21 percent), shopping (20 percent), and going to the gym (19 percent).
Figure 5-25 Photo 9 from online experiment. Working class (30 percent), student (22 percent), liberal (27 percent), Christian (80 percent), who spends free time watching TV (22 percent).
Figure 5-26 Photo 10 from online experiment. Poor (32 percent) or working poor (32 percent), working in food service (21 percent), with a high school education (30 percent). She is a Christian (78 percent), who is politically apathetic (32 percent), and she spends her free time going to clubs (32 percent), and getting her nails done (24 percent).
Figure 5-27 Photo 11 from online experiment. Photo 11 was voted to be the most Ghetto person. She is poor (33 percent) or working poor (31 percent), she has a job in the adult entertainment industry (22 percent), or she is unemployed (17 percent). Her highest education is high school (52 percent), she is politically apathetic (31 percent) and she is a Christian who spends her free time in clubs (35 percent) and getting her hair and nails done (21 percent).
Figure 5-28  Photo 12 from online experiment. Photo 12 was voted to be the second most professional person (36 percent), Photo 12 was voted to be the second most conservative person (20 percent). In this photo she is the richest and best educated. She is a middle class (21 percent), woman with a professional career (27 percent), who graduated from college (24 percent) and may have a Masters degree (15 percent). She is a liberal (32 percent) Christian (83 percent) who enjoys reading (26 percent) and exercising (20 percent) in her free time.
Figure 5-29  Experiment Respondent Age.
Figure 5-30 Sign adorning Kalyana Katta, the four story building where hair tonsuring is conducted.
Figure 5-31 Sign directing devotees to tonsure line inside temple grounds outside Kalyana Katta.

Figure 5-32 Tonsuring outside of the temple.
Figure 5-33  Hair being swept together for donation.

Figure 5-34  Post-tonsure photo of a small child.
Figure 5-35  Hat vendors outside of Kalyana Katta.

Figure 5-36  Main headquarters of Raj Impex.
Figure 5-37 Women sorting hair in Raj Impex factory.

Figure 5-38 Different textures of hair at Raj Impex, with long *remy* hair in the middle.
Figure 5-39  Hair being raked and tided off for sale at Raj Impex India.

Figure 5-40  Human hair ready for packaging and export at Raj Impex.
Figure 5-41 Synthetic hair for sale in Accra market in Ghana, West Africa.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The Hair

Someone told me this morning they feel sorry for my plight
An hour and a half curling my hair? It’s as long as taking a flight!

I was insulted by the notion that someone might feel sorry for me
I guess she doesn’t realize what she or her hair could really be

I wear it curly when I feel like being bad
I’m sorry if my sexiness makes you feel a little mad

I wear it straight when I’m feeling low-key
It brings out the seduction deep within me

I slick and highlight in the spring to go with the flowers blooming.
I bring out reds in the fall when the cold is slowly looming.

I never wear it the same, no matter how hard you look
My hair is like the different chapters of a very beautiful book.

Am I high-maintenance? Do I waste a lot of time?
Hell yes! That’s why I’ll always look like I’m in my prime!

I guess the sorriest thing of all is that others don’t realize
Just how important your hair can be if you just accessorize

Different hair for different moods, but never looking the same
If I had to wear my hair just one way, girlfriend, I’d go insane!

I wear it straight and sleek when my mood turns mellow
With golden colors that turn heads all around
I wear it curly when I feel like being bad
And better-looking hair just can’t be found!

--Sili Recio, poem written in response to a negative comment made by a co-worker about how difficult it was to maintain her hair (see Figure 6-1 the faces of Sili)

Introduction

Just as individual strands of hair are commingled and woven together to form the intricate braid patterns found in cornrows, the rituals, symbols, and beliefs experienced by women of African descent can be viewed as the building blocks that work together to form the cultural
domain of Black hair. Unbraiding these social constructs requires me to discuss the cultural domain of hair in different sections. First I will outline what I call the “conceptual framework of Black hair,” then in the second section, I review the findings uncovered by this study and discuss the contradictions and continuity among the interviews, focus groups, and survey results that became apparent during the data analysis phase. It is here that I outline the cultural domain of Black hair. Then third, I present a section entitled “I am not my hair.” In this third and final section of both this chapter and dissertation I summarize the findings, and suggest avenues for future research. Overall the main goal of this chapter is to explain the symbolic meaning attributed to hair and hairstyles while highlighting how these meanings influence notions of power, domination, and social control as they are employed by women of African descent.

**Conceptual Framework for Cultural Domain of Black Hair**

The conceptual framework for the cultural domain of Black hair begins with the rituals, symbols, and beliefs that serve as its basic components (see Figure 6-2 conceptual framework). First the experiences that bind women of African descent together in this cultural domain are summarized in the rituals they perform surrounding their hair on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis. Hair combing, washing, and processing rituals take on extremely similar patterns among African-descended women throughout the Diaspora. The first major component of this ritual is pain. Take for example the five year old twins Dezare and Jare Smith who told me in unison, “we don’t like getting our hair washed, it hurts, but we get used to it” [Dezare and Jare Smith interview with author June 2006]. At five these girls have already been indoctrinated into Black hair culture. They know that they must endure the pain associated with having their hair washed, combed, and pressed with a hot comb, in order to be beautiful. But, more importantly they know that they must endure this pain in order to be acceptable because they have learned that their grandmother thinks they are so much sweeter when they have their hair done. Similarly in the
Dominican Republic girls are told *cabello bonito, aguanta jalones* (You want pretty hair? Deal with the painful pulling). Women from Brazil, Puerto Rico, Ghana, and the United States all reported similar experiences with painful applications of chemicals, long tedious sessions of hair braiding and the daily rituals surrounding hair care maintenance. However, embedded in these painful rituals are stories of bonding, love, and sisterhood. Women recounted elaborate stories to me about the relationships developed and maintained during and through these “hair dressing” sessions. The participants also explained how spending time at the beauty shop could teach you all about a community because this is where women felt comfortable sharing the intimate details of their lives with total strangers. So the pain and pleasure associated with hairstyling serve as the first components of the conceptual framework of the Black hair domain.

While engaging in the rituals of the Black hair domain, African-descended women begin to learn the symbols associated with hair texture and styles. The women tacitly learn the meaning of these symbols through their participation in the rituals. As they struggle with painful combing sessions and learn to hold the base of their hair while the ends are being combed, they also begin to absorb the meanings associated with good and nappy hair. The degree of pain they experience during this hair combing ritual might be directly related to how good or straight their hair is versus how nappy it is purported to be. The women learn that nappy hair is painful to comb and good hair is not. This lesson translates into an assignment of positive value to good or Caucasian type hair and the devaluation of hair that is classified as nappy or African type hair. Women learn that having nappy hair is a physical indication of your African heritage and that having straight or good hair indicates that you are of mixed heritage. Hair texture as a symbol of race serves as the second major component of the Black hair cultural domain.
Conceptual Framework for Black Hair Texturocracy

Hair texture, styles, length, and color are critical factors in an African-descended woman's access to social economic and cultural capital. These elements of the hair domain are critical because they all are related to the beliefs created by the symbols of good and bad hair discussed above. I call this hierarchical system a “texturocracy” and this texturocracy functions as the primary component of the conceptual framework of the Black hair cultural domain. Hair texture is the first filter through which symbols about good and bad or nappy Black hair are translated into beliefs and actions. The symbolically good hair is manipulated differently than the nappy hair because good hair is believed to be easier to deal with. This believed ease translates into good hair being valued more than nappy hair and this is why 72 percent of the respondents to the online survey said that they think women of African descent would prefer to have good or straight hair. This belief system is extended to include hairstyle, hair length, and hair color which all act in unison to enhance the social, economic, and cultural capital for women of African descent. In this domain once the woman’s hair texture, style, length, and color are assessed the system grants her varying levels of social, economic, and cultural capital which are used to augment her perceived attractiveness, declare her sexual orientation, religion, level of professionalism, and ultimately her racial and social identity. Following Foucault (1979), Bourdieu (1986), and Firth (1973a) it is easy to conclude that straight hair functions as a powerful form of social, cultural, and economic capital for women of African descent (see Figure 6-3 Conceptual Framework for Black hair Texturocracy).

Comparing and Contrasting the Survey Results: Contradictions and Continuity

Five primary groups of hairstyle types emerged from the experiment photos. Short colored hair, medium length colored hair, medium length natural colored hair, natural hairstyles, and
long hair. I will discuss the symbolic meaning that each of these five hairstyles types created in combination with hair lengths and colors.

First, short colored straight hair such as in photos one and three (see Figures 5-17 and 5-19) marked the wearer as a poor woman who works in the food service industry and has very little education. These two hairstyles were interpreted as making the wearer more likely to spend her free time in clubs, watching television or on the cell phone. Therefore, it can be inferred that wearing short colored hair symbolizes that the wearer is a member of a low socioeconomic class based on her lack of education, small income and limited social interests.

Second, medium length colored hair as shown in experiment photos five, six, ten, and eleven (see Figures 5-21, 5-22, 5-26 and 5-27) had a slightly different effect on observers. While all of these photos were seen to portray a poor woman having burgundy colored hair seems to greatly influence her perceived profession. So in photos six and ten (see Figures 5-22 and 5-26), the model was identified as being a food service worker. Whereas, in photo five (see Figure 5-21), the participants believed that the model was probably a student. But, interestingly in photo eleven (see Figure 5-27), the only photo of her with blonde hair, she is believed to be employed in the entertainment (adult) industry. In all of these photos her perceived leisure time is spent having her hair and nails done or going to dance clubs. These varying opinions of the model that change based on her hairstyle and color indicate that symbolic meanings are attached to these elements. In this example medium length colored hair that is an unusual color marks the wearer as being uneducated and working in food service or other low income jobs. Changing the color of her hair from burgundy to light brown, as seen in photo number 5 (see Figure 5-21), changed her symbolic meaning and her profession became student. But, changing that color to blond made her appear to be employed in the entertainment industry. These changes indicate that hair
color is a salient factor used by women of African descent to identify the socioeconomic status of other women within this cultural domain. Natural looking hair colors seem to increase the woman’s perceived socioeconomic status, light colors seem to decrease it slightly, and unusual or bright colors seem to decrease it dramatically.

Third, this theory may be confirmed by examining the photos grouped together as medium length natural color photo 2 and 9 (see Figures 5-18 and 5-25). In these photos the model appears with medium length straight and curly hair, but she is perceived as working class instead of poor. So having a natural looking hair color increases her perceived economic status. Furthermore, in these photos she is seen as a retail worker or student who still spends her time going to clubs, having her nails done, and watching television. So with a natural hair color the main thing that changed was her projected or symbolized socioeconomic status.

Fourth, photos eight and twelve (see Figures 5-24 and 5-28) are grouped together as long hair. These photographs were perceived as being significantly different from all of the other pictures in the experiment. These long haired appearances symbolized that the wearers were working or middle class. This is important because these were they only photos where a significant number of participants thought that the model was well off financially. Similarly, these are the only photos where the participants believed that the model could be in a professional career and probably a college graduate. These are also the only photos where a significant number of participants thought that the woman would spend part of her leisure time exercising. So in this cultural domain maintaining long hair seems to help craft an identity of wealth, professionalism, education, and health consciousness, for the wearer.

Finally, in the styles where the hair appears to be natural or nappy, as in photos four and seven (see Figures 5-20 and 5-23), the participants’ opinion of the model changes dramatically.
These hairstyles seem to hold strong symbolic meaning for the respondents. With natural hair the model’s perceived income moves from being primarily poor to symbolizing working class values. Her perceived educational level and profession also increase with natural looking hair. She is now seen as an advanced college or graduate level student. Interestingly, instead of spending her free time in clubs like the other photos, the respondents believe that the woman with natural hair probably spends her free time reading. Furthermore, it is believed that the model wearing natural hair is more politically active as a black nationalist, or feminist. But, the photo with the model wearing dreadlocks is seen as the most politically radical and only type A personality out of all of the photos. But the most startling statistic revealed by the analysis of these photos shows that when the model has dreadlocks she is seen as being the most unlikely to be a Christian. The other natural hairstyle also is seen as being non-Christian. These two photos have the lowest percentages of people who believe they are Christians. So for some reason having naturally styled hair seems to symbolize that a woman of African descent is not a Christian.

Conclusion: I Am Not My Hair

Despite the fact that Indie Arie sings fervently that she and women of African descent are “not their hair,” this dissertation questions the premise of her song title. She may say she thinks that she is not her hair, but what do other women of African descent think? Uncovering the beliefs held by women of African descent concerning their hair was the main objective in this research. As Ingrid Banks will tell you, hair matters. But, what we have learned is that hair matters because it has a distinct cultural domain. The rituals, symbols, and beliefs about and for Black hair form the core components of the Black hair domain. Moreover, there is a texturocracy within this domain that functions to analyze a Black woman’s hair texture, style, length and color in order to assess her access to social, economic, and cultural capital. For Black women hair is
more than an aesthetic presentation. It is a way to signal detailed accounts of your identity to other women who are participants in the same cultural domain. Domain participants believe that the texture of a Black woman’s hair provides insight into her ancestry and socioeconomic background, while the hairstyle and color serve as indicators of educational level, profession, socioeconomic status and religion. This research project benefited from the combination of methods that were employed to glean the data. Going beyond the interviews, focus groups and surveys and actually conducting an experiment added a dimension to the work that would have been otherwise undetectable. Additionally, women of African descent have been long-standing participants as informants in social science research and during these relationships they have learned how to present a *buena presencia* (good appearance) to researchers, which may inhibit the veracity of any project. This is another reason the experiment proved to be so beneficial. The experiment in this project allowed me to interrogate both the women’s unconsciously hidden beliefs and their conscious omissions. But, there were numerous hurdles to cross in this project. One problem stemmed from the fact that women assumed that as a participant in the culture I had knowledge about the domain and they were not as detailed in their descriptions during interviews. Many times conversations revolved around my asking, “what does that mean?” and the participant responding, “well you know.” I had to actively work at getting women to fully explain concepts instead of allowing them to depend on my understanding of the terms. Additionally, because of the use of the Internet, the study was slanted towards young women who were computer literate. Finally, although women from all around the globe participated in the online research the majority of the women were from the American South and this may mean that this group of women controlled the survey results more than I anticipated.
This research lays the groundwork for investigation into the cultural domain of hair on several different levels. First this research should be replicated in different geographical areas in the African Diaspora and eventually in any area where women self identify themselves as being of African descent. This type of replication will help to expand or contract the parameters of what I have outlined as the cultural domain of Black hair. Furthermore, this type of cross cultural analysis the African Diaspora would be beneficial to the areas of Diaspora and Black studies. Another avenue of research that should be explored is the relationship between hairstyling methods and chronic illness. Several of the beauty rituals that women of African descent engage in involve chemicals that may be adversely influencing this population’s health. Moreover, given the fact that most of the women in the study admitted that they were reluctant to exercise because sweat and chlorine damaged their hair, what influence do these factors have on incidents of obesity among African descended women? Finally, this future research should explore the impact of religion and religiosity on the rituals and beliefs I uncovered.

My findings and conclusions should have saliency for the existing body of scholarship on African Diasporan identities in the disciplines of anthropology, and Black and Africana Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and Cultural Studies. Ultimately, my research attempted to explore and document a current method of local and global self identification. I investigated the rituals and symbols that may serve to bind African descended women together as a Diasporan community. Recording contemporary cultural norms will assist future scholars to track the development of identification strategies among African descended women. Human hair is a symbolically and economically valuable commodity that is used to transform women’s lives spiritually and physically. Ultimately, this research and the work of my predecessors imply that all we need to know about Black people can be learned from looking at their hair. Given the
level of importance women of African descent accord their hairstyles and textures perhaps we should begin to think, “I am not my hair . . . or am I?”
Figure 6-1  The many faces of Sili Recio collage. Photographs courtesy of Sili Recio.
Figure 6-2  Conceptual Framework for Black hair domain. This conceptual framework for the Black hair domain is based on the research presented in this dissertation. This study revealed that the rituals women engage in concerning their hair help outline the symbolic meaning attributed to hair texture and hairstyles in this culture. Finally, the belief system crafted from these rituals and symbols helps to reinforce the value of the rituals and symbols by turning particular combinations of hair texture and hairstyles into social, cultural, and economic capital.
Figure 6-3. Conceptual framework for Black hair texturocracy. In this conceptual framework, items that are closer to the center circles are associated with having more social capital, while items on the periphery of the circles are granted less social capital. As the areas commingle, the level of social, economic, and cultural capital changes.
APPENDIX A
VIEW OUR HAIR STORY ASSIGNMENT

View Our Hair Story
Photo Survey Final Exam

Materials:
1 Disposable Camera
Addresses and Phone Numbers of all people photographed
Photo Log Release Forms

Directions:
1. Obtain access to a camera; it can be disposable or your own. I only need you to be able to take 10 photographs of people.
2. Take photographs of people in your environment these people should serve as examples of different types of hair color, texture, and hairstyles.
3. Fill out the photo release form for each photograph you take. You should get the name and address of each person you take a photograph of and have them sign the photo release form. The only time you do not need a release form is when you take a photograph of a crowd of people in a public place. When you take a photo of a crowd of people you should identify where you took the photograph and when, date, time, type of event, event name. Give me as much information as you possibly can. Photos without the signed photo release forms will not be counted toward your grade. (You should take photos of people in their natural environments at home, at work, school, the club, anywhere you feel is a part of your community and a reflection of your life.
4. After you take the photos you have them developed and then for each photo from number 1-10 you should attach the release form and the photo information which will have the names of subjects, date photographed etc.
5. You will then complete a 1 page rationale and analysis of each of the 10 photos you take.
6. Think about the following questions when you take photos of different people and their hair:
   a. Do different hairstyles have different meanings?
   b. Do different hair lengths have different meanings?
   c. Do different hair colors have different meanings?
   d. Do different hair textures have different meaning?
   e. Does hair says anything about you politically?
   f. Does hair say anything about you socially?
   g. Does hair say anything about you economically?
   h. What does hair say?
   i. What do you think of your hair?

These questions can help you write your rationale and analysis for each photo. I want to know why you selected the photo, what it means to you and what you think it means to others in your community.
7. You may turn in this assignment on December 9, 2003 from 2-5 pm in my office at 317 FAH. I will check your note cards when you turn in your assignment. This project is worth 200 points. Late assignments will not be accepted
APPENDIX B
EMAIL CORRESPONDENCE WITH STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA COSMETOLOGY BOARD

11/1/2004

Dear Ms. Rosado:
I had a note to place you on the mailing list for information when if or when it becomes available. Presently, there is no information to disburse other than you do not need a license to practice braiding in this state. You may not use chemicals or perform other hair care services. Currently, you may practice just braiding anywhere in this state.
Sincerely,
NAME DELETED
Asst. Administrator

-----Original Message-----
From: Sybil Rosado [mailto:srosado@earthlink.net]
Sent: October 29, 2004 1:19 AM
To: SC BOARD OF COSMETOLOGY
Subject: Hair Braiding

Dear Ms. NAME DELETED,

I am very interested in getting registered to be a hair braider in SC. Where would I find the approved course here in south Carolina? I have called several schools and they do not know anything about hair braiding. I don't want to do a full cosmetology course in order to braid hair and I wanted to know where to go and what to do. Please help me.
Thanks
Sybil

Sybil Rosado
srosado@earthlink.net
Why Wait? Move to EarthLink.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born March 16, 1968, Sybil Dione Rosado is a native of Tampa, Florida. She is the only daughter of Mr. Don L. Johnson and Dr. Sybil K. Barnes and grand daughter of Mrs. Sybil H. Barnes, Mr. Wesley Barnes, Mrs. Annie Mae Johnson, and Mr. Willie Johnson. She has one brother who is also named Don L. Johnson. Sybil participates in a blended family with her husband Mr. Craig A. Rosado and they share seven children.

Sybil earned a B.S. in Political Science from Florida A & M University in 1989, a Juris Doctorate from Vanderbilt University Law School in 1992, a certificate in law enforcement from Hillsborough Community College police academy in 1993, a M.A. in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Florida in 1999 and a certificate in women’s studies in 2007.

Her research interests include medical tourism, native epistemology, gender inequality, ethnic identity, the symbolic nature of beauty, and body modification. She positions herself as a visual anthropologist who studies the people of the African Diaspora.