

Jazmine Beatty

ENG 1310- Coates

Essay 4

08-08-18

### The Defining Feature of the Black Race

In the early 2000's, African American singer-songwriter India Arie released a song entitled, *I Am Not My Hair*. This song has resonated with many people, especially women, as it tackles the subject of self-acceptance in a world that is constantly segregating people by their appearance and more absurdly, by their hair:

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am not your expectations,

I am not my hair

I am not this skin

I am the soul that lives within

Good hair means curls and waves

Bad hair means you look like a slave

At the turn of the century

It's time for us to redefine who we be

The ideal of what is and is not “good hair” has been perpetuated throughout time, directly affecting people’s quality of life. Black women specifically have been targeted because their naturally curly and/or coiled hair textures do not fit society’s White standard of beauty. When

comparing the multitude of curly hair textures among Black people, looser curls have always been more favorable because they're closer to being straight. While hair standards affect Black men as well, it is important to note the association that hair has with beauty and femininity. The desire to achieve a White standard of beauty has been conditioned in the psyches of Black women, and as a result, enforces discrimination against coarser hair textures — both within and outside of the Black community.

African Americans have been straightening or altering their hair since the abolishment of slavery because of the stigma that is propagated in American society, the promotion of White beauty standards and the hatred of Blackness. Long, straight hair is not only desired, but expected. Like race, the notion of good hair is a social construct that has, through centuries of reinforcement, “become naturalized” (*Good Hair*). It's so normal that people often don't realize they're enforcing the stigma, and therefore almost never consider where the concept derived from. Since the beginning of slavery in the United States, Black people were put in a position of inferiority because of their physical appearances, and White cultural values were forced onto them. As discussed in Byrd and Tharp's book, the White European settlers who purchased people from Africa would shave their heads upon capture. This power-establishing practice devalued and dehumanized African captives (Byrd 42). Thus, the White settlers were able to shape them into animals rather than human beings, and the slaves' sense of identity was lost. Slaves were constantly taught to hate and shame not only their skin, but also their hair. For most slaves, all they knew were their plantations and their masters. They had no way of knowing that their hair could be anything more than worthless. As the original African slaves died off, and White slave owners continued to rape their slave women, the multicultural hair textures of their offspring made them more favorable (Byrd 59). The biracial slaves often had lighter

complexations and looser hair textures. They were of higher status than other slaves. Although still devalued and degraded, they were usually made into house slaves (maids butlers, etc.) because they were closer to White and seen as more beautiful or acceptable. Darker skinned Blacks with coarser hair were considered closer to being African, and therefore of the lowest value.

This negative belief system was internalized by slaves and passed down generationally. Black people have been brainwashed into valuing looser curl textures and shaming tighter ones. Following in the footsteps of the White slave masters before them, many Black people established their own set of discriminatory rules. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Black organizations, such as churches and colleges, performed admission tests: (1) the brown paper bag test in which only the Black people who were lighter than the bag were admitted, and (2) the fine tooth comb test, which stated that if the comb did not go through a person's hair, that person would not be admitted (Byrd 67). These organizations reinforced the special treatment of lighter-skinned, straighter-haired Blacks because history had shown that those characteristics were superior — and often equated to success. In American society, where the dominant group is White, the default setting to expand one's opportunities is to appear whiter. African Americans began associating their hairstyles with their ability (or inability) to achieve economic success in a segregated society (Byrd 57). African American women have struggled for centuries to invent methods of straightening their hair to conform to White America's hair rules and thwart the perception that they are different from, or less capable than, their White colleagues.

Making sense of all of this hair controversy can seem daunting or irrelevant, but it's important for people to understand the intersectionality of race and hair as it relates to Black women. Black women are constantly judged by the hairstyle choices they make (or don't make).

While it is true that people of any race can be judged based on physical attributes like hair, there is no negative perception connecting the hair and race of non-Black people to their racial identity. However, there is a direct link between the natural hair of a Black person and a stereotyped racial identity. Dr. Valerie Johnson, an African American political scientist, described her experience of being denied an assistant position for an African American male who had recently been elected to become one of the first Black county commissioners in Fulton County, Georgia. He told her that “[he] really wanted to give [her] that job, but the reason why [he] couldn't was because there would be times when [she] would have to stand in for [him] and [he] just didn't know how [his] white constituent would be able to handle [her] hair” (*Good Hair*). Dr. Johnson made the choice to wear her hair in an afro. The afro is often a symbol of revolution because of its association with the Black Power Movement. It can be seen as a radical statement, or just untamed, even though many Black people have hair that naturally expands outward into an afro. The commissioner, in fear of the perceptions of others, decided to eliminate the potentially problematic situation. Dr. Johnson was an exception to the unwritten rule that requires Black women to straighten their hair.

In recent years, popularization of natural hair and the Natural Hair Movement have skyrocketed. Many Black women are going natural, growing out chemical straighteners, also known as relaxers, and reverting back to their natural curl patterns. Today there is a plethora of natural hairstyles and a variety of hair products on the market made for the diverse textures of Black hair. In 2011, Black celebrity hairstylist Andre Walker created the hair typing system: 1 is straight, 2a, 2b, 2c are wavy, 3a, 3b, 3c are curly, 4a, 4b, 4c are coiled and kinky. While this system can be a great tool to navigate proper hair care, it also can further enforce discrimination by promoting a hierarchy of hair types. Walker even said that people with Type 4 hair could

benefit from relaxers or texturizers since their hair is fragile and difficult to manage, making style options limited (Wallace). This statement was extremely biased — and false. With proper hair care, any hair type is manageable. His personal comment on the system that he created validifies the general assumption of ranking hair types from greatest to worst or prettiest to ugliest. The ranking of hair can be paralleled with the classifications of skin complexions. Black people are ranked on an interconnected scale of hair types and skin hues that verifies them as good or bad/ acceptable or unacceptable.

Some Black people constantly worry about the impressions they make on others, usually in a desire to avoid the negative stereotypes associated with their race. One interviewee in the film, *Good Hair and Other Dubious Distinctions*, discussed how the negative stereotypes associated with darker skin affected his life. He was teased in high school, and called ape by fellow Black students. Other derogatory names mentioned in the film were jigaboo, tar baby, and nappy head. There are many African American people who despise coarser hair textures because of what society has taught everyone — it's dirty and untamed. In a 2009 special on the Tyra Banks show, Ms. Banks — an African American supermodel who, growing up, struggled with accepting her natural hair — examines the attitudes of African American girls and their mothers on the topic of good hair. Shantae, one of the mothers on the Tyra Banks 'Good Hair' special, discusses that she specifically only dated, and ended up marrying, outside of her race so her children would have pretty hair. Unlike herself, she believes that her daughter has nice hair. Shantae experienced a lot of skin and hair hate growing up; she didn't want her kids to go through that. However, rather than teaching her children love and acceptance, she continued the vicious cycle of hair shaming that was imposed on her as a child.

White beauty standards are so deeply rooted within society that it's hard for people to see past the norm and embrace new ideas about subjects like hair. For many people, there is a sense of obligation in appearing White. The effects of this obligation lead to the "double marginalization of Black people, one from external forces, the other from internal forces" (*Good Hair*). The perceptions that Black people have of themselves don't only stem from self-inflicted beliefs and practices, the way they see themselves is also greatly influenced by the views of non-Black people. Outside of the black community there is an "unconscious bias" towards favoring light-skinned Blacks (Monroe 50). Darker Blacks are associated with illiteracy, aggressive behavior, and poverty. Lighter Blacks, on the other hand, are typically associated with positive attributes, such as wealth, intelligence, and attractiveness. When discussing the effects of colorism on education, Monroe states that "teachers may . . . [take] their [light skinned Black mother's] concerns more seriously" and assume "that they . . . are appropriate role models. By the same token, stereotypes about unmarried, undereducated, and poor Black mothers may affect dark women with unique force" (50). The attitudes people have towards skin tones, whether they're aware of it or not, can have harmful effects. Generalizations about an entire group of people can lead to conflict and misunderstandings because people make assumptions that aren't necessarily true. This can be especially detrimental to the mental state of young people. Monroe mentions the response of a research participant, "I remember my young cousins growing up who were lighter skinned and had the good hair, . . . they were just expected to be smart, to say smart things . . . I was never expected to be smart" (49). People often grow up believing that every person falls into a category that defines who they are and how they should act. Creating a false sense of oneness within categories (i.e. races/ ethnicities) and not recognizing the individuality of each member, can isolate the individuals within a group.

The right of self-expression through natural hairstyle choices in recent years has been monumental in enhancing not only the self-worth of Black children and adults, but also in changing the negative social and cultural perceptions other people have about African Americans. On the surface, “hair seems to be such a little thing. Yet it is the little things, the small everyday realities of life, that reveal the deepest meanings and values of a culture” (Caldwell 370). Hair shouldn’t define a person’s character, but it plays a large part in the way people are treated. Progress in eliminating racism and sexism cannot be made until we “eradicate negative stereotypes about [B]lack womanhood” and Black hair (Caldwell 372). People can overcome the discrimination that American society enforces by being aware of how stereotypes are skewing their perceptions of others, and then making the conscious decision to block out those ideas. The true essence of the Natural Hair Movement is to fight against assimilation, conformity, and the hypocrisy of America. This movement promotes the ideal American philosophy of independence. The message of the Natural Hair Movement encompasses a feeling of empowerment; it embraces uniqueness and versatility. The natural hair community today also dives into educating people on natural hair care. The wide range of social media outlets today are helping to shed light on the true essence of Black hair. Internet outlets like YouTube offer users a diverse platform for creating and watching natural hair videos about styling strategies, as well as hair care regimes for various curly hair types. Representation of coarser textures is still limited, but the gradual acceptance and understanding of all Black hair textures will hopefully destabilize the inequalities within societal hair standards.

## Works Cited

- Byrd, Ayana and Lori Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. St. Martin's Press, 28 Jan 2014.
- Caldwell, Paulette. "A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender." *Duke Law Journal*, 1991, pp. 365-396.
- Good Hair and Other Dubious Distinctions*. Directed by Camille DeBose, SOC Media Films, 2011.
- India Arie. "Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationship." *I Am Not My Hair*, Motown, 2006, [www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=29927](http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=29927).
- Monroe, Carla R. "Race and Color: Revisiting Perspectives in Black Education." *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 55 no. 1, 2016, pp 46-53.
- The Tyra Banks Show. "What Is Good Hair?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Megami284, 17 May 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0DgVijM7Z8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0DgVijM7Z8).
- Wallace, Tracey. "Andre Walker Talks Down Kinky Hair- A Response." *Curly Nikki*, TextureMedia, 15 July 2011, [www.curlynikki.com/2011/07/andre-walker-talks-down-kinky-hair.html](http://www.curlynikki.com/2011/07/andre-walker-talks-down-kinky-hair.html). Accessed 08 Aug 2018.