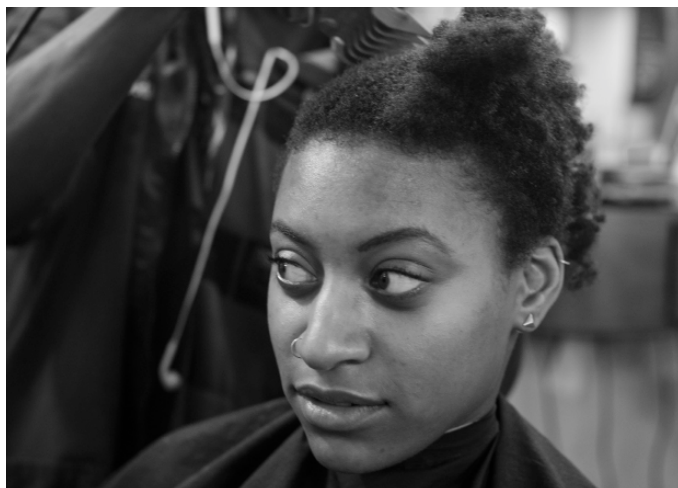
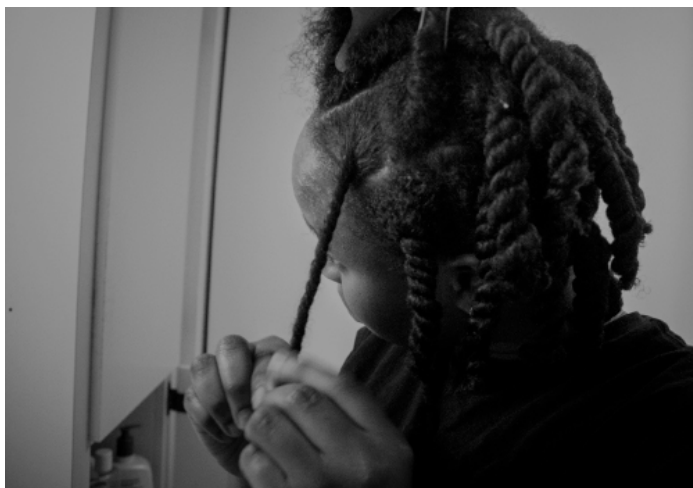


# THE NATURAL HAIR MOVEMENT

By: Kamina Wilkerson

AN UNDERSTATED REVOLUTION



---

Now more than ever we see black women in the United States wearing their hair curly and chemically unaltered. Nationwide perm sales are declining, more than 26% since 2008, while natural hair product sales (such as leave-in conditioners, styling gels, setting lotions, and curl creams) are steadily rising (“Hair Relaxer Sales Decline”). For centuries, black women have felt immense pressure to straighten their thick, curly hair to not only appeal to mainstream white beauty standards but prevent themselves from jeopardizing their social mobility and employment opportunities (Tracey). Now, however, black women are embracing the way their hair naturally grows regardless of texture, length, or curl pattern.

Today many black women report, upwards of 70%, “going natural” or transitioning, a process in which the chemically-altered hair is allowed to grow out and is trimmed gradually (“Hair Relaxer Sales Decline”). The increase in sales of curly hair products, as well as, the visibility of celebrities who have chosen to ‘go natural’ such as Emmy award-winning actress Viola Davis, has captured the rest of America’s attention. The natural hair movement represents the first time in the nation’s history, that wearing natural hair is considered socially acceptable and has likewise risen to such popularity in the African American community. For this reason, alone, the natural hair movement is revolutionary. It is not, however, a sudden phenomenon. Due to the changing beauty standards in the US as reflected in mainstream media, the prevalence of social media in communication, and the ability of black women to redefine and reassert their own standards of beauty, the natural hair movement has gained momentum in recent years, changing what it means to wear natural hair and what it means to be beautiful.

### Changing Mainstream Beauty Standards

Black hairstyles are often equated with political statements. The afro, for example, is commonly viewed as a militant symbol of black pride. Due to the political nature associated with black hairstyles, the political environment of the country at any specific moment is likely to influence the common or acceptable hairstyles in the

black community. Unlike the Black Power Movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s, however, the natural hair movement has represented a time in which the shift in beauty standards, more so than the political environment, has affected the popularity of natural hairstyles. The mainstream media has moved towards coverage of more diverse forms of beauty, often encompassing beauty ideals unique to different cultures. This shift in mainstream beauty, in part, explains why the natural hair movement has been able to rise in popularity. Black women can feel more comfortable wearing hairstyles once seen as socially unacceptable because they are now represented in a more positive light.

The American standard of beauty is a dynamic concept that changes from decade to decade and year to year. Certain fashions and idealized body forms of one decade are not guaranteed to carry into the next. For example, in the 1950’s the curvy hourglass figure of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe was the ideal and classic, feminine beauty was the standard. By the 1960’s, however, a rejection of this ideal for a more flat-chested, boyish appearance mirrored the sexual revolution of the era (Runkel 52). Although each era of beauty and fashion have been very different, each had distinct, particular styles that were the beauty ideal. Recently, however, there’s less one universal standard of beauty as there is a multitude of beauty paradigms that women can emulate, drawing from beauty ideals in African American, Hispanic, and Asian communities (Runkel 52). Celebrities from diverse backgrounds such as Kim Kardashian, Jennifer Lopez, and Beyoncé are all considered beautiful although they don’t share

a common “look.” Therefore, the new beauty ideal has morphed into uniqueness that highlights natural beauty, no matter where in the world it originates. This shift towards more diversity of beauty at one given time has provided a climate for black women to be more comfortable expressing their authentic beauty, making it more socially acceptable for black women to wear their natural hair.

This new mindset in the beauty industry is in direct contrast with the black woman’s reality for much of America’s history. In the past, adopting white standards of beauty by straightening curly hair and trying to lighten dark skin protected black women to a certain degree (Tracey). Women who had more European features—lighter skin, less curly hair, thinner noses—during slavery were

more likely to work in the slave master’s house where conditions were not as severe as in the fields. Also, post-slavery, these women were more likely to be able to elevate in society. Entrance into black churches, sororities, and other civic organizations would depend on the presence of whiter features as determined by the brown paper bag and fine-tooth comb tests

(Lester 205): if her skin were lighter than a brown paper bag and her hair’s curl pattern were of a looser texture, she was allowed access to these organizations. As exemplified by these examples, straightening hair was associated with relative success and comfort in society. Emulating white beauty ideals, even if marginally, opened the horizons for black women. In the current day, however, beauty ideals are no longer aligned so heavily towards white ideals. Therefore, black women who choose to exhibit their natural beauty through natural hairstyles can do so socially with fewer ramifications. Whereas in the past, certain organizations banned these women from joining or would bar them from social mobility, black women today have less of those concerns, explaining why the natural hair movement originated in the 2000’s as opposed to any other time in history.

---

**This new mindset in the beauty industry is in direct contrast with the black woman’s reality for much of America’s history. In the past, adopting white standards of beauty by straightening curly hair and trying to lighten dark skin protected black women to a certain degree**

The changes in the standards of beauty have manifested primarily in the music industry and in between magazine covers. Although music often is produced for the auditory enjoyment of the listener, music videos tend to reflect notions of beauty, romance, youth, and more. Magazines are similar in that even though their primary goal may be to inform readers about fashion, health, cooking, or the like, ideas about beauty are often conveyed through the choice of models in advertisements. Englis, Solomon, and Ashmore created a study looking into the beauty ideals that magazines and music videos chose to present to consumers. The different looks could be split into six categories: Exotic/Sensual, Trendy, Classic, Girl-Next-Door, Sex Kitten, and Cute. They found that in cutting-edge fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Glamour* the Exotic/Sensual and Trendy looks

were most prevalent. Similarly, the majority of music videos showcased a Sensual/Exotic look, characterized by models or actresses of non-white heritage with an ethnic background (Englis 54-57). The prevalence of this beauty ideal in popular media over more classic, traditional looks further reveals the acceptance of diverse

expressions of beauty.

Furthermore, the beauty product industry has diversified its target audience, producing a snowballing effect of further reaffirmation of black beauty. As minorities have made up a larger portion of the population, companies have marketed specific products and services towards this audience (Ede 119). One example is how some traditionally non-black hair-care brands such as Dove, after the popularity of the natural hair movement, are now appealing to African American women by advertising hair care products designed for curly hair. This phenomenon is coupled with the Beauty Match-Up Hypothesis, explaining that companies often choose models whose beauty match the advertised product in order to create a cohesive, believable message for the consumer (Solomon). As businesses try to tap into the purchasing power of people of color, likewise the advertising used to reach

that goal showcase a more diverse set of models. When women of color view models in advertisements who exemplify their ideals of beauty, it serves to perpetuate that ideal in a positive feedback cycle. For black women, seeing black women with natural hair in advertisements also solidifies the social acceptability of natural black hair. As the natural hair movement has grown so has the number of famous black women who have chosen to wear their hair natural, in turn inspiring black women to follow in their footsteps. Jemima Oso, for example, a Nigerian-American woman from Phoenix, Arizona, looks forward to the summer when her hair will be long enough for an asymmetrical cut similar to one of Lupita Nyong'o's signature hairstyles. "For me, Lupita Nyong'o is such a goddess because she has that short, natural hair and is, you know, in the media, has been called the 'Most Beautiful Woman in the World,' can rock these different hairstyles. I always think to myself 'wow my life would be so different if I saw her when I was younger, you know.' Just because it's the first time and still really one of the only representations of a natural black woman's hair that looks like mine (Oso)".

## The Role of Social Media

Social media has been crucial as a catalyst for the vitality of the natural hair movement. Outlets such as YouTube and natural hair blogs have widened the movement's scope by allowing the trend of natural hair to permeate the households of black women all around the U.S. Black women from coast to coast have now become connected to one another thanks to social media. Since one person does not govern social media but a community of individuals, the natural hair movement's utilization of social media shows the desire and drive of black women to create a platform to not only educate, but support one another. This phenomenon in of itself is revolutionary as a self-created, self-perpetuating female-led movement. Without social media, the natural hair movement may never have reached the scale seen today.

The tantamount role of social media in the natural hair movement has been to educate millions of black women about how to care for, style, and maintain their natural hair. It is not uncommon for many black women to have had their hair permed for the majority of their lives. When they decided to "go natural," they did not know how to best approach caring for their natural hair which

# The tantamount role of social media in the natural hair movement has been to educate millions of black women about how to care for, style, and maintain their natural hair.

”

they had become estranged from for so long. Jenna Jones, a woman with natural hair from North Carolina, recounts her experience transitioning between relaxed and natural hair. "I watched so many YouTube videos. That was like my life. I would go to school, come back and just watch YouTube videos on natural hair (Jones)." For her and many other women, natural hair tutorials on YouTube helped ease the transition between caring for different hair textures.

For most of history, black women have been discouraged from engaging with and embracing their curly tresses. During the times of slavery, slaves did not own the treasured combs that were used in Africa to style and detangle hair. Many slaves would wear headscarves to hide their hair that often was unkempt and or damaged (Thompson). After slavery black women, to better assimilate into society, would imitate the straight styles of white women. Before the invention of the perm in the early 20th century, the hot comb popularized by Madame CJ Walker would be used to achieve desired straightness (Thompson). Black women via social media serve as educators to other women who likely have generations of women who are also unable to style their natural, unprocessed hair. What is remarkable about these women who create videos on YouTube or share their hair journeys on blogs is that the majority of them are not hair stylists by trade. Rather the majority are everyday women who share the trials and tribulations of transitioning to natural hair for the benefit of other women (Rhône). Naptural85, EvelynFromTheInternets, and NikkiMae2003, for example, are prominent natural hair YouTubers who share tutorials, hair product reviews, and styling tips. Hundreds of thousands of women subscribe to these channels to learn more about the journey to healthy hair (Naturally Curly 2013).

Another key aspect of social media is that it



allows for increased flexibility to address the needs of women with all textures of hair. Traditionally, women who had finer naturally, looser curls were seen as having “good hair.” Those women who had hair that was short, thicker, and more tightly coiled were seen as having “bad hair” (Rosado). Women with “good hair” were prized for their natural hair whereas women with “bad hair” would be encouraged to straighten it in shame. This dynamic sometimes makes it difficult for women who have hair that is thicker and tightly-coiled to transition into being natural because the locus of beauty is near those women with traditionally “good hair.” Social media, however, provides educational tools that serves the needs of all the members of the community it appeals to. As mentioned before, the women on social media who upload videos and update natural hair blogs are not typically professional stylists. Since natural hair comes in so many different textures, lengths, and curl patterns, real women with any permutation of the aforementioned characteristics can share their natural hair journeys with their viewers or readers. According to a popular hair typing system created by salon stylist Andre Walker, 4C hair, the most tightly-coiled hair type, tends to be the driest, requiring exceptionally thorough moisturizing routines and gentle handling. A popular blog called 4C Hair Chick, for example, provides resources for women with this particular hair type (“4C Hair Chick” 2015). This flexibility and range of social media significantly expand the role models women can have. Regardless if the media celebrates all hair textures or all hair styles, women are likely to find someone on social media that has hair similar to theirs, reaffirming their beauty and allowing them to care better for hair that may otherwise be labeled as “unmanageable” or “undesirable.”

Lastly, social media provides an online community for black women to find social support. Social media provides the opportunity to share information, create and foster communities, and discuss with one another, giving community members a voice that may not have otherwise been heard (Finin). Historically, issues or concerns affecting the black female community have been marginalized. Social media, however, has recently provided an outlet for black women to discuss and engage with topics that matter to them. This avenue gives black women a voice and contributes to the creation of strong, supportive community. “Going natural” and wearing the hair in natural styles may be an emotionally taxing

process for some women. It is not a guarantee that family members, significant others, employers, or the community they live in will accept their hairstyling choices. Rather, there may be periods in which the woman questions her decision and doubts her beauty. The process of transitioning may take up to one or two years before she is accustomed to styling her hair or until it reaches a length beyond a tiny afro (Hull). These multitudes of factors may leave a newly natural woman feeling lonely, frustrated, and dejected. The online community that natural black women have created, however, provides an outlet for her to seek help from women who have done it before. This powerful tool of shared camaraderie unites and connects black women like never before.

## Reclaiming Black Beauty

A central idea of the natural hair movement is that black women are reclaiming what it means to be beautiful and likewise asserting autonomy over their hairstyling decisions. Since black women have been historically marginalized from mainstream standards of beauty, they have been creative in inventing their own beauty standards especially as it applies to hairstyling. The variety and diversity of hairstyles stem from Africa in which the way the hair was styled often indicated class, marital status, ethnic identity, and more societal indicators (Tracey). The natural hair movement, in this sense, is a continuation of black women’s ability to redefine beauty standards within the black community; however, it is different in that now the ideals set by the natural hair movement are now permeating the rest of society. For example,



Allure magazine ignited controversy when they published an article in their August 2015 issue entitled “You (Yes, You) Can Have an Afro,” teaching white women with straight hair how to achieve a curly afro-like style without acknowledging the afro’s history or even featuring a black model. Also, celebrities have now taken to donning traditionally black hairstyles such as Miley Cyrus who wore dreadlocks to the 2015

Video Music Awards. Although these are clear examples of cultural appropriation, they also demonstrate how black women are redefining what it means to be beautiful for not only black women but also all women in America.

Black women choose to go natural for a multitude of reasons, many of which reflect the woman's discovery of her natural beauty or ability to make independent lifestyle choices. One of the original motivations of the early natural hair movement was to lead a healthier, more resource-conscious lifestyle. The boxes of popular perm brands provide warning labels that caution of scalp irritation, chemical burns, hair damage, and eye irritation (Lester 212). Perms, if used incorrectly or too frequently, can cause scalp and hair damage that may be irreversible. Many black women who decided to go natural did so for health reasons, preferring to distance themselves from harsh chemicals for nature-based ingredients. Many styling products for natural hair tend to contain more wholesome ingredients that can even be made at home. The founder of the popular hair-care brand Carol's Daughter, for example, began her business in 1993 by mixing hair products in her own Brooklyn kitchen ("Lisa's Story"). According to a study conducted by anthropology researcher Sybil Dione Rosado, black women who wear their hair natural also report spending less time and less money styling their hair than women with chemically-treated hair. The shorter time allows natural women to be able to style their hair at home without needing to book appointments at salons, putting them back in control of their beauty regimens.

Another motivator for many women is to acknowledge their heritage and display cultural pride. Since the times of slavery, black hair was viewed as inferior and repulsive. Minstrel songs created by whites in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries mocked African Americans for the texture of their hair, comparing it to wool and often describing it as nappy (Lester 206). Due to the internalization of racist, white supremacist beauty ideals, black women have developed the "Lily Complex," a term to describe the altering of a black woman's self to assimilate into mainstream white beauty standards that are often unattainable and inauthentic (Tracey). The black women of today, by consciously choosing to wear their hair the way it naturally grows, simultaneously reject the centuries of toxic beauty ideals that have been pushed upon them and their ancestors.



Similar to the Black Power movement, the natural hair movement does embrace reclamation of black pride. However, unlike the Black Power movement, the natural hair movement tends to have more emphasis on discovering authenticity with hair being just one of the avenues in doing so. Ashlea Haney, a multi-ethnic black woman from Oregon, who is currently transitioning, has battled feelings of frustration and self-hatred towards her hair which was unlike that of any of the other women in her family. Since transitioning, however, she has developed a more intimate relationship with her hair:

"I would say that when I style my hair in a more traditionally black way I feel more empowered and that's specifically just because I was never allowed to, not even that I wasn't allowed, I never knew how to do that before. And because I spend so many years hurting my hair. And so to me, to wear my hair in what people would see as more black [styles] like in braids right now feels really empowering, because it feels like I stopped running away from myself and I am happy in my own skin (Haney)."

Lastly, many black women choose to go natural simply because it is trendy. The natural hair movement has origins at the start of the 21st century. It is just recently, however, that the momentum has increased, changing beauty standards nationwide. According to Mintel, a market intelligence agency, 45% of black women believe natural styles are trendy, and 48% believe they exude confidence. For these women, natural hair may be another beauty frontier to explore. Often black hair styles are imbued with particular meanings such as the politicization

of the afro or the self-hatred of the perm. Although it is a popular belief that straightening hair is a sign of shame for one's heritage, some scholars believe that it may simply be another way for black women to express themselves, their creativity, and the versatility of their hair (Tracey). Therefore, it is important to consider that some women may just choose hairstyles regardless of political or ethical reasons. For some women, the way they decide to wear their hair is not a reflection of what they believe as much as how a hairstyle makes them feel.

## The Myth of Self-Esteem Sheltering

Some may argue that the natural hair movement is not revolutionary because black women are substantially insulated from mainstream beauty standards. Earlier studies comparing black and white female adolescent development noticed that white female adolescents tended to be more self-conscious about their weight than that their black counterparts, more often turning to unhealthy, restrictive eating practices. Researchers concluded that black females were sheltered from mainstream beauty ideals by the different beauty standards advanced in the black community, without considering that many black women may be self-conscious of other areas besides weight (Poran). This claim, however, as studied by researcher Maya Poran, proves to be inaccurate. Black female adolescents reported experiencing competing pressures from both mainstream American culture and from beauty ideals advanced by black men. This push-and-pull that many modern black women face exemplifies the significance of the natural hair movement. Regardless of the perceptions of black men or the impossible standards created by the media, black women have continued to redefine what beauty is to them and reconnect with their authentic selves.

## Conclusion

The natural hair movement, as every newly formed movement, is still blossoming and taking on new shapes and forms. One of the fundamental questions is if it is just another trend in black hairstyles or if it is here to stay. We have seen the Black Power Movement and its accompanying Afro fade as a relic of the 1960's and 1970's; can we expect the same of the natural hair movement? Although similar, these two movements are not a fair comparison. For many black women, the natural hair

movement signifies much more than just cultural pride. It signifies an attempt at a healthier lifestyle, a more authentic existence, and a redefinition of the meaning of beauty. The confines of the natural hair movement are not limited solely to a return to blackness. For the first time in history, black women are allowed to be their true physical selves in society and have worked together to encourage each other to make the transition, in many ways, into liberation from the confines of beauty. And because of their efforts, black hair is now synonymous with beauty not only in the insular bounds of the black community but in the wide expanse of mainstream beauty. Black women have created the spaces needed to express what beauty means to them and confidently beckoned the world to follow.

### References

- "4C Hair Chick." 4C Hair Chick. 2015. Web. 29 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.4chairchick.com/blog/>>.
- "15 YouTubers to Watch Right Now." NaturallyCurly. 9 Sept. 2013. Web. 29 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.naturallycurly.com/curlreading/wavy-hair-type-2/15-youtubers-to-watch-right-now/#!slide1>>.
- Basil G. Englis, Michael R. Solomon, and Richard D. Ashmore. "Beauty Before the Eyes of Beholders: The Cultural Encoding of Beauty Types in Magazine Advertising and Music Television". *Journal of Advertising* 23.2 (1994): 49-64. Web.
- Ede, Fred O., and Stephen E. Calcich. "African-American Consumerism: An Exploratory Analysis and Classification." *American Business Review* 17.1 (1999): 113-22. ProQuest. Web. 7 Feb. 2016.
- Finin, T., Joshi, A., Kolari, P., Java, A., Kale, A., & Karandikar, A. (2008). The information ecology of social media and online communities. *AI Magazine*, 29(3), 77-92. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/208125355?accountid=14026>.
- "Hair Relaxer Sales Decline 26% over the Past Five Years | Mintel.com." N.p., n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2016.
- Haney, Ashlea. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2016.
- Hull, Tina E. "More Black Women Embrace their Hair's Natural Style." *Afro - American*, 5 Star edition ed.: 1. Dec 2007. ProQuest. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
- Jones, Jenna. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2016.
- Lester, Neal A. "Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African-American Daughters and the Politics of Hair." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24.2 (2000): 201-24. ProQuest. Web. 7 Feb. 2016.
- "Lisa's Story." Carol's Daughter. Web. 16 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.carolsdaughter.com/lisas-story.html>>.
- Oso, Jemima. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 11 Mar. 2016.
- Poran, Maya A. "The Politics of Protection: Body Image, Social Pressures, and the Misrepresentation of Young Black Women." *Sex Roles* 55.11-12 (2006): 739-55. ProQuest. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.
- Rhone, Nedra. "SOCIAL MEDIA: 'Going Natural' a YouTube Hit: Local Women Share Expertise on Hair. Millions have Viewed Video Blogs about Unprocessed Tresses." *The Atlanta Journal - Constitution*: D.1. Jan 10, 2012. Print.
- Rosado, Sybil Dione. "No Nubian Knots Or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress." *Transforming Anthropology* 11.2 (2003): 60-3. Print.
- Solomon, M. R., Ashmore, R. D., & Longo, L. C. (1992). The beauty match-up hypothesis:

---

Haney, Ashlea. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2016.

Hull, Tina E. "More Black Women Embrace their Hair's Natural Style." *Afro - American*, 5 Star edition ed.: 1. Dec 2007. ProQuest. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

Jones, Jenna. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 12 Mar. 2016.

Lester, Neal A. "Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African-American Daughters and the Politics of Hair." *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24.2 (2000): 201-24. ProQuest. Web. 7 Feb. 2016.

"Lisa's Story." Carol's Daughter. Web. 16 Feb. 2016. <<http://www.carolsdaughter.com/lisastory.html>>.

Oso, Jemima. "Natural Hair Journey." Personal interview. 11 Mar. 2016.

Poran, Maya A. "The Politics of Protection: Body Image, Social Pressures, and the Misrepresentation of Young Black Women." *Sex Roles* 55.11-12 (2006): 739-55. ProQuest. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

Rhone, Nedra. "SOCIAL MEDIA: 'Going Natural' a YouTube Hit: Local Women Share Expertise on Hair. Millions have Viewed Video Blogs about Unprocessed Tresses." *The Atlanta Journal - Constitution*: D.1. Jan 10, 2012 2012. Print.

Rosado, Sybil Dione. "No Nubian Knots Or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress." *Transforming Anthropology* 11.2 (2003): 60-3. Print.

Solomon, M. R., Ashmore, R. D., & Longo, L. C. (1992). The beauty match-up hypothesis: Congruence between types of. *Journal of Advertising*, 21(4), 23. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/236548499?accountid=14026>

Thompson, Cheryl. "Black Women, Beauty, and Hair as a Matter of Being." *Women's Studies* 38.8 (2009): 831-856. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

Tracey, O. P. (2006). Hey girl, am I more than my hair? : African american women and their struggles with beauty, body image, and hair. *NWSA Journal*, 18(2), 24-51. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/233235409?accountid=14026>

