Conformed and Disrupted Black Bodies in Intraracial Interactions: Deliberations on the Wearing of Natural Hair

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Abstract

Hair, like skin color, is a social marker that distinguishes Blacks from others and has essentially functioned as a way to position some in the racial group outside the sanctified realm of beauty and acceptance that has existed since slavery. This chapter explores the ways in which African Americans experience and think about wearing natural hair. Two critical questions are explored: (1) What impact does the choice to wear natural hair have upon the individual and upon the individual’s intraracial relationship with members of her/his racial group? and (2) How are these preferences for a conformed (straightened hair) or disrupted (natural hair) physical appearance articulated through intraracial interactions? The following narratives on natural hair resonate from myriad centers of intraracially defined, and self-positioned, black bodies.

KEY TERMS: natural hair, intraracial interaction, black body politics

Introduction

Hair, like skin color, is a social marker that distinguishes Blacks from others and has essentially functioned as a way to position some outside the sanctified realm of beauty and acceptance since slavery. Thus, natural hair, like black skin is devalued (Mercer, 1987; Shane, 1996). Natural hair, as spoken in the black community, is the same as “nappy hair,” but technically denotes the non-use of chemical agents to straighten or change the biological texture of the hair—as a specification of rupture or a principle for challenging mainstream images of beauty. Natural hair for Blacks,
especially black women, is therefore conflicting. It functions as a symbol of liberation and freedom as well as social and political marginalization (hooks, 1992; Magubane, 2007)—it is a personal and public matter, which concerns the intersection of race, gender and culture. In an interview April 13, 2007 on National Public Radio (NPR), Rosario Schuler, owner of Oh My Nappy Hair Salon, suggests that the word “nappy hair” is not an offensive expression except when used as an adjective to a negative. However, when I was growing up, calling someone “nappy headed” was insulting and grounds for fighting.

In 2007, radio personality Don Imus experienced how offensive the term could be when he was temporarily fired after referencing the Rutgers’ women’s basketball team as “nappy-headed hos” after they lost the NCAA championship game. His comment stirred up controversy that was particularly problematic for the black community. The first, and most obvious reason for the controversy as suggested by Schuler (2007) in her interview on NPR is that Imus, a privileged white male used “nappy hair” as an adjective to a negative. Imus’s comment separated the black players from the white players on the team. This divisiveness symbolized, when prescribed by outsiders publicly, that Blacks have not moved from their subject positioning. The comment represents the dilemma that Blacks historically and presently face in fitting into the social culture of everyday life (Ferguson, 2007). Whether we want to believe it or not, black hair perpetuates the domination of subordinated racial and gendered groups (Caldwell, 1997), and is what Gaskin calls a cesspool of racial politics that has historical and long-term consequences for the black body (1996). Blacks who wear natural “nappy” hair (i.e., afros, locks, twist, and other hairstyles without the use of chemical agents) are conceptually and visually impaired in mainstream society, which means they become disrupted black bodies. A disrupted black body refers to the things (i.e., hair, skin color, shape of nose and body) that distinguish black people from other people, resulting in heightened identification or self-denigration (Morrison, 1981) and resulting from social, economic, and political seclusion. When compared to the white ideal of beauty, natural hair exists in an uneasy coexistence (Ashe, 1995) and is yet another reminder that long flowing hair represents a conformed black body—a body manipulated through the use of hair straightening agents, skin-lightening cremes, and plastic surgery in order to be socially acceptable to the majority. This kind of change is partially related to deflecting one’s own racial identification, yet emphasizes how social and cultural ideas of beauty are further transmitted through the body beyond skin color.

Second, the Imus comment was a put-down of Black women and was deeply offensive to those like Renee Ferguson, a 2007 Nieman Fellow and investigative reporter for
WMAQ TV, NBC-5 in Chicago, Illinois, who had emotionally liberated herself from being judged by what was occurring on the outside of her head rather than what was going on inside her head (2007). In early American history, black skin and coarse hair marked slaves as unintelligent and unattractive (Morrow, 1973). If a slave could pass as White, the kink of the hair was the true test of blackness; therefore, runaway slaves, who could pass for White, cut their hair to liberate themselves from bondage (Byrd & Tharps, 2001). Byrd and Tharps (2001) and Walker (2007), articulate that many Blacks embraced their natural hair during the “Black Power” and “Black is Beautiful” era in the late 1960s and 1970s. This time period not only demonstrated freedom, but a black consciousness and identity untainted by majority views. Griffin (1996) and Lee (1996) contend that African American literature also theorizes about the black body through literary work (Annie Allen, Is your hair still political, and Zami), neo-slave narratives (Beloved and Dessa Rose), poetry, narratives and film (For colored girls who considered suicide, Nappy edges, Tenderheaded, and School Daze), and folklore (Sula, The bluest eye, Song of Solomon, Tar baby, Passing) as a means of raising consciousness. Imus’ comments were a big deal because they transcend aesthetic issues to suggest that black hair represents self-struggles socially, politically, and historically (Banks, 2000; Shukra, 1995; Simkins, 1990).

Lastly, Imus placed the phrase “nappy head,” a private context for Blacks, in the streets for public review; he exposed the deep connection that Blacks have with the residual effects of racial superiority, which is materialized through the dialectics or tensions of good hair versus bad hair. Many scholars locate the origin of the good hair/bad hair argument in the days of and following slavery (Byrd & Tharp, 2001; Little, 1996; Morrow, 1973). Byrd and Tharp (2001) note that there was a “skin-shade, hair-texture hierarchy developed within the social structure of the slave community” (p. 19) reinforced by slave masters who divided slave labor (house slaves vs. field slaves) on the basis of skin tone and hair texture. Additionally, house slaves could be sold for five times more than a field slave. As a result, Blacks have battled this ideology for decades within their own community and this is the subtext that surrounds Imus’s comments.

The purpose of this study is to understand a unique, but not-so-unique experience related to personal philosophies of natural hair in intraracial interactions. Intraracial interactions refer to ongoing dialogues within a specific racial community on specific topics that are multi-layered and complicated. This means the topic under discussion isn’t an easy task, but it is surrounded by an abundance of factors that cannot be easily unveiled or understood. What makes this study not-so-unique is that Blacks are not the only people with natural hair, nor do they have a particular epistemology or learning
patterns of experiences related to natural hair (Weitz, 2004). What is unique and perhaps more appealing is the role being played out by members who belong to the same community (intraracial interactions). The center of the discussion is on how Blacks uniquely impose a white standard of beauty on other Blacks, which is missing from discussions on natural hair.

These findings are an attempt to become conscious of how intraracial experiences play a role in understanding the ways that individuals describe the wearing of natural hair. They reveal that black men and women who wear natural hair are often confronted with estrangement from, and mandates by, primary association groups such as family, friends, and peers to accept a body aesthetic. This body aesthetic is dissonant to their own bodies, thereby conforming to an unattainable body. Data were drawn from videotaped interviews and focus group discussions collected in 1997, and these collected interviews will serve as data for investigating the disruption of black bodies in intraracial communication interactions. In particular, I was seeking to examine the following research questions: How do African Americans describe their experiences of wearing natural hair? What does natural hair signify? Given the exploratory nature of this line of research, an inductive methodological approach—like that which is inherent to phenomenology—was enacted. These methods assume a first-person point-of-view of how a person relates to the lived world that she or he inhabits (Lannigan, 1988) and follow a three-step process (Nelson, 1989).

First, data were collected from interviews with forty African Americans (thirty females and ten males) in fourteen personal interviews and two focus group discussions. Participants for this study were drawn from a large Midwestern community through nonprobability sampling methods. Recruitment was conducted by strategically placing fliers about the study on local college campuses, majority black communities, through word-of-mouth, and a local, black audience radio station. After receiving permission to solicit participants from business owners, a set number of individuals were interviewed and two focus groups were conducted. Fourteen separate individual interviews were conducted and two focus groups were formed, with a total of twenty-six participants. All interviews were video recorded face-to-face and transcribed later for analysis. All interviews were led by the author, who asked general questions concerning what they thought about the wearing of natural hair, and their personal experiences with natural hair. A questionnaire was used to gather demographic information including age, race, and education level. Participant ages ranged between 18 and 52, with a mean age of twenty-six. All individuals self-identified as African American with 78 percent (n = 27) reporting they had a college education, and 22 percent (n = 13) with no college experience. The second step involved a reduction of descriptions of
lived experience into essential themes. The third stage centered on producing an interpretation of themes.

**Thematic Insights: Understanding Conformed and Disrupted Black Bodies**

Descriptions of intraracial encounters provided substantial insight to the realities of black body politics—how black bodies are portrayed, represented, socially constructed, and constituted at the institutional level (i.e., media) that manifest itself at the micro-level—interactions with others. The crux of this analysis focuses on how participants perceive natural hair and how that perception is disrupted through experiences of wearing natural hair. In particular, I explicate three essential themes with their sub-themes: (1) Hair style versus hair statement, including the sub-themes “personal choice,” “cultural affirmation,” and “signs of resistance”; (2) Natural hair in captivity, which includes sub-themes “ascribed passé and African identities,” and “attributes of social class”; and (3) The disposability of black bodies, including the sub-themes undesirable and unfeminine.

**Hair Style versus Hair Statement**

One theme that emerged from this phenomenological inquiry focused on natural hair as just a hair style and the significance of natural hair as (1) personal choice, (2) cultural affirmation, (3) signs of resistance. From the perspective of participants, natural hair transcended the problems Blacks face in defining a black identity, to affirming a sense of ethnic pride, authenticity, independence, and personal choice. One black male, for instance, stated:

> When I think of natural hair I think of freedom and pride. Black people in general spend an inordinate amount of money on hair care products and it seems natural; it seems correct. They have a sense of who they are and where they come from and that makes me feel good.

Another black male described what natural hair signified for him. He states “It makes me think that they [natural hair wearers] are confident. That they are natural and more beautiful.” In other interviews, such as one involving a young black female with natural hair, more points of cultural affirmation are discussed:

> I also think that it is a pride thing because I know that generally it [natural hair] is going against the images you see portrayed in the media. You can go to any magazine rack and when you flip through you don’t see too much of that. You see blondes and things like that.
An older black male echoes a similar statement when he suggests that the natural black body is a sign of resistance. He states, “Oh, I love it. I love it. I think it brings more independence, and strong willedness. They are not caught up in the system. [They are] going back to the Afro thing.”

Although the natural black body was not interpreted as opposing straightened hair, discussion about the meaning of it went on. One female with natural hair regards the choice of wearing natural hair or straightened hair as creative and individualistic:

I think it’s great that they [straightened hair wearers] want to have their own style. I think it looks fine. If that’s what they want to do, that’s fine. It is individuality. I would want anyone to have the freedom of having their own creative style whether it’s natural or unnatural. What that says to me is do you understand who you are? Are you doing that because you don’t want to be Black, or are you doing that because that’s just your style? Do you tell people that that is a weave in your hair or are you trying to fake it some how?

A female with straightened hair focuses on making her hair easier to comb, “I can’t deal with the thickness of my hair and this [straightened/permed hair] is more manageable. I don’t think that the natural hair style would fit me.”

These examples highlight several key factors about how natural hair is perceived. First, most respondents suggested that the natural black body is about connecting to “blackness” or to a community of worldwide oppressed and stigmatized bodies. Anything that disrupts the standard is ridiculed and must be strong to survive it. In other words, natural hair is a developed sense of self-confidence, power, and consciousness. Second, natural hair is a sign of resistance—trying to exist within the dominant system and to maintain a cultural and unique self. Respondents noted that the natural black body is in a system that says you must conform to a particular beauty standard, and retaining your natural structure is therefore necessary for acceptance or success. This is apparent in the response “natural hair goes against the existing system.” Third, wearing either the natural hair style or straightened hair is individually motivated rather than socially motivated. In other words, it’s a matter of choice in how individuals wear their hair. Accordingly, participants related hair to the style of dress that “changes with the wind.” Individuals were seemingly in touch with diverse spheres of the black community, and perceived either style as a factor of personal difference. Not surprisingly, the pride and beauty discussed in the aforementioned narratives are not apparent in the experiences of natural hair wearers in the next thematic insight.
Natural Hair in Captivity

Although the natural body is liberating to the wearer in one sense, it is confining in another. Accordingly, individuals who wore natural hair often faced strong reactions because their hair was misperceived as passing for some other cultural group or lacking class status. This section explicates different sub-themes including (1) ascribed passé and African identities, and (2) attributes of class based on or nurtured in internalized prejudice. For instance, several women and men related stories of ascribed passé recalling how others had mistakenly assigned them to a certain racial-ethnic group because of the texture of their hair (e.g., “You got some Indian in your family?”, “You Puerto Rican or something”). A black female recounted this experience when she straightened her hair:

A brotha walked up to me one day and said, ‘How did you get hair like that. Black people don't have hair like that.’ I said, ‘Excuse me? I was born with hair like this.’ That was when I thought about wearing my hair natural. I had more questions when I had relaxed hair. Those were the most hurtful things I’ve heard. I’m either not supposed to have hair like this or something is in my hair.

The notion of good hair appeared to be rooted in biology and ethnicity outside of a black cultural identity. The implication is that the kink is vital to one’s blackness. Anything outside of that must come from another cultural group or some mixture thereof. This dynamic was also marked in the experience of a female who had an encounter with family members who accused her of trying to be too African:

It was for a holiday, Christmas. I went over to my cousin’s house and they were like, ‘You are taking this African stuff way too far. You are not African. You are American. You can be African American or even Black American, but you’re taking that African stuff way too far.’ They were making a correlation with natural hair, or short natural hair, with Africans.

The majority of examples where this theme was seen involved black women who faced being redefined by standards of beauty that are unattainable without reconstructing the self. Their descriptions of being labeled were by individuals who did not approve of their natural hair choice. In some cases it was a stranger, and in other cases it came from friends and family. Interestingly, some of the instances reflected being boxed into a category. For instance, one woman with natural hair stated:

It’s funny how black people will say African like it’s not a good thing. Like you're trying to be too Black; whatever that is. I think that once you start to
grow locks, there are these groupies on the other side that like to box you into a category that may not apply to you like being Rastafarian, an Israelite, even African-centered because I don’t think that everybody with locks is African-centered or conscious or righteous or all those other things that kind of come along with natural hair.

Two natural hair wearers, for example, described their experiences as relating to social class (e.g., having a good job and being well educated). In one instance, a female was told by her mother and grandmother after disclosing a desire to braid her hair “you can’t do this. You’ve been to college and you have an education, you have a job.” The other woman was interviewing an elderly woman for her book. At one point in the conversation, the elder leaned over to make a statement about the interviewer’s research assistant, who wore locked hair, “she so smart, why don’t she do something with her hair?”

As so indicated in these passages, the stigma of hair is related to passing as others, too African-centered, and status. Labels not only pathologized black features, but demoralized others as unattractive, uneducated and inferior. “Good hair,” as the politics of black identity, assumes certain privileges and benefits that kinky hair cannot afford you. With status, one can do better with one’s hair. Straight hair decodes to financial viability. In short, this theme focused on how natural hair punishes those who step outside of social norms, indicating that hair is a means to an economic end, but is not truly about freedom.

The Disposability of Black Bodies

The interviews featured a number of instances whereby individuals were disparaged because of their natural hair, and devalued and labeled as lacking beauty by others. The hair policing resulted in disposing of the black body with sub-themes related to gender and sexuality. This theme was most evident within the descriptions provided by three women with natural hair. In each of the narratives, individuals reported that there were clear thoughts about being less feminine or lesbian. For example, one female described a situation with a friend:

Women are supposed to have long hair. It doesn’t matter if it’s permed or not, but they are supposed to have long hair. With me cutting my hair, I am not feminine anymore.

This statement is indicative of the theme of disposable black bodies, in that the body is no longer an object to be desired. As this story suggests, the respondent has somehow de-emphasized her feminine persona by cutting her hair short. Another
example was described by a female who cut her hair and went home to visit her mother. She stated:

I walked into the door and my mother standing toward the stairs took off my hat. She looked at me and said, “You had such gorgeous hair.” And she turned around and walked away and she did not speak to me the whole weekend. The thing that I don’t think she realized was that I still have gorgeous hair.

A similar dynamic of disposable black bodies was apparent in narratives regarding sexuality. In several instances, people who cut their hair reported being perceived as lesbian. The following example from a natural hair woman nicely captures this type of experience with her grandmother when the word “dyke” was used to demonstrate the disposability of her body by associating it with being lesbian:

It seems like either you’re trying to be Afrocentric or you’re trying to be a lesbian. It’s always something. There is never a middle ground. When I got my hair cut, I came home, and my grandmother was like “you look like a dyke.” And there was so much venom in the way she said that. You know, I was really hurt, but it’s always perceived as one or the other, not an extension of who you are, where you are right now. There is always something outside of you motivating you, or it can be internally you. It could be something practical like I got tired of getting up an hour before a class to beat the girls to the shower so I could curl my hair and looking like Penny on Good Times (black cast sitcom that aired in 1974) with burns on my forehead and the back of my ears and stuff because I didn’t take care of my hair.

Respondent experiences also contained descriptions of prejudicial commentary from other Blacks. Similarly, a black gay male states his experience with continually being defined and not accepted by friends due to his locked hair style:

Black gay male culture is very Eurocentric. They were like, “why are you doing that to yourself?” For me it was alienating. They were still my friends, but when they would come to my house they would tell me how much they hated my hair and how ugly it was and how they wished I would stop trying to be something I wasn’t. It was the hardest thing because I really didn’t have support from my friends, and my family thought I was trying to be African or something.

Here femininity still tends to rest solidly on a white beauty aesthetic. The natural beauty of Blacks is not held in high regards unless it mirrors that of whiteness or is
associated with something other than just black. The implication is that the black body is estranged from its naturalness and is intraracially devalued. Manyani (1977) agrees and further notes that individuals are alienated from their bodies, and that when the body is emotionally mutilated, it is incomplete and marred. Negative self-evaluation arises from this mutilation and creates a conflict between the ego and the body. This ruptured self manifests itself in the body to distinguish good hair and bad hair.

Furthermore, these unattainable aesthetics create problems in relating to the natural black body because the body to be experienced intimately is feminine and White. The Eurocentric ideal beauty is most adored and sought after. Having short, nappy, unstraightened hair is not desirable. As one gay male in the focus group echoes “Even in black gay male culture, drag queens long to impersonate white women.” The shared narratives suggest there are popular perceptions surrounding the natural black body whether gay or straight; interracial or intraracial.

**Conclusion**

Examining the ways in which individuals experience wearing natural hair is instrumental to the ambiguity associated with the use of the phrase “nappy headed.” Although a disrupted black body is most commonly understood from institutionalized roles, arrangements, and meanings (Mercer, 1987), it can and does function as cultural affirmation and versatility (Jeter & Crittendon, 1994). In the context of the narratives, natural hair intraracial experiences addressed the ideals of attractiveness as evidence of a not-so-distant past grounded in oppression. Accordingly, descriptions of interactions with same group members often times denigrated black bodies as lacking femininity and desirability. The maintenance of intraracial hierarchies and the expression of natural hair, most often focused on ideas of one’s identity expressed through making hair statements through their hair styles. However, hair described as captivating and disposing of black bodies was the reconstruction of mainstream constructions of beauty in intraracial interactions where individuals’ black bodies were devalued by individuals in the same cultural group. In the final analysis of it all, the controversy surrounding Imus’s “nappy headed ho’s” comment was clear reminder of how the black community maintains age-old hierarchies between themselves about hair textures and standards of beauty. His comment was an opportunity to deal with the hurtfulness. The rejection of natural hair at the intraracial level of analysis where communication is happening among African Americans, points to processes by which individuals shape their social and community climate. The intraracial interactions beg for theorizing natural black hair as an important identity of black people (Spellers, 2002) and promoting intraracial harmony.
This study is significant in that it provides insight into how members of the same group celebrate, define, adopt, and redefine natural hair identities socially and politically (Shukra, 1995). Many individuals described the stigma of their hair in interpersonal interactions with others who were the same as them. One contribution of the study is that these narratives are reflective of the importance of hair in the black community. Second, this topic is an important effort in the development of a critical approach to intraracial communication—one in which hierarchical maintenance structures are acknowledged and studied. Third, this study uses these men and women's experiences to seek knowledge related to the power dynamics that occur both at the interpersonal level and the social level with respect to traditional signifiers of superiority (i.e., race, sex, sexuality, and ability). Having discussed these issues in relation to black hair/black body politics lends itself to commentary directed toward creating a space for nappy hair to be conceptualized as beautiful hair. One respondent says it best as she describes her natural hair epiphany while using a product to straighten her hair: “One day I was perming my hair. I had this take home perm set from the beauty supply store that came with hair grease and gloves. When I put the gloves on my hands to apply the perm, it finally hit me that anything I need gloves to apply should not be used on my head.”

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Camara discusses the impact of hair choices upon intraracial communication among African Americans. Which of her six sub-themes do you think most challenges these conversations?

2. Based upon the narratives in this chapter and your own experiences, can hair be used as a political statement? Why or why not?

3. Why do you think Camara included the Don Imus controversy in this chapter? What issue/s does the controversy raise about race and gender in our society?

4. What is the difference between a conformed black body and a disrupted black body?
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