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**DETANGLING BLACK HAIR: HAIR JOURNEYS, DISCRIMINATION, AND
RECONCILIATIONS OF CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AMONG CLAREMONT
COLLEGE STUDENTS**

by

AMALIA RAQUEL BARRETT SINGMASTER

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR SEO YOUNG PARK
PROFESSOR VANESSA C. TYSON**

MAY 5TH, 2021

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Introduction

It seems like every so often a non-Black celebrity inevitably wears another Black hairstyle. Social media and the news that covers it run abuzz, announcing “She did it again,” accompanied by their Instagram post picturing them in cornrows or some other style. In rolls the comments on the photo that hatefully shout, “Give credit where it’s due!”, or the questions that read, “Did she really mean to though?”, or the confident supporters that write “So beautiful,” “Girl wear what you want, they look cute,” “Hairstyles belong to no one.”¹ Such is the cultural appropriation of Black hair in America, where non-Black people don well-known Black hairstyles without citing their sources. Often such appropriators are non-Black celebrities, as their “new” and “unique” hairstyles are met with praise and positives. But where does this leave Black women? They remain targets of racial discrimination based on their Black hair, while non-Black women are celebrated for wearing the very same hair.

This thesis works to answer how Black women—and specifically, Black women and those perceived as such at the predominantly white institutions of the Claremont Colleges—feel in regard to this duality, while also showing that despite the preposterous nature of the dynamics, it is not anything new. What is new, to me at least and hopefully to readers, is the breadth of techniques my interlocutors use to understand these circumstances and the ways that they explain and reconcile them. Yet, even with the diversity of perceptions and experiences, there remains a commonality throughout my interviews that was both comforting and exciting to see, as these Black women and those perceived as such have come from different places around the world, have different hair textures, different experiences they attribute to their hair, and are overall distinct individuals. And still there are strong connections and similarities in the way they speak

¹ Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian), “Bo Derek braids.” *Instagram*, February 13, 2013, https://www.instagram.com/p/VsE5XhOS_G/?hl=en.

about their hair and their lives that shows there is more to this topic that deserves to be explored, even further than I am able to in this senior thesis.

This ethnography works to answer such questions as: how do Black women/those perceived as such at the Claremont Colleges wear and describe their hair and what experiences in their life do they relate to their hair? What challenges related to hair do my interviewees perceive in life outside college? How do my participants actively reconcile and critically rationalize the dynamic between Black hair being worn by Black women and by non-Black women? What patterns appear in my participants' logics regarding why non-Black women desire Black hair and are rewarded for wearing it? In this ethnography I will detail the ways my participants perceive this dynamic and show that, while there are innumerable differences in the ways they understand Black hair in America, in their hair journeys, and more, there still persists common notions that discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair are not in any way contradictory. This thesis ultimately argues that they see both concepts as inherently connected and in need of some reconciliation for themselves, as they deal with the Black hair discrimination they believe they have (or have not) personally received and with how instances of non-Black women wearing Black hair fit into their ideas of American anti-Black racism.

The Basics of the Discrimination and Appropriation of Black Hair

In public discourse today, the conversation of cultural appropriation related to Black hair often gains new examples. Cultural appropriation is generally defined as “the unacknowledged and/or inappropriate adoption and use of customs, practices, ideas, and other cultural aspects of a group by a typically more dominant group.”² While this basic definition is constantly expanded upon and complicated, as my interviews in the later chapters suggest, the essence of the cultural

² *Oxford Languages*, s.v. “Cultural appropriation,” accessed April 4, 2021.

appropriation of Black hair we are discussing typically involves a non-Black woman in pop culture—such as Adele, Ariana Grande, or Kim Kardashian—wearing their hair in a common Black hairstyle and being praised for looking “gorgeous,” “unique,” and more. Non-Black celebrities have been known to wear such Black styles as cornrows, box braids, or bantu knots, not only appropriating the Black hair but at times referring to the styles with new terms like “Bo Derek braids,” “boxer braids,” or “mini buns,” which just works to further alienate the origin of the style. It is important to note, however, that this phenomenon is not limited to the rich and famous: everyday non-Black, non-celebrities are also included in this definition of cultural appropriation of Black hair, as seen in your friendly neighborhood non-Black man with dreadlocks or old school friend who got cornrows on their vacation to Mexico. While instances of celebrity cultural appropriation of Black hair are the most visible and discussed, this is an occurrence that spans much furtherer than the fame sphere. Recently, more and more media outlets have begun point out the appropriation, as national headlines read, “Kim Kardashian accused of cultural appropriation—again...”³ But such nominal backlash is never enough for them to stop appropriating, nor enough to stop the comments of viewers who praise them.

This severely contrasts with the experiences of Black women whose hair grows out of their heads already textured and curly, as they are discriminated against in everyday interactions, in the workplace, and in the classroom for the way their hair looks. The Black women and those perceived as such that I interviewed attest to this—even though not all of them mention discrimination they have personally been affected by, they acknowledge that, on the whole, Black women in America are treated negatively because of their Black hair. My research will

³ Griffith, Janelle. “Kim Kardashian Accused of Cultural Appropriation — Again — over Name of Shapewear Line.” *NBC News*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/kim-kardashian-accused-cultural-appropriation-again-over-name-shapewear-line-n1022116>.

help illuminate how some Black women and those perceived as Black women react to this phenomenon and reconcile its contradictory nature.

While there is definitely a personal stake in this topic, discussing such subjects with the people most affected is vital. My interviews provide a close look into the experiences, perspectives, and reconciliations of a group of people whose voices are not often heard. Throughout my conversations with these students, many made it clear that they feel as though Black women in America have been put down disproportionately and the discrimination we face for our hair and the lack of recourse for appropriators only adds to this. I made sure in each interview to let them speak freely and for as long as they wanted—some were over an hour and a half—and although not all of our conversation were quoted in this thesis, those that I have included display not only the diversity of my participants expressions and interpretations of cultural appropriation, but also some shared and consistent ideas that pervade every interview. In order to understand varied conceptions of cultural appropriation of Black hair, I also explored their hair journeys and experiences that led them to the beliefs they hold today. Much of why I wanted to write this thesis was to provide people that looked like me and were at a similar place in life the opportunity to speak their mind and have their words documented. No matter how much we have been told that we are small, this ethnography is meant to show that even the most specific thoughts that we have about the most specific topics are significant and worthy of note.

Throughout this work I examine in detail the resemblances and differentiations I see in the responses of my participants—and greater American society—as we frankly discuss race and hair. National media and non-Black Americans simply acknowledging the presence of cultural appropriation of Black hair does not work towards resolving the issue at hand, and this fact remains clear in my interviews. The Black women and those perceived as such that I spoke with

have always and continue to consider anti-Black racism against Black women with Black hair ever-present. Even through their different experiences in their hair journeys as they grew up as being seen as Black women with Black hair, it is not questionable fact—and this continues when considering cultural appropriation. There are some who think discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair are problems of the past that we have overcome in our ever more “post-racial society,” as they are contradictory forces that do not compound into a larger mechanism of racism.* There may even be some who do see both discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair as racist in and of themselves—but separately so. While others may be able to move on and write off discrimination and appropriation as not tangible and active issues since they have simply been acknowledged, my participants maintain a keen recognition that the two purposefully coexist and act together as a part of the larger system of anti-Black racism.

Discrimination and appropriation are not incongruous in any way, but have a dynamic that demands a reconciliation as they are two pieces to the same racist puzzle—where a reconciliation is a means through which to understand the situation, but not one where it is necessarily resolved, settled, and swept under the rug, but rather one that makes sense of the dynamic even if there is not a neat and positive resolution. Adrian Little, a political theorist, discusses alternative definitions to reconciliation that do not include the normative ideas of “[repair] and [compensation]” and that the term is “complex” in that it is used “in extremely different ways [to] say widely divergent things.”⁴ Little notes that in their research on reconciliation in Northern Ireland, it includes the ideas that reconciliation can mean problems are

* Many books and scholarly works, such as Catherine Squires’ *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* and Charles A. Gallagher’s *Color-Blind Privilege: the Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America*, discuss this idea of a post-racial America in more detail, displaying how this concept maintains racial power structures, obscures discrimination, and is often presented in media, especially since the election of President Obama in 2008

⁴ Adrian Little, “Disjunctured Narratives: Rethinking Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation,” *International Political Science Review* 33, no. 1 (2011): 84

not literally “reconciled—” that there are narratives involved that “are not forgiving, which do not apologize, which call for punishment,” even.⁵ “Former enemies” need not be brought together in this conception, and narrative reconciliation can act towards allowing “traumatic events [to be] narrated” without the pressure of “producing accord.”⁶

Such a conception of reconciliation is the one I am working with. This reconciliation is something that my participants tell themselves to make sense of the situation and continue to work through their own experiences of discrimination and the effects that the appropriation of Black hair has on them. Some concept—some idea—that to them synthesizes and boils down the dynamic to its essence, into a morsel or two that rationalizes the situation my participants and I find ourselves in. It is the way my participants “make it make sense” to themselves, which allows them to continue to persevere through such negative institutions and maintain their relationships to themselves; to their hair that they are born with and where they are in their journeys; to their senses of humor as a means of critical resistance; and as they venture into a world outside of college that may not be so welcoming to them and their hair.

Theoretical Frameworks

I will be using aspects of cognitive anthropology’s schema theory to discuss and describe the reconciliations of my participants that are mentioned above. Schema theory encapsulates the idea held within the cognitive sciences that a significant portion of “information processing is mediated by learned or innate mental structures that organize related pieces of our knowledge.”⁷ Essentially, we each have “schemas” for a wide variety of ideas, things, or concepts—like anti-Black racism or cultural appropriation—and each are like sets of our organized “generic

⁵ Little, “Disjunctured Narratives,” 86

⁶ Little, “Disjunctured Narratives,” 86

⁷ Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, *A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 49.

knowledge of any sort, from parts to wholes, simple to complex, concrete to abstract,” whose blanks were filled in and formed by the information or experiences we have had that pertain to that idea or thing. As we gain more experience and information that relate to and activate those schemas, they are expanded and built-upon as they are supported, or thwarted, or otherwise changed by new data. In Chapter 3, I will expand upon on this theory in relation to my participants’ reconciliations of cultural appropriation as I will classify each their schemas and understandings of the difference in treatment when Black and non-Black women wear Black hair into several categories.

Body politics is another—and larger—framework I draw from in this ethnography. Both race and hair inherently have to do with the body: our visible corporal presence that is perceived and judged accordingly. As Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon write, “bodies are sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings” and “the body itself is politically inscribed,” and influenced by the “containment and control” exerted by others onto certain bodies.⁸ The “daily micro-[histories]” where the body is controlled, policed, and contained by others affects the “macro-history” of those bodies.⁹ And through such consistent “social conditioning” of discrimination and prejudice and “normalization” of “better” and more desirable bodies, identity and power relations are manipulated and can result in reduced “individual agency and [the] subjectivity” of what is actually a desirable body among those marginalized.¹⁰

The body is “placed in hierarchized (false) dichotomies” such as “masculine/feminine;...able-bodied/disabled; fat/skinny; [and] heterosexual/homosexual,” and Black/white can easily be placed with such dichotomies and the marginalization follows suit as

⁸ Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon, “Body Politics,” *Politics, Groups, Identities* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1.

⁹ Laura Verdi, “The Symbolic Body and The Rhetoric of Power,” *Social Analysis* 54, no. 2 (2010): 112.

¹⁰ Brown and Gershon, “Body Politics,” 1.

the Black body exists as one of the major sites of anti-Black racism.¹¹ This racism is even further complicated (if that is even possible) with the inclusion of gender as the intersectionality of the Black woman* body makes it even more “vulnerable” in many ways.¹² And a major location of this intersectional bodily marginalization of Black women is in hair—Black hair, to be exact.

Hair politics, like body politics, maps social constructions and the effects of them onto the hair—and onto the body. Black hair on Black women has “beauty standards and social norms” mapped upon it and the perception of it by others furthers the discrimination of Black hair and contributes to the lack of discrimination non-Black people experience for wearing and appropriating Black hair.¹³ My participants prove through our conversations some of the ways some Black women and those perceived as such “demonstrate agency” day-in-day-out, by just existing every day in their bodies, as they “actively experience, negotiate, subvert, and reify larger concepts of beauty and systems of oppression.”¹⁴ The simple presence of Black bodies, particularly those of my participants, are socially and culturally loaded in the spaces we exist, as our hair takes on meaning beyond the tangible and we must experience the consequences of that. The ideas and imaginaries people have about our bodies—and our hair, in particular—affect our real bodies, which are detailed in the words of my interviewees.

I wanted to ensure that the exact words, phrases, and quotes of my interlocutors are front and center in this work, as their exact responses to my questions in our conversations are what is really important here. When beginning this ethnography, I knew a significant amount of page space must be saved for quotes, and I find this keeps with Black Feminist Thought traditions.¹⁵ Black women’s narratives are of the utmost importance to this ethnography, and I want to use

¹¹ Brown and Gershon, “Body Politics,” 1.

* I don’t want to confound gender-identity and sex with the use of “female,” even though “female” and “woman” are likely interchangeable in a majority of cases

¹² Kristin Denise Rowe, “Nothing Else Mattered After That Wig Came Off: Black Women, Unstyled Hair, and Scenes of Interiority,” *The Journal of American Culture* 42, no. 1 (2019): 23.

¹³ Rowe, “Nothing Else Mattered,” 25.

¹⁴ Rowe, “Nothing Else Mattered,” 34.

¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

their words as often as possible. Patricia Hill Collins' and the work of other Black feminist thinkers posit a concept central to this thesis: that while Black women possess a distinct perspective that maintains commonalities as a group, we are far from a monolith and maintain nuance as we each have different identities that complicate our intersectionalities and influence our own unique narratives and outlooks.¹⁶ This is the epitome of my conversations with these Black women and those perceived as such, as despite common experiences, those moments have been expressed and reacted to differently, resulting in both the diversity and homogeneity I see in my interviews. Throughout this thesis you will see large blocks of quotes purposefully placed for the sake of letting my interviewees say what they want to say in their own words and prioritizing Black women's narratives.

These three theoretical frameworks allow me to effectively discuss and base my ethnography within their contexts. Schema theory provides an avenue through which we can succinctly view the reconciliations and interpretations of my interlocutors as I illustrate their complex understandings of cultural appropriation and the most significant aspects of it, in their opinions. Body politics works to shed light on the historical and ever-present focus on Black women's body and Black hair that have led us to this point in time where I and my participants must still remain significantly preoccupied with our hair and how other people perceive and use it as we also come to terms with the politics of appropriation. Together, these two narrative strategies offer the stable footing required to analyze and discuss my participants and their views, all while keeping with Black Feminist Thought traditions and allowing their exact thoughts and opinions to be at the center of this thesis.

Positionality

¹⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

Along with elaborating on my theoretical frameworks, it is important to be explicit about this authors' own experiences. I chose this topic because these are the questions I have been asking myself for years: why can non-Black women wear Black hair and be praised, while I have been put down? While I am biracial and Latina, I still present as unequivocally Black—or “police-Black,” as my father affectionately has called it. Even if I am part Puerto Rican and part white, the world we live in categorizes me as Black and that is something that has affected my experiences, especially those pertaining to my hair.

I (believe) I have around 4a-4b type hair, categorized by widely used but inaccurate “hair-type charts,” and I have always had my hair natural, except for the few times I begged my mother for a relaxer that burned my scalp and did not even loosen my curl pattern a smidge. I was the only Black kid in my school for most of my life and that has not changed much since going to a predominately white institution like the Claremont Colleges. While I adore my hair and how far I have come with it, it has been one of my largest insecurities and a point of contention in my life. There have been times where I have been treated differently, looked down upon, ridiculed, and straight up harassed that I attribute to the existence of my hair as it grows out of my head. I can vividly remember over 20 instances over my 21 years of life where individuals—both children and grown adults—have come at me, trying to dig their fingers into my hair as if I am there solely for their tactile entertainment like a petting zoo. And yet, I have wracked my brain all night long some days wondering why the Kardashians can wear cornrows, but people said I looked weird and ghetto when I rocked the same look. Although each of my participants and I come to the table with different intersections of hair journeys, hair textures, family/school relations, locations, and more, we each have experienced some part of what it

means to be a Black woman or be perceived as one with Black hair in America, and those are experiences worth listening to and exploring.

Methods

To more deeply understand the direct experiences and narratives of young Black women and those perceived as Black women, I completed 26 semi-structured ethnographic interviews that ranged from an hour to an hour and a half over Zoom video conferencing. By conducting in-depth interviews with direct questions but ample opportunities for tangents, this format allowed me draw a significant amount of my participants thoughts and feelings on the topics at hand. Each participant identified as a Black woman or identified as being perceived as a Black woman, so I will continue to make this distinction—the analytic focus of this research did not require further specifications because our conversations pertained more to how they are perceived by others and the effects of that perception, rather than how they personally identify themselves.

My interviewees consisted all of students from the undergraduate Claremont Colleges, a consortium of residential liberal-arts colleges in southern California. These students presented a population going through many transitions in life as they learn more about themselves, their hair, and where that fits in our world. College provides more freedom to express themselves and their hair, and acts a time in their lives where each are understanding to a greater degree their and their hair's visibility—especially as they will be moving on and “out into the world” once they graduate. Most of my interviewees knew one another—and I knew a good portion of them myself—and they were kind enough to point me in the direction of one of their friends who might be interested or an acquaintance they knew that had many opinions on this thesis topic. As will be seen, the ease with which all of our discussions flowed proved that this subject is

frequently on their minds and reflected everyday conversations they appear to have often with one another.

All of the Claremont Colleges are predominately white institutions (PWI's), where on average each are 5.34% Black and no college out of the five (Scripps, Pomona, Claremont McKenna, Pitzer, and Harvey Mudd) has over 9.25% Black students in their populations.¹⁷ With Scripps College at 3.7% Black, that makes the 16 Scripps College participants (and myself) around 41.8% of the entire Black population of the college.¹⁸ Campus diversity was discussed at length with my interviewees—and although not all of our conversations regarding the topic are present in this ethnography, the Colleges being PWI's most definitely colored the perspectives of my participants.

Onward and Upward

Chapter 1 covers a basic history of the discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair in America. There, I unequivocally place Black hair within the histories of Black culture, just as each of my participants did and noted that Black hair was an essential part of the culture. By placing Black hair within Black culture, it becomes clear that Black hair is necessarily appropriated by non-Black people when they wear Black styles. Despite some celebration of Black hair and acknowledgement of the cultural appropriation by it, these are acts of virtue signaling that do not actually change the reality of being a Black woman with Black hair in America. Discrimination and cultural appropriation continue to persist in our society, and this is in no way news to Black Americans and my interlocutors.

¹⁷ "Scripps College Admissions," DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/scripps-college#admissions>; "Harvey Mudd College Admissions," DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/harvey-mudd-college#admissions>; "Pitzer College Admissions," DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/pitzer-college#admissions>; "Claremont McKenna College Admissions," DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/claremont-mckenna-college#admissions>; "Pomona College Admissions," DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/pomona-college#admissions>.

¹⁸ "Scripps College 2019-2020 Factbook: Assessment and Institutional Research," Scripps College, accessed February 27, 2021, http://www.scrippscollege.edu/assessir/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2019-2020-FACT-BOOK_PUBLIC-USE-1.pdf.

The next section confirms this further, as Chapter 2 begins discussions of each of my interviewees' hair journeys and experiences in their lives they attribute to their hair. While many note instances where they have been treated differently because of their Black hair, several others made specific mention that no such thing has happened to them. However, whether they indicated they had been personally discriminated against for their Black hair or not, each confidently reproduced the narrative that Black women in America are consistently discriminated against and hair represents one of the main locations of that prejudice.

My final chapter delves into my interlocutors' thoughts, feelings, and ideas regarding the cultural appropriation of Black hair. Both the similarities and differences between my participants are on display, as they end up with diverse reconciliations for the difference in treatment of Black and non-Black women when they wear Black hair, despite their similar starting points. In Chapter 3 I classify these rationalizations as my interviewees show that discrimination and appropriation are not contradictory and are actually just different sides of the same anti-Black racist coin that they feel requires and deserves some sort of explanation to themselves.

Chapter 1: Contextualizing Discrimination and Appropriation in American Culture

Both discrimination against Black hair on Black people and cultural appropriation are nothing novel. Throughout American history there has been an active and concerted effort to reduce the identity of Black people through institutional and interpersonal prejudice against Black hair, all while non-Black people take up the image for entertainment or popularity. We do not have to look far into the past to see these phenomena in unbridled action. Discrimination against Black hair appears to be ever-present, as connections can be effortlessly drawn from 1700's chattel slavery norms, to the Jim Crow period minstrel activity, to Civil Rights era court cases, to today when our fathers still worry for us if our hair is not "neat" enough to be in public, as one of my interlocutors Dominique* noted.

In recent times, such discrimination has been labeled more explicitly, as mainstream media and the American public have gained some sort of basic understanding of Black hair discrimination and appropriation. Today you will not see a news article about a celebrity with box braids or a child kicked out of school because of dreads without some critique embedded. Headlines today technically point out the cultural appropriation and discrimination—even policies have been passed that not only display a knowledge of the racism situation but also a willingness to acknowledge and educate the public about these issues.

Yet, I argue these acknowledgements of what Black Americans already knew to exist are cursory and unthorough at best and act as more as virtue signaling of our supposedly eminent progressive "post-racial future," rather than actually holistically working towards solutions to discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair. The perpetrators who are singled out by these articles about and policies about discrimination are never significantly reprimanded—no

* Pseudonyms for each of the participants have been created to ensure anonymity and confidentiality

one has lost their careers, and interpersonal racism based on Black hair is still rampant—which muffles the oomph of the critiques and furthers displays these attempts as more gesturing than substantive change. We as a society have not come as far as some may think, as my interviews will show current and ever-present damage to young Black women and those perceived as Black women due to racism against Black hair. My interlocutors are a testament to the fact that just because wider, white America now happens to know and label this prejudice, it does not follow that these shallow efforts have actually created any remarkable political and/or social difference in the field. In fact, with this lack of meaningful pushback against both appropriation and discrimination, it follows that the dynamic between the two persist as the prejudice against Black hair on Black women and the subsequent seizure, alienation, and commodification of Black hair by non-Black people only furthers the deep and negative impact as they work towards perpetuating anti-Black racism. In this chapter, I will detail these histories of discrimination against and the cultural appropriation of Black hair as they support my argument that such perceived progress away from negative and explicit discrimination and towards critique and positive celebration has not been such a seismic shift as other presume.

Placing Black hair within Black culture

In this ethnography I am basing my analyses on the premise that Black hair is a significant, essential, and distinct aspect of Black culture and that it is appropriated when worn by non-Black people. Susan Scafidi in *Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* states that “Within a cultural group, members may debate the authenticity of particular cultural products, a difficulty exacerbated by their constantly evolving nature,” especially in the context of property lawsuits, where she mainly works.¹⁹ While such ambiguity

¹⁹ Susan Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 10.

of authenticity may be the case in legal circumstances, Black hair, the particular texture and styles, has long been considered as Black body and culture, both by Black people and by the system of American racism. When asked about the relationship between Black hair and culture, each of my interlocutors noted the strong connection and importance of the relationship, saying “there’s no question about it” and that some even “find” their “Blackness” with their hair. I am basing this placement of Black hair inextricably with Black culture both on my interviewees’ opinions and responses, as well as on the extensive histories of particular Black hair hairstyles and their importance to Black culture.

Lori Tharp and Ayana Byrd note the cultural and social significance of each strand of hair for all African cultural groups in Africa pre-slavery.²⁰ Hair was the foundation of “complex language systems” that carried messages through hair for West African peoples.²¹ These styles were used to communicate status, ethnic identity, geographic location, and family, among numerous other demographics of an individual, all the while still holding aesthetic significance as well.²² Braids, twists, bantu knots, and more were transported from the Gold Coast to the Western world in the slave trade, and hair traditions and importance went along.²³ Much of the history with Black hair is connected to women who have more often donned these styles, and my thesis focuses on those Black women and those perceived as Black women because of this. There has been discussion that Black women culturally appropriate from white people when they wear straight hair—either as their own straightened hair, extensions, wigs, or weaves. However, “white hair” is not categorically racially attributed to white people, nor does it carry the significance Black hair and Black hairstyles have to Black culture and people, thus non-Black

²⁰ Ayana D. Byrd and Lori Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2014), 1.

²¹ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 2.

²² Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 2.

²³ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 2.

people are appropriating from Black culture by wearing Black hairstyles, while the same cannot be said for Black women wearing straight hair²⁴. Additionally, it is important to consider the unequal history of discrimination against Black hair, which has demanded assimilation to “white” styles for the sake of erasing critical aspects of Blackness. Further on in this chapter, I will analyze the logics of cultural appropriation as it relates to this.

Body Politics of Black Hair

As part of Black bodies, one of the most distinct and visible features, Black hair is not only inherently comprising Black culture. It is a contested terrain which social constructions of what is deemed normal and what is not can be mapped onto, and where competing politics of prejudice and resistance unfold. This political inscription with its accompanying control and containment is assigned not only to the Black body, and not only to the Black woman’s body*, but also affects the perception of and carries “material stakes” for Black hair on Black women’s bodies.²⁵ Even though hair, and Black hair specifically in this case, is something that is personal, it is visible and up for discrimination as “the intersections of race, class, gender, and region all make Black women and their bodies vulnerable in particular kinds of ways.”²⁶ It is almost as if Black hair is somewhere between our skin color and our clothes: while our skin color cannot be changed or as easily changed as our hair can, our hair is still attached to our bodies in a tangible way unlike clothes that can be changed. These circumstances make it so Black hair can be pressured and manipulated in ways that are determined for the sake of beauty standards and social acceptance, creating power dynamics and discrimination that can be acted upon. As

²⁴ Danielle Kwateng-Clark, “No, Whoopi Goldberg: Black Women Are Not Cultural Appropriators for Wearing Weave,” *Essence*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.essence.com/hair/whoopi-goldberg-Black-women-weaves-cultural-appropriation/>.

* I don’t want to confound gender-identity and sex with the use of “female,” even though “female” and “woman” are likely interchangeable in a majority of cases

²⁵ Kristin Denise Rowe, “Nothing Else Mattered After That Wig Came Off: Black Women, Unstyled Hair, and Scenes of Interiority,” *The Journal of American Culture* 42, no. 1 (2019): 22.

²⁶ Rowe, “Nothing Else Mattered,” 23.

Kristin Rowe, a professor of American Studies specializing in Black hair, notes, “For Black women and girls ... the stakes of having their hair ‘done’ in a ‘proper’ way while navigating public spaces are...[high],” to the point that we are “getting suspended, expelled, fired, and otherwise disciplined for the way [our] hair is styled.”²⁷ The body politics of Black hair permeate and enact real and detrimental changes to the lives of Black women, and this is supported not only in the history of discrimination that follows, but also the experiences expressed by my interlocutors as will be seen later on.

Black Hair Discrimination

The chronic oppression Black people have faced for the hair that grows out of their heads has been omnipresent, and definitive political action has only been created against it recently. Evidence of this discrimination has permeated through the centuries. Since the beginning of the slave trade as the first enslaved Africans were brought to American shores in 1619, white participants in the industry dehumanized the enslaved by likening Black hair to wool—a derogatory classification used to place Black people closer to animals than to white people at slave auctions, runaway posters, and other media.²⁸ This demoralization is key to the origins of American racism, and often time particularly targeted Black women as hair was used as a site to portray the ugliness and inferiority of darker women with thick, kinky hair as compared to white women with “long straight hair, with fine features.”²⁹ Slave traders were also known to shave the heads of incoming enslaved Africans, which “can be interpreted as taking away someone’s identity”—especially in the case of those peoples stolen for whom hair was of the utmost significant and shaving a head was the “highest indignity.”³⁰

²⁷ Rowe, “‘Nothing Else Mattered,’” 22.

²⁸ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 14.

²⁹ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 14.

³⁰ Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 10.

This alienation of Black identity caused by the original Black hair pre-slavery, in the form of oppression on hair, continued as traditional combs and care routines used in Africa were not accessible and available on plantations.³¹ In the 1700's, enslaved Black women wore rags on their heads to cover their hair from the sun during excruciating outdoor labor, while those that worked indoors had more time and requirement for more styled hair, attempting to imitate white standards and styles with flat braids against the head or even wore or imitated the look of wigs.³² Those lighter-skinned slaves, who were often results of plantation rape, had looser textured hair and objectively were treated more favorably than their darker-skinned and kinkier-haired counterparts.³³ In places like New Orleans the Tignon Law was enacted and forced the growing population of free Creole women to cover their hair—which usually was adorned with jewelry and plumes—with tignons, or kerchiefs, in order to denote they were part of the slave class, whether they were free or not.³⁴

Since these times Black women have been socialized and brutalized to believe their naturally curly hair was objectively “bad hair,” and “good hair” was signified by straight, long hair.³⁵ The hierarchy led to an internalization of the social hierarchy as unchangeable and innate fact—much like the “(false) dichotomies” seen with body like masculine/feminize and Black/white as discussed in the introduction.³⁶ Minstrel songs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries mocked Black people for their hair, with lyrics describing it as “nappy” and “wooly” which only furthered the dehumanization and solidified distinctions between “good hair” and “bad hair” that still permeate the Black community to this day.³⁷ Most participants mentioned

³¹Brenda A Randle, “I Am Not My Hair: African American Women and Their Struggles with Embracing Natural Hair!,” *Race, Gender & Class* 22, no. 1-2 (2015): pp. 114-121.; Rumeana Jahangir, “How Does Black Hair Reflect Black History?,” *BBC News*, May 31, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-merseyside-31438273>.

³²Byrd and Tharps, *Hair Story*, 13.

³³ Ayana Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, “When Black Hair Is Against the Rules,” *The New York Times*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/01/opinion/when-Black-hair-is-against-the-rules.html>.

³⁴ Donald E Everett, “Free Persons of Color in Colonial Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 7, no. 1 (1966): pp. 21-50, 34.

³⁵ Randle, “I Am Not My Hair.”; Neal A. Lester, “Nappy Edges and Goldy Locks: African-American Daughters and the Politics of Hair,” *The Lion and the Unicorn* 24, no. 2 (2000): pp. 201-224, <https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.2000.0018>, 204.

³⁶ Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon, “Body Politics,” *Politics, Groups, Identities* 5, no. 1 (2017): 1.

³⁷ Lester, “Nappy Edges,” 206.

this dichotomy, to either voice their criticism of it or express their personal encounters with it as family members, friends, and even strangers would comment on whether they had “good hair” or not. In order to have “good hair” many Black women painstakingly straightened their hair, with severe heat and chemicals, to inch towards a little bit more acceptance in white America. The first Black female millionaire, Madam C. J. Walker, made her fortune by selling chemical “hair softener” and the hot comb to Black women in America in 1905.³⁸ While many positives came out of this situation such as higher self-esteem among the Black community and a new industry for Black women to join in beauty schools, the advent of the hair-straightening comb in the early 20th century happened to consolidate the need for Black women to straighten their hair and imitate white styles—through hot combs and wigs—for most forms of social acceptance, to signify economic class, and be privy to professional opportunities.³⁹ This dynamic, coupled with the fact that there is a literal and profitable industry encompassing the commodification of the transforming of natural Black hair into white-adjacent hair adds to these pressures placed on Black women to fit into beauty standards and alter their bodies for the sake of public acceptance.

(Some) Celebration of Black Hair

By the 1960’s, a movement finally attempted and succeeded in showing that “Black Is Beautiful,” as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements brought about the beginning of the natural hair movement.⁴⁰ The afro, Black hair in one of its natural and untouched states, became a popularized style and symbol of political and social resistance as protests and rallies emerged, with activists like Angela Davis and celebrities like Michael

³⁸ Randle, “I Am Not My Hair,” 118.

³⁹ Tracey Owens Patton, “Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 2 (2006): pp. 24-51, <https://doi.org/10.2979/nws.2006.18.2.24>.

⁴⁰ Byrd and Tharps, “When Black Hair”.

Jackson alike wearing the style.⁴¹ With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was created to curb workplace discrimination—little did they know Black hair would be such prominent part of their work.⁴² In 1976 *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance* marked the first court case surrounding natural Black hair discrimination, where Beverley Jeanne Jenkins brought action against her employer for “denying her promotions...better assignments, and...ultimately [terminated] her employment because of her race, sex, Black styles of hair and dress.”⁴³ The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit ruled in her favor, saying Jenkins’ termination violated Title VII of the Civil Rights Act.⁴⁴

Some of these celebratory approaches surrounding Black hair continue to today, as Black women everyday are making the big chop by cutting off their hair that was chemically processed straight and allowing their natural hair to grow out. My participants spoke fondly of the peer communities they have created around mostly Black people and people of color who embrace and observe the beauty of Black hair in its many forms, as they consciously make an effort to increase positive dialogue about Black hair. Such acceptance and celebration are far different than appropriation and such a distinction should be noted: while both Black and non-Black people can support, love, and advocate for Black hair, there is a fundamentally different impact generated when one chooses to adopt the Black hair styles as a non-Black person and claim it to be celebration. Black hair remains an inextricable part of the Black community that is still misused and exploited. When it is detached and taken away from the body and community of people it originates from and is placed onto others’ body, the seizure cannot be called celebration even if the intent was positive. Even the commercialization of the natural hair movement, which

⁴¹ Byrd and Tharps, “When Black Hair”; Chanté Griffin, “How Natural Black Hair at Work Became a Civil Rights Issue ...,” JSTOR, July 3, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/how-natural-black-hair-at-work-became-a-civil-rights-issue/>.

⁴² Griffin, “Natural Black Hair at Work”.

⁴³ *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance*, (United States Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit 1976).

⁴⁴ *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance*, (United States Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit 1976).

was meant to be empowering to Black women coming to terms with their natural Black hair, has complicated the idea of natural Black hair celebration through the commodification of products for natural Black hair. Some of my participants like Kara and Treasure noted this, as the natural hair movement is co-opted and profited off, particularly by non-Black people; the movement becomes another way for non-Black people to profit from the control of Black hair.

While such cases as *Jenkins v. Blue Cross Mutual Hospital Insurance* signaled the beginning of widespread acknowledgment of Black hair discrimination, it in no way deterred the continuation of it. To this day not only are Black women and their Black hair still oppressed in professional workspaces, but the prejudice remains elsewhere throughout our society. Despite more recent political action against and acknowledgement of Black hair discrimination, Black women still have less access to career opportunities and are discriminated against within those jobs for hair; Black hair and styles have been barred from military such as with the Army's grooming policy AR 670-1; young Black children are suspended from school, kicked off of extracurricular teams, and pressured to cut their Black hair on site for apparently violated institutional guidelines.⁴⁵ One of my participants was told by school administrators to "take out her braids" when she arrived at school one day because they were and "unnatural color," despite proving her hair was the exact same color as another, white student. It was not until her mother, who happened to work at the school, "yelled at the principal" about the ridiculous direction to take out her braids that she, her mother, had just put in the day before, did the administrators

⁴⁵ Maya Allen, "The Messed-Up Reason This Girl Got Suspended for Wearing Her Natural Hair," *Cosmopolitan*, February 19, 2016, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/beauty/news/a53919/people-around-the-world-are-standing-up-for-natural-hair-with-the-support-the-puff-movement/>; Maya Allen, "If You Wear Dreadlocks, Your Employer Can Legally Ban Your Hairstyle", *Cosmopolitan*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/style-beauty/beauty/a3616858/dreadlocks-discrimination-case/>; Daily Mail Reporter, "12-Year-Old Girl Who Was Told to Cut Her Hair Is Welcome at School." *Daily Mail Online*, December 2, 2013, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2516925/Vanessa-Van-Dyke-12-threatened-expulsion-refusing-cut-afro-hair-welcomed-school.html>; Nia-Malika Henderson and Bethonie Butler, "Army Bans Natural Hairstyles Worn by Black Women." *BostonGlobe.Com*, April 5, 2014, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/news/nation/2014/04/04/army-ban-twists-other-natural-hairstyles-sparks-calls-racial-bias/wMzSDZV9j3LZMtHFbXUY9H/story.html>; Desire Thompson, "Texas Mom Says Daughter Was Kicked Off Cheerleading Squad For Refusing To Straighten Curly Hair," *NewsOne*, November 9, 2015, <https://newsone.com/3245416/daughter-kicked-off-cheerleading-squad-for-curly-hair/>; Dawson White, "Teen with Dreadlocks Suspended Because His Hair Is against Dress Code, TX School Says." *Star-Telegram*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.star-telegram.com/news/nation-world/national/article239482118.html>; Williams, Mará Rose, "Kansas Cheerleader Says She's Kicked off Squad after Coach Says Braids Are Too Long," *The Kansas City Star*, January 21, 2021, <https://www.kansascity.com/news/local/education/article248694865.html>.

“back down.” Such stories were ubiquitous among my interviewees, which my following chapters will display.

Cultural Appropriation of Black Hair

Cultural appropriation is defined by Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* as the “taking—from a culture that is not one’s own—of intellectual “property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history, and ways of knowledge.”⁴⁶ America has always seen itself as a nation made up of various cultures, as the imagined community of the U.S. bases itself on ideals of interconnected ethnocultures and more.⁴⁷ Some find such an environment ripe for the formation of stereotypes and discrimination as America has made it clear that there is an ethnoracial majority and disadvantaged minorities throughout its racist history, despite its melting pot public image.⁴⁸ To many, cultural appropriation is inextricably associated with minority culture oppression and is often committed for the sake of social or economic advancement.⁴⁹ In one of the earliest references to cultural appropriation in Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, case studies are discussed regarding how dominant white British subcultures would adopt “cultural or revolution symbols” of marginalized groups with specifically less social and economic power than others in order to build community.⁵⁰

As mentioned earlier, often appropriation is done for a profit: rarely do those interested in adopting aspects of other cultures stop at appreciation, and go on to imitate to “suit their own taste...or simply [for] a profit,” resulting in the commodification of culture.⁵¹ This has been seen

⁴⁶ Bruce H. Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

⁴⁷ Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?*, 5.

⁴⁸ Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?*; James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), ix

⁴⁹ Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*, 9.

⁵⁰ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 2011), 21-70

⁵¹ Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?*, 9.

throughout American history as others, typically white Americans, have appropriated Black culture heavily, blatantly, and often for profit. From post-slavery Jim Crow minstrelsy, to Elvis and greater American music, among so many others, there is no doubt that the cultural appropriation of Black people and culture is and has always been rampant.⁵² This commodification depersonalizes and alienates Black identities from their origins in Black culture, disassembling the complex concept of Blackness into individual consumable parts that can be picked over and chosen from like a candy store: the hair, the skin color, the body type, facial features, the styles, the lingo, and anything else put up for sale.

To the more specific aspect and time frame of this ethnography, the particular cultural appropriation of Black hair has been extant, even if not always obvious to the greater American public. In modern day, the most consistent offenders seem to be celebrities and other Americans in the public eye. There was time before each headline noted the term “cultural appropriation” before discussing one of these celebrities, and they used to clearly and openly praise the appropriations. One of the earlier examples of these media stories covered Bo Derek, a white actress who played the lead role in the 1979 film *10*, while wearing Fulani braids, a particular style of cornrows. In a 1980 people magazine article titled “In An Odd Twist, from *10*, the Beauty Biz Finds the Cornrow Is Oh, So Green” Derek is praised for creating a “cross-cultural craze” that had white Beverly Hills “phoning [B]lack beauty parlors in Watts” looking for appointments.⁵³ Despite the gross clarity of cultural appropriation of Black hair by non-Black people for profit and clout in this case, the American public loved Derek’s “green” new style and it is now her most iconic look that she no doubt economically and socially benefited from.⁵⁴

⁵² Andrew Nurse, ““In Defense of . . . “: Historical Thinking and Cultural Appropriation,” *Active History*, June 20, 2017, <https://activehistory.ca/2017/06/in-defense-of-historical-thinking-and-cultural-appropriation/>.

⁵³ Suzy Kalter, “In An Odd Twist, from *10*, the Beauty Biz Finds the Cornrow Is Oh, So Green,” *PEOPLE.Com*, February 11, 1980, <https://people.com/archive/in-an-odd-twist-from-10-the-beauty-biz-finds-the-cornrow-is-oh-so-green-vol-13-no-6/>.

⁵⁴ Kalter, *In An Odd Twist*”.

Since the 2000's, I would say the Kardashian-Jenner's, a celebrity family made up of mostly Kris Jenner's daughters, are the most common cultural appropriators of Black hair. Many older headlines that do not call out cultural appropriation for what it is, writing excitedly "Kylie Jenner's Cornrows Are Back!" or naming "Boxer braid hair...Instagram's favorite new hair trend after Kim Kardashian...[rocks] the look."⁵⁵ Even the use of "boxer braids" instead of cornrows or "mini buns" as opposed to bantu knots alienates the origins of the hairstyles, allowing appropriators like the Kardashians to erase Black people from the conversation and transform the style into something that is theirs to profit from.⁵⁶ Kim Kardashian even went so far as to call her Fulani braids "Bo Derek braids" in honor of Derek's styling of them in *10*, not only appropriating the style but also naming Derek as its founder.⁵⁷ Kardashian was lauded for her new look by commenters on her social media posts.⁵⁸ When some individual commenters—and not mainstream media—would point out the wrongdoing associated with wearing and mislabeling the cornrows, fans of Kardashian would fight back in the comments.⁵⁹ However, there is a significant and lengthy history behind these hairstyles, and when such styles are misused and alienated without repercussions as these older examples display, there is tangible damage done. While this may seem like a transgression only committed by the rich and famous, appropriation of Black hair is present in everyday life, with celebrity examples simply being the most visible and creates the status quo of reaction (or lack thereof). The insult to injury of such public appropriation by mega-celebrities send a message to the public that appropriation is an inconvenience at worst and a catchy headline at best, rather than an act of direct racial

⁵⁵ Brett Malec, "Kylie Jenner's Cornrows Are Back! Birthday Girl Sports Braids on Vacation in Mexico," *E! Online*, August 12, 2015,

<https://www.eonline.com/news/685665/kylie-jenner-s-cornrows-are-back-birthday-girl-sports-braids-on-vacation-in-mexico>; Deni Kirkova, "Instagram Goes Mad for Boxer Braid Hair Taking after Kim Kardashian and Katy Perry Rock the Look," *Metro*, February 17, 2016, <https://metro.co.uk/2016/02/17/boxer-braid-hair-is-instagrams-favourite-new-hair-trend-after-kim-kardashian-and-katy-perry-rock-the-look-5698685/>.

⁵⁶ Kiersten Willis, "Khloe Kardashian Is 'Bantu Babe' While Black Women Are 'Ghetto' for Same Hairstyle," *Atlanta Black Star*, August 10, 2016, <https://atlantaBlackstar.com/2016/08/10/khloe-kardashian-is-bantu-babe-while-Black-women-are-ghetto-for-same-hairstyle/>; Scafidi, *Who Owns Culture?: Appropriation and Authenticity in American Law*, 9.

⁵⁷ Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian), "Bo Derek braids." *Instagram*, February 13, 2013, https://www.instagram.com/p/VsE5XhOS_G/?hl=en.

⁵⁸ Kardashian, "Bo Derek braids.," Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian), "BO WEST," *Instagram*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BejDGW4FRRS/?hl=en>.

⁵⁹ Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian), "Hi, can I get zero fucks please, thanks," *Instagram*, January 29, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BejFTSImDk/?utm_source=ig_embed; Kardashian, "Bo Derek braids."

antagonism. This is not just a media phenomenon, but the visibility of such instances adds to the knowing erasure of the complex and painful inheritances of American Blackness by non-Black Americans.

Recent Acknowledgment and Actions against Discrimination and Appropriation

As of late, America appears to be getting the gist of this whole racism thing. That may be a bit crass, but it perfectly mirrors the frustration of many of my participants and others. As seen with these contexts and examples, there is extensive evidence of the presence of damaging cultural appropriation and discrimination against Black hair that was not always acknowledged by Americans—such histories have been swept under the rug as they were not widely and publicly recognized to exist and be negative phenomena. The headlines reading “Khloe Kardashian Rocks Cornrows” and Black women being more outwardly shamed for their hair was not so long ago, and it was only until recently did we see the entrance of basic colloquial understandings of cultural appropriation of and discrimination against Black hair on a wide scale in the U.S.⁶⁰ Upon first glance, it seems as though the general public has begun to be able to point out and label these bad things for what they are, both with political actions and an alteration in media portrayals.

Nowadays, every time a Kardashian or Jenner other celebrity wears a Black hair style, the headlines acknowledge the possible appropriating nature of it. “Kim Kardashian accused of cultural appropriation—again...,” “Adele accused of cultural appropriation over Instagram picture,” and “Katy Perry’s Cultural Appropriation Meat Grinder” are ubiquitous titles of articles today.⁶¹ I, personally, have not seen any media that plainly praises appropriations without some

⁶⁰ TooFab Staff, “Khloe Kardashian Rocks Cornrows & a Funky Denim Jumpsuit -- Like the Look?”, *Toofab*. January 28, 2016, <https://toofab.com/2016/01/28/khloe-kardashian-cornrows-denim-jumpsuit-instagram/>.

⁶¹ PA Media, “Adele Accused of Cultural Appropriation over Instagram Picture,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/sep/01/adele-accused-of-cultural-appropriation-over-instagram-picture>; Janelle Griffith, “Kim Kardashian Accused of Cultural Appropriation — Again — over Name of Shapewear Line.” *NBC News*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/kim-kardashian-accused-cultural-appropriation-again-over-name-shapewear-line-n1022116>; Jesse Mechanic, “Katy

form criticism anymore. And while the lack of efficacy of these critiques will be discussed later, the fact they are now present is something to remark.

In the realm of Black hair discrimination, the CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair) Act, or California Senate Bill 188 *Discrimination: hairstyles*, was signed into law on July 3rd, 2019 and prohibits discrimination based on hairstyle and texture by extending the definitions and purview of the California Education Code and the California Fair Employment and Housing Act of 1959.⁶² S.B. 188 explicitly acknowledges “the history of our nation [being] riddled with laws and societal norms that equated Blackness...to a badge of inferiority, sometimes subject to separate and unequal treatment”—an idea that pervades “societal understanding of professionalism, [as it] still is, closely linked to European features and mannerisms.”⁶³ This bill was the first of its kind in the States, and similar bills have been adopted in New York and New Jersey; are being worked on in other states like South Carolina; and have passed the House of Representatives in the United States’ federal Congress.⁶⁴

But What Has Really Changed?

Just because more Americans appear to know about and acknowledge appropriation and discrimination does not mean such racism has been resolved. I would argue such recognitions of discrimination and appropriation have been nominal at best—and I say so sadly. I wish it were otherwise, but the CROWN Act and media usage of “cultural appropriation” in headlines and articles has not solved the problems overall.

Perry’s Cultural Appropriation Meat Grinder,” HuffPost, May 5, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/examining-katy-perrys-cultural-appropriation-meat_b_592464e4b0e8f558bb2a3a.

⁶² California Congress, Senate, *An act to amend Section 212.1 of the Education Code, and to amend Section 12926 of the Government Code, relating to discrimination*, SB 188, Chapter 58, Statutes of 2019, introduced in Senate January 30, 2019, https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200SB188.

⁶³ California Congress, Senate, *Discrimination: hairstyles*.

⁶⁴ U.S. Congress, House, “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair (CROWN) Act of 2020,” H.R. 5309, 116th Cong., introduced in House December 05, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bills/116th-congress/house-bill/5309?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22crown+act%22%7D&r=2&s=1>.

Political policies like the CROWN Act have not created much of a dent in America's long-steeped history of Black hair discrimination, as it has no jurisdiction over interpersonal events of racism nor is it able to stop the Black women from believing there is something wrong with their hair due to their socialization. My participants still seem very hesitant to wear natural hairstyles to job interviews, and worry their hair is seen as unprofessional by others. Yes, something like the CROWN Act could curb workplace prejudice but Black women have to be comfortable to go in for the interview first. With cultural appropriation: yes, media outlets have begun to recognize and pre-critique celebrities in their articles before publishing their appropriated hairstyles, but that does not mean Kim Kardashian has suffered any negative consequences for her actions. When someone culturally appropriates there must be some form of sustained backlash that makes it clear that what they are doing is wrong; just pointing it out does not suffice. In fact, it likely causes a decrease in the political significance of calling appropriators out and leaves us not far from where we started. The issue does not reside only in the action of appropriation, but the idea that a minor slap on the wrist is enough of a rebuke for such an active participation in the continued legacies of racism. It is clear that we have not achieved a "post-racial future" if there is not even any critical inquiry into why appropriative behavior is necessarily racist.

Cultural appropriation as it exists today stems from the historical disassembly of Blackness and the commodification of its component parts; for Black women, a primary site of this is the physical body, and even more specifically the hair. The complex history of Black hair in America can be viewed through the lens of body politics, as meanings have been ascribed to natural Black hair that perpetuate discrimination even today. Black women and those perceived as Black women I have interviewed expressed and displayed the continued trauma and anger

they have experienced at the hands of Black hair discrimination and cultural appropriation, showing that even in 2021, Black twenty-somethings are still heavily affected by such actions, despite recent steps taken to alleviate such experiences. In the coming chapters, I will detail their narratives about their hair journeys and analyze their schemas regarding cultural appropriation of Black hair.

Chapter 2: Experiences and Narratives of Black Hair Discrimination

It was not much of a surprise to me to see the range of issues around hair I was able to have with each of my interlocuters, as we conversed in depth about their personal hair journeys, experiences, and opinions about Black hair and cultural appropriation. I had expected as much from hour-long conversations with 26 individuals, from across the country (and world), each with different hair textures, curl patterns, routines, and more. And yet, the eerie consistencies between each and every one of my interviews came as a delightful shock as I slowly realized most of my interviewees expressed the same pressures they have felt because of their hair; interactions with family, peers, and strangers; attitudes towards cultural appropriation; and overall sentiments about being a Black woman or being perceived as one in the U.S.

Specifically, the latter—being/being perceived as a Black woman—seemed to be a standard that was reproduced across every one of my interviews, as they discussed the intersectional discrimination and constant “getting the short end of the stick” of being a Black woman in America. Even my conversations with participants like Gina, who was born and primarily raised in East Africa, included tangents about the general treatment of Black women with Black hair in the States, with in-depth insights into the negative attention, discriminatory practices, and institutional racism and sexism we face. It appears almost as if—much in a similar way as Chapter 1 discussed—they’re all singing the lyrics to the same song:

However, while all 26 of my participants noted this same narrative of intersectional discrimination, particularly around hair, not all seem to think that standard applies to them. While a majority not only expressed this narrative and employed rhetoric of Black hair discrimination to express personal experiences of such discrimination, there were some that would express the narrative but note that *they* had never been treated differently because of their

hair. Of course, I acknowledge the possibility for a Black woman in America to say they have not been treated differently and never bring up any situations where they had. But some interlocutors identified the narrative, said *they* had not been discriminated against, and yet went on to speak about situations where I believe they had been treated differently.

In this chapter I will not only discuss the hair journeys of my interviewees as they live with Black hair in Black bodies in America, but I will also detail the consistent mentions of this narrative with the inconsistent perceptions of how close this standard hits to home. Despite whether my participants decide to place themselves within the narrative or out outside of it, the fact that they are still passionate about, believe in, and reproduced the narrative is a significant finding, cementing a cornerstone to their reconciliations of cultural appropriation. The interviews illustrate their active and constant negotiation with their own experiences with and the narrative regarding Black hair, as they analyze this hyper visible aspect of their bodies that is capable of receiving a brunt of the discrimination and the exertion of institutional power as they decide how visible they want Black hair to be.

The Implicit

As mentioned, something throughout my interviews made it clear to me that all of my participants seemed to be on the same wavelength. Just as my first chapter stated, even if white America does not notice the discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair (until of recent), all of my interviews expressed thorough and homogenous understandings of the topics at hand. While talking to my participants, it was often a fun conversation as I seemed to ask questions they all knew the answer to and they found it funny for me to ask such “simple” things. “Are you kidding me?” and “Is that really the question?” were phrases I heard throughout my interviews and not because the questions were easy, per se—many were opened ended inquiries

about their opinions like “Who, in your opinion, culturally appropriates Black hair?” or tailored questions regarding their own personal hairstyles. I have been asking versions of my interview questions to friends and family for years, and I never saw such standardized answers among non-Black respondents.

An array of explanations could be given as to why there is an implicitness within and between my interviewees’ responses, despite their distinct and individual experiences. It could be that the questions were too obvious for my targeted population: asking young Black women and those perceived as Black women about their hair, discrimination, and cultural appropriation might just be subjects they parse out more regularly than others. This would parallel their reproductions of the narrative regarding Black women and Black hair in the U.S., as these topics may just be givens considering they pertain to their lived experiences. The awkwardness and discomfort of talking about subjects about discriminations and possible trauma could lend to why humor was a common occurrence in my interviews—at some point in time in each conversation we had a good-spirited laugh or two, despite the painful nature of some of themes. While I will return to possible justifications for this humor and consistency later on, I find it important to begin discussing and describing my participants’ experiences and opinions in their own words.

Hair Journeys

It’s a give and take for sure...if I put time and energy into it...it definitely gives back. It’s a two-way street. – Opal

To tell the hair journeys of 26 of Black women and those perceived as such is a large task, but I can confidently describe each one as complicated. Even when I asked about adjectives they would use to describe their relationship with their hair, words like “frustrating,” “stressful,” “time consuming,” “caring,” and “positive” came up often, and sometimes within the same interview. Several described it as a “love-hate relationship,” and I could not agree more.

Each participant started their journeys from different places: some had their hair natural only when they were kids, while others had their hair straightened by varying methods at some point in time during their childhood. Whether it was using a flat iron, a hot comb (a literal hot, metal comb), a relaxer or perm (a permanent and strong chemical treatment that breaks down the disulfide bonds that forms curls), or keratin treatment (a semi-permanent chemical treatment), 24 of my participants straightened their hair with some regularity in their youth. Samira, a 20-year-old from the Southern US, said “[her] mom permed her hair at two...[and she does not] know why.” One interviewee, Kalani, did not even realize her hair was being relaxed, saying she “didn't know it was happening at the time:”

I was actually getting my hair braided...and I was like, “Oh, man, like they put this chemical on me” and now my hair is like, so much straighter—like it fucking burned for a while but it made like braiding my hair so much easier. And then I realized, like, “Oh, I just got my hair relaxed for the first time.”

Others remember “begg[ing]” for their hair to be straight, as Dominique recounted “screaming” and “forcing [her] mom to do it as a four-year-old.”

More than half identified as having some form of type 4 hair—the curliest/kinkiest type based on a highly debated hair-categorizing scale that groups hair by macro-categories of numbers between 1 and 4 and micro-categories of letters between “a” and “c,” resulting in hair types like “4c” and “3a.” And while a majority of my interlocutors expressed some form of love and appreciation for their hair—no matter their texture—they were quick to speak on the pressures they had felt as children to have different hair. For example, Tanya, a sophomore at Scripps College, detailed the “love” for her hair:

It’s a love-hate relationship...people around me didn't necessarily have the same hair type and so I guess that was like frustration and like, “Oh, why isn’t my hair like their hair.”

Tanya’s remark on the “love-hate relationship” resonates with many responses of my research participants, as their relationships have become embodied with the experiences and influences

their environments as children had on them and their hair. This is confirmed by other interviewees, as they echoed such sentiments with Kalani saying “I think because I was around so many white people, like I just didn't understand my hair for a very long time... it always seemed like a chore ... I definitely resented my hair for quite some time.” Eve noted she felt “like at first being surrounded by more... people that had straight hair, [she] kind of went through this identity crisis,” and even Aaliyah remarked, “In middle school, a lot of the girls... always had their hair straight and...had perms and I thought that people would like me more if I had straight hair, so I straightened my hair a lot.” Each show how much one’s circumstances around those that do not look like them, and the pressures of that, can affect their individual connections to their Black hair.

Even in the same breath, while describing the negative feelings associated with straightening their hair, some spoke about how good it felt for them to wear straight hair. Aaliyah, a 19-year-old at Pitzer College, had straightened her hair the week before I interviewed her, and described feeling “like a different energy... it felt lighter, I felt more comfortable, I felt like I could do anything... it just felt good.” I in no way intend to attempt to explain *this* reconciliation, but it just goes to display the complexity with which my participants exist with their Black hair.

Attending college marked a turning point in the hair journeys of many of the students I talked to, as it presented a space for new opportunities:

My probably freshman year of college where I would wear my hair and wear like my little fros and it felt good, like it felt nice because...once I outgrew high school is when I really started becoming like my authentic self and started expressing myself more through my hair. - Zaya

College was like the first time where I could sit down, like as an adult with people who had the same hair as me, who understood, like a lot more about who I am, in terms of like race and culture. - Kalani

But once I got to college, I got a cut and I was like, “This is it, like I'm going to prioritize my hair's health, I don't care if it's short, I don't care...what happens” and I just got to make that relationship better. - Samira

Once I got to college... I had more Black friends and I was more exposed to that type of culture again, like I definitely started...doing my hair however I want to... [In] college I definitely feel more confident and ... I could just do my hair and not feel judged or anything. - Cecily

When I came to college, I really started to explore, you know, haircare like, "Oh, I can use gels or conditioners." Freshman year[s]...when I actually started taking care of my hair and started... learning how to braid my hair and how to do lots on my hair. - Treasure

However, even though higher education has provided a new arena, not everyone's journey currently is in a positive place. Joy, a 22-year-old student from Texas, discussed how "there's definitely been times where [she] resented it." She noted that "I would say, it brings me a lot more stress than it brings joy for me." Gina had a similarly sobering sentiment, as she said she "never really liked [her] hair, I never really cared for it... I don't even have good enough hair to care for it."

In the coming pages I will discuss what my participants deem as "good hair," but I think it is clear how each hair journey is incredibly nuanced, and I wish there was the time to discuss each in the detail it deserves. Each of my participants are still actively going through their hair journeys, as they navigate college and eventually move on into the "real world." But at this time, they move through the world in such beautiful and assorted styles: some choosing to wear their natural hair out in fros and wash-and-go's; others in protective styles like braids or wigs; several have shaved most of their hair off and rock a buzzed and often-colorful close cut; and still others retain relaxed hair—and none are better, or more appropriate, or more evolved than the rest. It's all Black hair, in the eyes of my interlocutors.

Contested Visibility

My interviewees show consistent understandings of the ways in which their hair is a point of visibility to the public, both as an example of institutional diversity and as a means of assimilation into corporate culture. To exemplify this, I asked, "Hypothetically, say there are two pictures of you [the interviewee]: one with a natural hairstyle and one with a straighter/longer

style. Which picture would a job interviewer pick, and which would the Claremont Colleges pick to put on a brochure?" I had asked this question to them because I had expected a wide variety of responses, but this was the question where responses were uncannily homogenous.

23 of 26 said that a job interviewer would prefer the picture of them with the longer/straighter style—and that could be straightened hair, relaxed, or braids depending on the interviewee—rather than one with a natural/curlier hairstyle. When I asked what about that picture caused them to think a job interviewer would prefer it, words like “professional,” “put-together,” “clean,” and “familiar” came up often, and they worry that natural hairstyles would be seen as “messy,” “unkempt,” and “unprofessional.” Those that said they would not change their hair and actually wear a more natural hairstyle to an interview were those with looser textured hair. This juxtaposes the majority of interviewees who have curlier hair textures who said they wear their hair pulled, pinned, and slicked back or up out of their faces when going for interviews. There seemed to be a widely shared sense that job interviewers would feel more “comfortable” with Black hairstyles that were considered “neat” among my informants, and especially those hair types and styles that mimic properties of white people hair, or “good hair,” whether the hair is actually straight or just appears straighter and longer, like with box braids. The replication of this standard across interviews indicates the deeply held beliefs that my interviewees had for how their hair is perceived. Regardless of their relationship with their own hair, and the effort they put in during their hair journeys, it is clear there is an understanding that job interviewers, who sit in a particular position of power, bring in ideas that are directly descendent from centuries of anti-Black racism, particularly embodied in hair.

Some of my participants were even embarrassed to admit that they would change their hair for an interview, saying such things as:

It's messed up, but it's the reality of it: I would change my hair for a job interview, and that means avoiding wearing it out, just laying...it down or just having braids even. Yeah, that's, you know, it's the unfortunate reality. -Treasure

I'm not even gonna lie, 'cause my first thought would be like, "Should I wear a wig?" That would be my first thought especially if it's a place that I know is predominantly white...That would definitely be my first thought. - Tianna

Sometimes it is just like implicit biases, they're like, "Oh, I feel more comfortable with this person or the way this person is wearing their hair." - Samira

When you're trying to get a job, like, if I don't get a job, or if I got turned down for an interview, I wonder like, "Oh, was it because of my hair?" - Eve

Some even expressed that, in the moment, securing employment was more important than their own personal feelings about their hair:

I mean, I also want to make sure I get a job. So it's like, yes, I am proud and I love my hair, but if I have to do dumb shit and straighten it to get that ...To get somewhere in life and help people? ...If I have to give in to certain things? Oh, well. - Gina

I might not wear an Afro to like a job interview, maybe because I want a job...Sometimes girl gotta do what they gotta do -Azalia

Showing up to an interview, like what kind of hair I should have, like, "Oh, let me do a twist out real quick, or let me...wear a certain scarf or..." ...I [can] look like the type of Black people they trust or the type of Black people they...have confidence in or believe in... I know that my hair has that much power to change their entire opinion, perception, or whatever about my capabilities. When I was getting rejected from a whole bunch of stuff over a quarantine...I did a lot of job search...and I was getting rejected. I was like, "Oh, maybe if I try this hairstyle...maybe if I cover my hair entirely like with a scarf, and like tie it a certain way, or change my glasses"... And, you know, you get to a certain point where you're desperate and you're overthinking everything. -Joy

And to imagine the consistency I observed when asking which of 2 pictures the Claremont College would put on a brochure was even more evident that the prior question. 26 out of 26 interviewees responded—and quickly, too—that the 5C's would place the picture of them in a more natural, curly hairstyle. At least 10 of them laughed when I asked the question because they thought it was a joke or trick question, because *obviously* an institution like the Claremont Colleges would put their Blackest features forward. Even Kara, a first-year student, scoffed when I asked the question, and she has never set foot on campus as student due to the COVID-19 pandemic. 20 specifically used the word “diversity” when asked why the 5C's would prefer the natural hairstyle, describing that the colleges want to “appear diverse” and have “different” faces on their advertising, whether that reflects the student body or not. When Celeste was asked why, their response was “because these niggas [are] racist. They're trying to get

diversity points so of course they would pick the Black child with their natural hair—giving revolution, giving liberal arts, you know?”

Claremont College brochures ended up being more of a touchy subject than I had expected, as so many of my participants had personal experiences of being put on them repeatedly. Even from the first day on campus, Milan recounted how she had been harassed by a Scripps’ photographers to the point where her “Dad actually had to tell one of the photographers to like, leave us alone during moving day. They were following our little mixed Black and white family around all day.”

This sort of instance was sadly not uncommon. Azalia described being on Scripps’ “Instagram like three times, [and she] didn't even go to school for a whole year.” Tanya came to our interview prepared and even sent me the many pictures of her that the College had “the audacity” to take and post on social media, noting “They literally use my picture to ask for money from donors and I was like, ‘Where's this money going? Because it's not to me.’” Cecily described to me the times she’d be “hidden” in Honnold Library, only you be “found” by photographers asking, “Can I take a picture of you” and “Can I post these?” The hyper-visibility of Black students on promotional media may be portrayed as a means of celebrating Blackness, but in reality shows yet another instance of virtue signaling for the sake of signposting “diversity,” while the same students continue to feel neglected by the institution’s lack of any meaningful action to recognize or support its Black student body.

While I had expected that this senior thesis would prove to be an opportunity to learn and explore things about myself, I had not expected to learn about multiple instances where I had been pictured by Scripps College that I have no recollection of whatsoever. Janelle brought up a moment on a day our freshman year where she swears that I was present when “they pulled a

whole group of all the colored girls they could find and said, ‘Picture time.’” Even more surprising was Joy’s responses, as she recounted her time working in the Admissions office when a photograph of me was up for consideration for a college brochure. I was under the impression that I had done a good job of removing myself from such situations, since I personally cannot remember a single time a Scripps photographer has captured my likeness and it honestly spooked me to learn that that is apparently not correct.

These occurrences are not anything unexpected from the Claremont Colleges by my informants. Across the board, they see the colleges as predominantly white institutions (PWI’s) that often use Black students in advertising to showcase diversity. This phenomenon has been identified at colleges across the country, where students of color are overreported in visual advertisements, as part of an effort to “create false diversity” in public institutional images.⁶⁵ When I asked Joy if the pictures Scripps uses properly displays its demographics, she replied “No. I’ve been in way too many of them. Scripps is 4% Black. Even me just being an admissions Ambassador is like a lie to people.” And this is correct. On the Scripps College website, it says 41% of undergraduates are “students of color” with no mention of the word Black until you dig for the 2019-2020 Fact Book, that shows Scripps is only 3.7% Black.⁶⁶ On average, the Claremont Colleges are only 5.34% Black, and no school has above 9.25% Black students.⁶⁷ This is reflected by how my participants described them as a PWI. Aaliyah described it as feeling like “it was a little white bubble I was in and I felt suffocated by all the whiteness...when I went to classes and I went to the cafeteria, I just saw the whiteness, and it made me feel small.”

⁶⁵ Deena Prichep, “A Campus More Colorful Than Reality: Beware that College Brochure,” *npr*, December 29, 2013, <https://www.npr.org/2013/12/29/257765543/a-campus-more-colorful-than-reality-beware-that-college-brochure>.

⁶⁶ “At a Glance,” Scripps College, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://www.scrippscollege.edu/about/glance>; “Scripps College 2019-2020 Factbook: Assessment and Institutional Research,” Scripps College, accessed February 27, 2021, http://www.scrippscollege.edu/assessir/wp-content/uploads/sites/30/2019-2020-FACT-BOOK_PUBLIC-USE-1.pdf.

⁶⁷ “Scripps College Admissions,” DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/scripps-college#admissions>; “Harvey Mudd College Admissions,” DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/harvey-mudd-college#admissions>; “Pitzer College Admissions,” DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/pitzer-college#admissions>; “Claremont McKenna College Admissions,” DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/claremont-mckenna-college#admissions>; “Pomona College Admissions,” DATAUSA, accessed February 27, 2021, <https://datausa.io/profile/university/pomona-college#admissions>.

Malia, a 19-year-old who once worked in admissions, talked about how the colleges “accept more Black students than we think, they just don’t want to come” because they might not feel so “welcomed in the sea of white people.” This dichotomy neatly shows the contrast between Black student hyper-visibility and lack of diversity or institutional support. Each institution wants something different, a different level of visibility of their Black hair, depending on whether they want less Blackness in a place workspaces or more evident Blackness for the sake of diverse-appearing brochures. In the next section, I will go in depth into some of the specific and personal instances where interlocuters felt (or said they did not feel) discriminated against at the Claremont Colleges.

To Be or Not to Be Part of the Narrative

Yeah, at the end of the day, as harsh as it sounds, I think as Black women we aren't ever going to get the chance to be seen on the same level as any other woman in... the world... We're just there to provide for something but we're not anything important to anybody else and that's why I think ...no matter what we do, we will never be seen as something on the same level as a white person because they've just always been seen—they've always been “that,” they've always been the most popular, ... they've always been such an important part of “our history”... that they can't do wrong. And that's always going to be the case. - Tiana

I feel like [Black women are] called all types of derogatory words associated with Blackness and then are also like being denied opportunities, or honestly even just denied kindness, because all of a sudden this person is all that much more Black and therefore, like, undeserving of like human dignity...I feel like there's a lot of inherent references that people say like Black people are inherently poor, Black people are inherently criminalized, Black people are inherently ghetto. There's no nuance ...It's just assumed that it's like this binary of good or bad and there's this assumption that Black people are inherently negative in our greater society. - Dominique

No other group of people has to have their employers trained to learn how to deal with a person's hair...The diversity trainings that they're all doing now is like how to comment on Black hair and like, you don't have to do that for anybody else. But for hair, we're the only outlier in terms of different racial and ethnic groups. - Kalani

I keep saying this but, no matter what, Black women are always going to get shit for their hair and it's because Black women just always get shit. It's that simple. No matter what we do, someone's gonna give us shit. - Amethyst

Being a Black woman in America is hard. I think it's one of the hardest...I don't want to say it's one of the hardest jobs you can do, but it shouldn't be a job to just be myself, but it often feels like that it's a job. - Aaliyah

These quotes show the aspects of the basic narrative that persisted through each of my interviews: that Black women in America are and have always been discriminated against and treated differently due to a combination of anti-Blackness and misogyny, and that Black hair is just another and particularly significant location of that mistreatment. This narrative of

intersectional discrimination follows the historical discrimination I discussed in Chapter 1, and each of my interviewees reproduced this standard in some form or another. Many were outright with this narrative and discussed it in the greater context of how Black women are treated in America generally, while others used specific framings for their understandings of the narrative. Some specifically noted the intersectionality they include in their understanding of discrimination against Black women:

Like so much is thrown at us, like...whether we're wearing our natural hair, or we're trying to look more presentable to...job employers and wearing straightened hair, there'll always be some type of antagonism that's racially motivated. That's racialized and gendered. And that... also had to do with hair. - Treasure

I think there's a lot of intersectionality in like the way that we're perceived because you're Black, but you're also a woman so there's a lot of confounding factors against both of it in a way. - Azalia

Black women [are] definitely on the bottom [on a spectrum of how different demographics are treated], just because we're Black and we're women, like those are just two double agents that are pinned against us for everything. - Aaliyah

Some mentioned the varied treatment and discrimination *among* Black women, due to colorism based on different skin complexions. There were several moments in conversation where interviewees would make a general statement about the negative treatment of Black women in the U.S. and go on to add “especially for dark skinned Black women” at the end to emphasize that skin tone adds a layer of complexity and even intersectionality to the situation. This was also seen as others acknowledge privileged accompanied with their lighter skin tones, as color colors their experiences.

I oftentimes I don't want to associate myself with America, just because this is just a really it's so hard to live here...I realized that my skin color determines a lot in my life, and, you know, there's so many things that I will have to go through as a Black woman, as a dark skinned Black woman. So that's mainly why I don't feel like an American sometimes. - Aaliyah

I feel like I am the token like, you know, that I uphold this—not me, intentionally, but just like societally in this country—this like, “Yes, perfect light skinned Black girl with curly hair, you know, able bodied, blah, blah, blah, blah, ’... like this token, Black girl that's non-threatening, non-aggressive... this idea of like ‘a respectable Black girl.’” - Dominique

Still others referenced famous quotes that they connected with when discussing their conceptions of the rhetoric within the narrative:

I don't think we're appreciated as much as we should be, especially for the amount of shit that we do. I always go back to this quote we read... 'De nigger woman is de mule uh de world' [from Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*]. And I feel like we literally hold the fucking world, like we hold up society. And then while we hold it up, they're like, "Oh, wow, you're a piece of shit...no one wants you, no one loves you, you're not beautiful, like, you're the ugliest woman on the planet." Meanwhile, we're always helping others, always worried about everyone else because we know that we go through hardships being a woman, being Black, being a Black woman. And so we're empathetic, but no one else is, towards us. - Opal

What did Malcolm X say? That the most [neglected] woman in America is the Black woman? You know, I think for us, this is our reality. - Treasure

Yet, the most interesting part of the consistent mentions of this narrative lies in the fact that not all of my informants placed themselves within it: while most acknowledge the narrative, said they fit within it, and gave examples of where they had been treated differently because of their hair, others who had acknowledged the narrative said that *nothing* of the sort has happened to them but still went on to recount instances of discrimination (or instances that for our purposes will be deemed discrimination, since those experiences noted mimic those by participants who said they had been discriminated against.) The juxtaposition of those that are consistent and inconsistent between the rhetoric they employ and their experiences is fascinating.

While the majority of participants kept consistent as they reproduced the standard and saw themselves within that narrative of discrimination against Black women and Black hair, this was not the case for 6 of my interviewees: they knew the spiel but saw themselves as outliers, despite seeming to not actually stray from the standard, as they recounted experiences similar to those that kept consistent. This lack of continuity was first seen when I would ask the question: "Have you ever felt as though you've been treated differently because of your hair?" to which they would respond along the lines of, "I don't think I've ever felt that I've been treated differently," "I want to say no," or straight-up "no"'s. Several set up their situation as *they* had personally never been treated differently—due to the fact that they were lighter-skinned, or had looser textured hair, or had relaxed hair—but they had seen other Black women be. But others saw it as *they* had never been, and they had never personally seen *others* be treated differently either.

Yet, as stated before, all of them mentioned the narrative in some capacity, in addition to relating experiences they have had where they had been treated differently, but they presumably did not see it as such. Such instances ranged from expressing feelings “tokenized” by the Claremont Colleges administration; to describing being often stared at like they’re “a statue,” to the point where they became “insecure” and “questioned themselves;” to being mistaken for other Black women from the 5c’s with moderate consistency—an occurrence I can personally vouch for as this interviewee was often confused for me, and I her.

Mercedes, who is in this group of inconsistent interlocuters, was a particularly interesting case, as she had a nearly identical incident occur to her that happened Tianna, described later. Despite saying she had “no experience” being treated differently, Mercedes discussed the time she went to a foreign language course in box braids:

... and like the teacher is from [outside the U.S] and there's some other international students who don't know [about Black hair], but I mean it's not my job [to explain it to them]. The teacher was like, “Oh, my God, like, your hair grew?” And I was like, “No, ... it's not my hair, like, it can't just grow that fast...like, it's connected to my hair, but”... But like, I knew they weren't doing it to be mean, so I wasn't mad at them, but [the teacher and whole class] were touching my hair...and I guess that was weird, because it wasn't like an invitation. Like, I didn't invite them to do that. But they just like felt like they can do it.

In just talking to Mercedes about this experience and others, she was clearly conflicted about how she felt, but maintained through the interview that she had never been treated differently because of her hair. She sustained this opinion as she described “random white” coworkers consistently making comments about her hair, as well as when she talked about a trip she took to the Caribbean:

My friend gave me box braids and then I went to [the Caribbean] and then...I took them off, because... it's totally different... I'm racially ambiguous [without the braids]...and I took them off because I was shook about how I was being treated ... like 'cause anti-Blackness is so like rampant in the world...I couldn't handle the weight of people immediately knowing I was Black because I had a protective hairstyle. And usually when I have my much looser [textured hair out]... I could like pass as ...a random brown person. And like [looking]...brown is easier than being Black—period. So I do remember taking off the braids that would make me be like perceived immediately as Black, because I couldn't take the perception.

I truly had not expected anyone to just say it like it is—especially from someone who lies in the inconsistent group of not placing themselves within the narrative—but I think that goes to

show the level of separation present within this category of my interviewees. Mercedes shows that she acknowledged the narrative concerning Black women, Black hair, and discrimination but does not place herself inside of it, despite pointing out moments where she personally had been treated differently because of her hair. As an added level of complication, she, as a person with looser textured hair, is able to remove hairstyles from her head that would make her immediately and perceivably Black, and she felt that difference in treatment. Now, obviously I would love to dive deep into the reasons why this inconsistency between the narrative and perception of experiences exists, but ultimately it does not matter that these 6 interviewees' experience do not match up with narrative they express because the fact that the dominant narrative prevails is more important.

Those that kept consistent make up the majority of my participants: 20 out of 26 mentioned the narrative, expressed that they had been treated different because of their hair, and provided examples of such instances. Such examples cover a wide range of transgressions, from verbal prejudice to physical offences. They recounted being teased and bullied in elementary, middle, and high schools for their hair, being called "bald" if they did not have enough hair, "distracting" if they had too much hair," and simply constant comments no matter what hair they had. "Nappy," "messy," "I like your hair when it's straight," "Is it fake?" "*pelo malo*," and "ghetto" were other common insults experienced. And while kids can be mean, not all such comments were from people the same age as my interlocutors—others were said by adults, from calling their hair "unprofessional," or specifically making a point to comment on their hair during class periods. Azalia even related a time when a teacher confronted her asking, "What happened?" and "Oh, I thought something went wrong" when she walked into class with an Afro.

My participants relayed other instances where others commented negative adjectives about their hair, but also compared and insulted them by calling them the names of both people, like adult male rappers like Lil Bow Wow and Kodak Black, but also non-human things as well.

I remember in second grade I was nicknamed the class bug. - Kalani

I got [told] that my hair looked like a bird's nest. - Esmeralda

And people like called me a lion or a lioness. -Milan

I've been called a mushroom. Broccoli, too. - Opal

And not one, but two (!), recounted being likened to a poodle. Hell, I remember as a kid being asked if birds—or even Smurfs, for god’s sake—lived in my hair, so unfortunately this is nothing new. When talking about comments made about hair, Sage just questioned, “Why? Why are [they] thinking so much about my hair? Like, why? Why do [they] feel the need to comment on it?” Others mentioned that it is not even always comments that they get, but just stares, “like they’ve never seen hair like this before”—and sometimes even nonconsensual pictures were taken of them in public places that they attributed to their hair as well.

The more egregious and aggressive instances of being treated differently can be seen in the descriptions of times when my participants’ hair was physically touched by others, without permission. Too many interviewees for comfort talked about such moments:

I went to somebody's house and their nanny, like touches [my hair] and is asking... like, “What is this? What's going on?” -Joy

I remember one of the days I first got extensions like everyone just kept touching it and me and it was uhm... I still I really need to go to therapy for that one because I really think I was traumatized as a result... There's like a fascination like, “Oh, can I touch you?” It's like they look at you like a specimen. - Onyx

When I had long hair I was I dealing with strangers...and people felt like they just had the right to touch my hair and like dig in my scalp and check to see if it was weave or not, like taking it upon themselves to obstruct those boundaries.” - Nala

White people come up and try and touch my hair and be like, “Oh, my God, is this your natural hair?” - Esmeralda

But yeah, there have been some jobs where after the first day, I was like I don't feel safe wearing my hair like this, like with all the touching or whatever it is. I had to set a boundary with my co-workers. - Maya

One time I wore my hair in a ponytail and...middle school...boys would like yank on my hair and like make fun of it...Just like all these like traumatizing things [happened] because of [my hair]. - Amethyst

Regrettably, some of this nonconsensual hair touching has even happened on the campuses of the Claremont Colleges, and some of the worst instances I heard happened on their grounds. Janelle was probably the most consistent interviewee I talked with, as she coherently identified the narrative, placed herself within it, and provided examples to support her experiences and opinions regarding this topic which she had clearly thought about before. She recounted specific weekend night out at the 5C's:

I went out to one of those parties—I think it was at Pitzer, I think it was at the Grove House. I had washed my hair and I felt good about my hair. I let her down that day, I said “She looks good, I'm gonna wear it down.” I don't really do that too [often], but I was feeling good that day. And so we went to... this thing at the Grove House—we were dancing, we were chilling, it was pretty crowded. And then I was minding my business dancing with my friends and then I felt someone like, pull and I [fell] back [thinking] it's someone yanking my hair. But when I turned around, I couldn't figure out who did it...I got pissed. I said, “Oh, who did that?” Like, I was asking around, “Who did that? Like they're trying...to fight” and no one would say who it was, but like, you know, like this group of guys. They were laughing at me. They thought it was so hilarious that I was mad. And like, so one of my friends was like, “It's okay, like, it's not a big deal.” But it was a big deal. I didn't really wear it down to parties after that, because it's the same thing. It's the spectacle. Like, why did someone feel the need to pull my hair out a party? That would never happen to anyone else.

Tianna also had experiences of others touching her hair at the Claremont Colleges, but they were not students—they were faculty, much like Mercedes' experience.

A professor at Pomona [touched my hair] too. She comes up to me, she's a [foreign language] professor from [outside the U.S.]. So I was like, “Okay, I'm not gonna yell at you because I understand there's cultural differences. You're not a white person, so I can't get too mad. But no, this ain't it.” She comes up to me goes, “I love your hair, is it a new wig?” and just grabs it and starts playing in it, and I'm like “[name of professor], that's my hair... I know, we haven't seen each other in a while, but please don't do that again”

These stories display the pervasive understanding that Black hair can be easily commented on, touched, and is seen as something detached from a human being that is deserving of respect. They challenge the unspoken belief that a positive and curious approach to Black hair by others can exonerate such egregious offences. Invasive behavior, regardless of intent, seems acceptable to the viewer: the physical presence of Black hair and the resulting fascination of non-Black people leads to a sense that the observer has prerogatives to invade personal space, though they may not feel their behavior is discriminatory. This mirrors the logic that Black hair can be alienated from Blackness, to be ridiculed or examined like a specimen as the observer sees fit.

Conclusion: Dominant Narrative Despite Perceived Experience

As seen, so many aspects of my interviews with these 26 students display that so much appears to be implicit in our conversations. Even though we come from different places, have different hair textures, and have had and will continue to diverge in our personal hair journeys, there are many prevailing features to our experiences and understandings. They see the shifts in the visibility of themselves and their hair, as they understand different people and institutions in their lives—from college to the workplace—will expect different presentations of their hair. They know their bodies not only create the perceptions others have about them, but their bodies will be utilized for the whims of institutions and what they want to portray to the public.

Yet, with such understood and unspoken ideas, they diverge once again in their understandings and expressions of their experiences they relate to their hair. But despite inconsistencies in experiences, the significant characteristic is the fact that there is a consistent narrative identified by every single participant. Even if they do not place themselves within the narrative—or have exactly similar hair journeys, or the same hair texture—their acknowledgement of the greater narrative about Black women and Black hair, especially when displayed in such situations as the 2-pictures question, demonstrates a collective foundation that informs their opinions and reconciliations of the cultural appropriation of Black hair (as will be discussed in the next chapter.) They are able to actively analyze the discrimination of Black hair and their experiences as seen in their ability to not just describe their experiences but actually scrutinize and comprehend their standing in their personal and the greater world we live in as they analyze how they place themselves within the narrative or not.

Chapter 3: Conceptions and Reconciliations of Cultural Appropriation

My discussions with participants about cultural appropriation again proved to be more akin to one another and yet still varied in ways I had not expected. When I asked, “How do you define cultural appropriation,” I was rarely met with the same answer twice, as a mosaic emerged of understandings and starting points from which each interlocutor views the concept. However, similarities emerged in discussions of the circumstances that surround the phenomena of appropriation of Black hair; very few strayed in their stances on who are the usual suspects of this appropriation—white people—as well as their hypothetical and actual reactions when faced with examples of cultural appropriation of Black hair in the form of photographs I presented. There was also absolutely no ambiguity among my interviewees regarding the difference in treatment experienced when Black women and when non-Black women wear Black hair, as discrimination against Black women and the cultural appropriation of Black hair come to a head when Black hair on different bodies means different behavior and conduct from others.

And yet, each interlocutor arrived at different reconciliations of this difference in treatment, as they described the ways and ideas they hold front and center when it comes to discussing this frustrating topic. For my purposes I will call these different reconciliations schemas, building on cognitive anthropologists’ use of schema theory to describe how groups classify information into different categories. While this ethnography could easily discuss the schemas about the cultural appropriation of Black hair shared among my interviewees who all identify as Black women or are perceived as such, I will actually be diving deeper into the more individual schemas and prototypes of reconciliation—each of which is shared between some my interlocutors, but not all. While some explained the dichotomy in treatment as either attributive to the Black body, others saw this as a matter of non-Black people’s conscious actions to gain

more power, clout, and more by taking from Black Americans; and still others rationalize the situation in an impersonal way, devoid of intentional actors, as the results of broad social forces and institutions at play in regard to racial power dynamics.

The schematic prototypes I witnessed at play allow us to view how some Black women and those perceived as such justify to themselves as to why this trying and seemingly contradictory dynamic exists and persists. In conjunction with the unfailing mention of the discrimination standard from the previous chapter, we can see how it builds on top of my interviewees' understandings of how non-Black people are treated after wearing Black hair. Along with the gamut of other data I gathered from my interviewees concerning cultural appropriation of Black hair, this chapter will explore these reconciliation prototype categories and display the building uniformity in some respects as seen throughout this ethnography. But also, this section will showcase that despite similar starting points, there exists an assortment of first thoughts that come to the minds of Black women and those perceived as such at the Claremont Colleges in this discussion of cultural appropriation.

Appropriation in the Eyes of my Participants (Spoilers: It's White People)

Cultural appropriation is taking something of someone else's culture and claiming it as your own or not giving credit for that culture- Tanya

Cultural appropriation is stealing something from another's culture, and making it seem like it was yours... and even not giving credit at that...Like, capitalizing off of another person's culture.-Zaya

The main elements of it are like exploitation...I'd say... the definition is kind of like the definition of racism, where there's like a power dynamic and like, prejudice plus power. So it's tied to like systems of oppression. I think that similarly, cultural appropriation applies. -Maya

A process of cultural-vulturing. -Treasure

While a majority of the definitions given for “cultural appropriation” included words such as “taking” and sentiments about “not giving credit,” each still brought their own pertinent experiences to their explanations—whether that be focusing on the capitalism aspects, or the lack

of empathy involved, or even taking the time to explain what it's not. Such nuance was not afforded when I asked "who, in your opinion, typically appropriates Black hair?". The consensus was clear: I received answers like "white people" (from Kahlani), "Oh, white people!" (Gina), "white people, no question about it" (Tanya), and even a "white people, they really... white women, specifically... these niggas just love us. Like I really don't get it" (Celeste.)

Every interlocutor mentioned white people at some point in time in our interviews as the main instigator of cultural appropriation of Black hair—either in answering this specific question, or solely referring to "white people" as the primary adversary against themselves in the conversation of discrimination and appropriation dynamics. Some participants were even so specific, that they easily named the poster children of Black hair appropriation when asked this question: Tanya noted "Actually, a certain family profits off of Black people from the jump," while Onyx mentioned "I mean, the first people come to mind are the Kardashians," among many other references to the Kardashian family.

The Black hairstyles worn by cultural appropriators were identified as cornrows, box braids, faux locs, among several other Black styles. I asked what my participants thought or have seen to be the reactions after appropriators wear such Black styles, and their thoughts were homogenous, as they are perceived as:

A trend...something amazing and cute and new... Unique... Beautiful. - Tianna

It's very fun. It's flirty, it's cute. It's something like new and short term...[They're given] more like genuine compliments and appreciation- Kahlani

Cool, quirky, unconventional, rebellious. You know, it's like, "wow, that's brave."...different - Dominique

Acceptable in the workplace...[they're] like praised for doing something different outside of like [their normal hairstyle]- Tanya

In addition to these ideas, there were also replies, including "innovator" (from Sage), "trendsetters" (Gina), "exotic" (Zaya), "fashionable" (Kara), and "feminine" (Malia.) All of these positive perceptions of cultural appropriators of Black hair greatly contrasts the treatment

that Black women receive for wearing Black hair. As seen in the previous chapter, my interlocutors had no shortage of examples of times where they felt that their Black hair caused negative treatment. Even just the one-off words they would hear about their hair—“ghetto,” “nappy,” “ugly,” “*pelo malo*,” “distracting,” “messy”—seem incomparable to the “beautiful”s and “praise” appropriators receive for wearing the exact same hair.

That last comment above—“feminine”—is also a significant quote to note, as many of my participants expressed that both before and while appropriating Black hair, cultural appropriators are viewed as feminine and still adhering to American standards of beauty, which did not apply to them. In the last chapter, I discussed how some participants were insulted by being likened to male celebrities, or just straight out described as looking like “boys.” Some recounted how even to this day they feel masculinized by American society, a long-standing tradition of placing Black women as far as possible from femininity, as well as not feeling as though they satisfy American beauty standards, which is evidenced by their experiences with interpersonal discrimination that they have attributed to their appearances.

This greatly contrasts my participants perceptions of cultural appropriators, as they see them to be feminine and even setting the “trends” in American standards of beauty by making room for themselves as non-Black women with Black hair. I asked several of my interviewees if Black women receive any of the beauty and femininity associated with appropriators wearing Black hair: that if Kim Kardashian is seen as feminine and beautiful with cornrows then that could somehow reflect back to Black hair on Black women. My participants were in consensus that no acceptance was conferred to Black hair, with Dominique noting “I think it stays the same, honestly,” showing that for some, the physical Blackness or whiteness of a body affects perceptions of Black hair, which will be discussed later on with reconciliation prototypes. In the

end, Black women continue to be viewed as less feminine according to American beauty standards.

Such juxtapositions continue with what is gained (by appropriators) and lost (by Black women) when people wear Black hair. When I asked whether my participants thought that after culturally appropriating Black hair, do such offenders gain something—whether that be clout, money, followers, respect, etc.—lose something, or if they stay the same, on average they agreed that appropriators gained something in the end, despite apparently futile attempts to bring them down:

But at the end of the day, I think it's a win-win for them, whether people love it or hate it, because they'd be trending on social platforms, and they'd have more attention. And yes, like Black Twitter can cancel them and whatnot, but it's still not gonna harm these people. And the more popularized they are, then the more they can...[build] off of that fame... they can monetize off of it and benefit a lot from appropriating culture. -Gina

I think they gain more awareness, not that the Kardashians need any more attention on them. But I think that it puts them in the news cycle. They can like pay to have their photos, they could do interviews and get paid for that. They could like do like an apology tour and go on a bunch of like talk shows, or do like a magazine cover with them not in Black hairstyles... So like they definitely do have some monetary gain from being disliked....And they know that if they do any of the Black hairstyles that they've been critiqued for in the past, they'll get back into the news cycle for a day or two, and then that can sustain them for a bit longer... So like, I think they only gain money and fame and recognition for pissing off people because that's their whole brand. -Kahlani

I think it's a big gain. One, because there's always a lot of news around it. A lot of trends on Twitter, a lot of reposting of social media...So it brings a lot of attention to them. But also, people love it, like their white fans eat that shit up. Like they really, really love it. ...Yeah, I think at the end of the day, it's pretty positive. -Sage

I don't think the hate ever overshadows [their gains] because I feel like if anything that hate gives them more attention, gives them more publicity, gives them more in general. Hate never overshadows it. -Aalyiah

The excessive publicity, whether there are negative connotations or not, converts “news cycles” into opportunities to increase value, as it turns into different forms of attention, social media noise, and recognition, shining in comparison to what my participants personally fear they may lose with their Black hair. The previous chapter discussed worries concerning job interviews and how they will have to present their hair in the future; how first impressions are affected; as well as how their hair may influence romantic endeavors. Overall, we can see how my interlocutors view the differences in perceptions and treatment, depending on what body is wearing the Black hair.

Sharp (but Hilarious) Subversive Satire

Before I even presented my interviewees with photos of what some believe to be cultural appropriation of Black hair, I asked what their reactions have been to instances of appropriation they have seen before:

I need to distance myself from those people at all costs... So there have been times like, if I'm in a store, and I see someone who has [appropriated] a Black hairstyle, I will walk away from them, I will go somewhere else, I'll do something else. If someone tries to introduce me to someone who has any Black hairstyles, I will not introduce myself to that person. - Kahlani

Usually disgust, disdain...definitely there's a little bit of a stink eye, if they ever make eye contact with me. It's just unpleasant, you know, kind of like a "Why did you do that?" I didn't need to see that.- Dominique

I feel like at this point I've gotten a bit used to it, which sucks, but it's really frustrating ... and really hurtful. And, you know, seeing comments like, "Oh, she looks so good, like those braids, doesn't she look so nice?" It's like a slap in the face because those are obviously not like the reactions that that we would get from those people.- Sage

I get annoyed...But it's just more like, I guess disheartening. And I guess it's also just the double standards of like, "Oh, okay, so this is like, beautiful and this is acceptable in the workplace or something," but like if a Black person does it, it's just not like it's no longer beautiful. - Tanya

I don't know how to feel. Sometimes it upsets me. ... and it's like, that's disrespectful.- Zaya

At first it's anger. ... and then I just get like sad, because it's like, you guys really don't care. I'm always reminded about how as a whole, kind of, the white population doesn't really care about what's going on or like the issues with Black people. So it just makes me sad. - Opal

For me, like, it makes me uncomfortable- Malia

It pisses me off. It annoys me so much"- Amethyst

The range of reactions I heard from each participant was wide—but never positive. The examples of cultural appropriation of Black hair they have seen in their lives has not only angered them but also discouraged them. However, when shown pictures of appropriation in the moment, a different side to this anger came out—a humorous one. Near the end of each interview over Zoom, I screen-shared my desktop to show three images of non-Black celebrities wearing Black hairstyles: Bo Derek in Fulani braids in the film *10* from 1979; Kim Kardashian in Fulani braids at the 2018 MTV Movie & TV Awards; and Adele wearing bantu knots in 2020 to celebrate the Notting Hill Carnival, a significant event for the British West Indian community

in the UK.⁶⁸ Upon seeing the first image, most participants either let out an audible “Oh!,” began laughing, or started a tirade of insults at the screen that would cause both of us to laugh. The conversation quickly shifted to cracking quips about how bad the celebrities looked or fake cautions and worries of their hair falling out (since non-textured hair types do not always bode well with Black hairstyles meant for Black hair textures):

This shit look ugly. Like I'm not even trying to be like rude, but this really does look ugly. It doesn't fit. Whoever braided it didn't braid it tight. It's lifting off her head. This looks like it's 10 years old. the way that it's braided. I know her hair definitely fell out a little bit after this. The grip game is just non-existent...This looks messy as fuck...Why do you have beads in your hair? You're from fucking Norway. [note: this is in reference to the photo of Bo Derek—Derek is not from Norway] - Celeste

Rest in peace, [her] scalp. - Mercedes

I know her scalp hurt. I know it's hurting. - Nala

[Her] hair is gonna fall the fuck out. - Milan

Her scalp looks like it hurts. - Aaliyah

I genuinely find joy when their hair pulls out and they find out it doesn't work for their hair... I think “I hope your hair pulls out when you go to take it out.”- Gina

[To Bo:] Honey, you're messing up your hair. It's not for that...It is not for you, the thin like follicles and your hair gonna fall out. You don't need to be doing that... And you just put it on your head, and it always looks nasty on our hair too. You can see the part [in your hair]. It's nasty.- Tianna

Oh my god she looks so bad. Like literally look at this, like, the hair doesn't even look like it's attached to her scalp anymore.- Sage

Her hair just looks so bad. Like, it looks *soo* bad.- Kahlani

I have to be honest: these comments were absolutely hilarious in the moment. There’s really nothing like someone saying the same things you’d want to say about these pictures. At times—I admit—I did give in and allowed myself to throw a few jokes at the screen, giving way to more laugh-filled moments like those I discussed in Chapter 2. Clearly, there is something about the combination of this subject matter and my population that creates circumstances that allows for such instances of enjoyment, whether it be about seemingly self-explanatory questions or pictures of Adele looking “dumb.” Personally, it just felt cathartic to express emotions about

⁶⁸ Suzy Kalter, “In An Odd Twist, from 10, the Beauty Biz Finds the Cornrow Is Oh, So Green,” *PEOPLE.Com*, February 11, 1980, <https://people.com/archive/in-an-odd-twist-from-10-the-beauty-biz-finds-the-cornrow-is-oh-so-green-vol-13-no-6/>; Teryn Payne, “Kim Kardashian West responds to the Backlash Over Her Braids,” *Glamour*, June 21, 2018, <https://www.glamour.com/story/kim-kardashian-braids-explanation>; PA Media, “Adele Accused of Cultural Appropriation over Instagram Picture,” *The Guardian*, July 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/sep/01/adele-accused-of-cultural-appropriation-over-instagram-picture>

this subject with a kindred spirit, even at the expense of maybe being a little mean. Treasure expressed a possible explanation for such amusement when the topic seems serious, saying “I think what we do is just, we just laugh through trauma, more cultural production, by the way, like, you know, with memes and stuff.”

Such “laughing through trauma” is not unheard of, especially in the Black community. As Terrence Tucker notes in *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock*, “for African Americans, humor often provides the rhetoric necessary for a community consistently seeking to effectively express dissatisfaction with racial inequality,” and such a concept could easily be applied to many instances in my interviews.⁶⁹ In the tradition of Langston Hughes’ 1952 work *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, Danielle Morgan’s *Laughing to Keep from Dying* discusses how the comedy and the blues, “two spheres so associated with ideas of Blackness and Black identity,” have been used together has both modes created “formal conventions to describe [a speaker’s] own experience and position.”⁷⁰ The combinations of blues and comedy can form satire, where Black people can laugh about the “inherent absurdity of race and racialization” through subverting narratives.⁷¹ Darryl Dickson-Carr in *African-American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* describes that “satire is nothing if it does not aggressively defy the status quo,” allowing humor to in a way “dwarf” the situation and give way to laughter, which only further helps display the “kaleidoscopic Blackness—the multiple autonomous ways of being Black” to ourselves and other.⁷² Many humorous moments with my interviewees would be located within this tradition.

⁶⁹ Terrence T. Tucker, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018), 252.

⁷⁰ Danielle Fuentes Morgan, *Laughing to Keep from Dying: African American Satire in the Twenty-First Century* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 1.

⁷¹ Morgan, *Laughing to Keep from Dying*, 2.

⁷² Morgan, *Laughing to Keep from Dying*, 2; Darryl Dickson-Carr, *African American Satire: The Sacredly Profane Novel* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 1; Dexter B. Gordon, “Humor in African American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression,” *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 259.

Besides “laughing away the pain” and assuaging their own feelings, there were also insulting reactions and rather disrespectful commentary on the pictures elsewhere. These criticisms seemed pointed and active. Tucker’s discussion of comic rage could easily play a part in this, as in many ways humor and anger join together, as they create a balance such that “humor prevents rage from becoming consumptive, nihilistic, or destructive, [and] the presence of rage rejects perceptions that humor should only serve as entertainment.”⁷³ The author quotes Paul Beatty, as the poet suggests that “Humor is vengeance. Sometimes you laugh to keep from crying. Sometimes you laugh to keep from shooting.”⁷⁴ While I do not see literal violence coming from the furious words of my interviewees, their satire was a productive catharsis.

Jessyka Finley’s “Black Women’s Satire as (Black) Postmodern Performance” dives into explanations of Black female satire, as it “privilege[s] emotion and experience in order to critique particular incidents of racism, sexism, and the lack of access to rights and resources,” while also including elements “permeated with disgust.”⁷⁵ And I think it would be an understatement to say that my participant felt some form of disgust when reacting to the images of cultural appropriation of Black hair. Finley goes on to discuss how such satire works to “spotlight and put pressure on deeply embedded historical narratives,” and the interviewees’ performance of biting critiques works to subvert the standard that non-Black women champion American beauty standards and more.⁷⁶ By pointing out the “ugly”—the badly braided hair, the likelihood of scalp damage, etc.—my participants are using satire to fight back. Finley notes that “employing an embittered, disgusted satirical humor to undercut ideologies in pop cultural media that are the brick and mortar holding structural inequalities in place,” and I think my

⁷³ Tucker, *Furiously Funny*, 255.

⁷⁴ Tucker, *Furiously Funny*, 255; Paul Beatty, *Hokum: An Anthology of African-American Humor* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006), 16.

⁷⁵ Jessyka Finley, “Black Women’s Satire as (Black) Postmodern Performance,” *Studies in American Humor* 2, no. 2 (2016): 237.

⁷⁶ Finley, “Black Women’s Satire,” 241.

interlocutors are doing just that in some form or another as they express the serious and the funny, being “simultaneously entertaining and resistant.”⁷⁷

One interviewee, Celeste, showed a noticeable penchant for satire and subverted narratives with it in ways Finley did not speak on. Celeste on several occasions, as seen in quotes in this and the previous chapter, employs the n-word when talking about people—and institutions—that typically are not called that. One such examples was mentioned above, but Celeste did this again when asked why they think the Claremont Colleges would pick their natural hair to put on an advertising brochure over a more straight/longer styles and they responded, “Because these niggas [are] racist.” Several interlocutors when asked about non-Black people—whether in reference to appropriation or in other parts of our conversations—were quick and somewhat proud to announce that they try to think or learn about white people as little as possible. Celeste mentioned “When I tell you, I never noticed anything white people did. I really don't know if they were dating each other and like, I know that's funny, but like, I'm not even joking.” Kahlani had also stated a similarly deadpan comment, saying:

I've really tried to not learn anything about white hair, so I actually don't know how it works. People have asked me like, “Oh, can you braid my hair?” and I was like, . . . “Your hair is too slippery, I don't get it, sorry.” So, I've been very happy to do that and turn people down anytime that I can.

Although subversive satire is not the main avenue through which I analyze reconciliations, I still find these statements to be hilarious and a tangentially significant part of their reactions to the subject matter overall. Finley had discussed such a matter-of-fact way of comedically talking about race—a “style of hyper-rational, cool, detached delivery” that the author “most prominently associated with white men” with their “detachment from the general racial situation... [and] their whiteness and maleness privileges [that] protect them.”⁷⁸ Seeing

⁷⁷ Finley, “Black Women’s Satire,” 262.

⁷⁸ Finley, “Black Women’s Satire,” 239.

such a similar way of satire, but in Black women or those perceived as such instead, who actually *have* attachment to the general racial situation, was enjoyable to see and, this means of delivery resonates with my interviewee's critical stances on Black hair discrimination.

“Make It Make Sense”

It is a sentiment I have felt often when thinking about the difference in treatment Black women and non-Black women receive for wearing Black hair, and it seemed pretty ubiquitous among my interlocutors too. “Make it make sense” was an exact phrase I heard several times, and even more frequently in spirit, and it is exactly the question I am asking: I want to know how my interviewees make this difference in treatment make sense to themselves. When this topic comes up, what is the first idea or concept in their head that's filed away in the “cultural appropriation” filing cabinet in their brain? For my purposes, this supposed “filing cabinet” is their *schema* of cultural appropriation of Black hair, and their “first idea or concept” is their *prototype* of that schema.

Roy D'Andrade, one of the founders of cognitive anthropology, described a need in “the mid-1970s ...across the fields of linguistics, anthropology, psychology, and artificial intelligence that...[utilize] human cognition...structures” for a term that encapsulates structures “even more complex than prototypes.”⁷⁹ Thus, schema theory emerged. D'Andrade defers to Charles Fillmore's explanation: where academic fields that analyze discourse required “a way of discussing the development, on the part of the interpreter, of an image or scene or picture of the world as that gets built up and filled out between the beginning and the end of text-interpretation experience.”⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Roy G. D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 122.

⁸⁰ D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 123.

Schemas are an “organizing experience,” where “a person, in interpreting a text [or experiences], mentally creates a partially specified world.”⁸¹ As the person received more information through that text/experience, “the details of this world get filled in; and in the process, expectations get up which later on are fulfilled or thwarted, and so on.”⁸² So when I mention the schema of cultural appropriation of Black hair, I am referring to my interviewees “partially specified world” whose blank spots have been filled in by the information they have been told or have seen about cultural appropriation of Black hair—kind of like a mad-lib. This schema is continually activated and added to—supported or thwarted—as they hear and see more information about cultural appropriation.

While much of schema research is focused on the schemas people hold and the influences that formed them, I am interested in their prototypes of their cultural appropriation schemas—the default conceptions of cultural appropriation. While a schema is “an organized framework of objects and relations which has yet to be filled in with concrete detail,” a prototype “a specified set of expectations, [where] the filling in of the slots of a schema with an individual's standard default values creates a prototype.”⁸³ While each interviewee has a unique schema regarding cultural appropriation of Black hair, I want to know how their prototype of that appropriation addresses the difference in treatment Black and non-Black women face for wearing the same hair, to see what is their most “typical instantiation” of cultural appropriation.⁸⁴

Several other of interview questions of mine help respond to other aspects of my participants’ prototype of cultural appropriation of Black hair. When I asked “who, in your opinion, typically culturally appropriated Black hair,” that answers who is the “Who” in their

⁸¹ D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 122-3.

⁸² D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 123.

⁸³ D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 124.

⁸⁴ D’Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology*, 124.

prototype of appropriation—and for the most part, that looked like

white people on the mad-lib. Rather than searching for the “Who?” of person who culturally appropriates Black hair

cultural appropriation, the main focus of this chapter is more to see prototype reconciliations of appropriation my interviewees have: some “made it make sense” by filling out the “Why do people culturally appropriate Black hair” empty slot in their schema, while others filled in their “Which institutions are at play?” slot in theirs. Some reconcile this topic as a matter regarding the appropriators, or white people; while others posited it as a matter about Black women’s bodies; and still other presented their reconciliation as having to do with impersonal institutions and power structures. While I will categorize each interviewees’ prototype reconciliations, I find it important to discuss what my participants believes is the intent behind cultural appropriators use of Black hair.

Let’s Reconcile

As displayed extensively in the pages above, my participants believe that Black women and those perceived as such are treated differently (and worse) than when non-Black women appropriate Black hair. My next inquiry was a simple: “Does this make sense to you?” – obviously, I understand racial dynamics in America that have set the scene for such circumstances to pervade, but there is an aspect of the phrase “make sense” that I feel includes a need for personal reconciling with the situation, in order to endure as a Black woman in America. By placing the blame somewhere or attributing it to something or someone, we can put a name to the face of the racism as we wonder why we are treated differently than other people, despite knowing the literal systems in place that create such an environment.

I believe such a struggle is present in my participants’ to answers to this questions, as I received just as many confident “yes”’s as I received confident, exasperated, and pissed off

“no”’s, “Fuck no”’s, “yeah, but not really”’s, and “kind of”’s. And yet, I have no doubts that every single participant could detail and reason out why this difference in treatment exists, and in a way they did so by presenting their reconciliations through their schematic prototypes of this situation. I also want to note that many participants discussed multiple reconciliations in our interviews; rather than conflicting or mutually exclusive, each reconciliation category speaks to different aspect of this discussion—whether it focuses on the appropriators, the appropriated, or the institutions at hand—and they can coexist.

A: Unmanned Institutions

The first major category of reconciliations I witnessed were in regard to power dynamics and institutions. Schemas that I placed in this category had taken the personal element out of their explanations, such that there was not a specific transgressor or actor involved in their resolutions. For example, when I asked Dominique about the difference in treatment and whether it made sense to her, she responded: “I can't rationalize it. I'm just like, it's racism.” Others also had a similarly plain and to-the-point reconciliation, as they framed it as a matter that is not in their hands, nor any other person’s. Eve saw it as it “comes down to power structures” and distant others “in power like leadership, or powerful positions,” are the ones pulling the so-called strings and creating such dynamics.

With those responses in this category that cited general big “R” Racism and its operations as the perpetrator of the different in treatment of Black hair on different bodies were some of the most cut-and-dry conversations I had—their thoughts were what they thought, and nothing more was necessarily at play. With interviewees in this group, I was met with a sort of stubbornness about the topic. Aaliyah, for instance, made her ideas clear, saying that the different in treatment did make sense to her because she “understand[s] the history of anti-Blackness.” Simple as that.

When I would ask her to elaborate a little more, she would push back and double-down on her answers, saying “I think it’s everything I just said.... It's because of the anti-Blackness,... it's because of their white privilege...it’s because the idea of racial capitalism.”

Others offered a more specified perspective on racial dynamics regarding the “admiration” but simultaneous “violations” of Black people and Black culture. Treasure is the main participant who brought this up, describing the “distinctions between negrophobia and negrophilia,” or the dislike/fear and the passion/interest in Black culture, respectively, as they apply to Black hair and cultural appropriation. She recalls taking an Afro-pessimism course where they discussed “this desire for Black people and just thirst for them, ... like a desire to be affiliated with everything...almost like a fetish.” But yet, “on the other hand, this deep hatred and discomfort with Black people,” but both the phobia and the philia “kind of work in one equation like, they're not separate at all.” This mirrors the detachment of Black hair from Black culture for the sake of commodification and non-Black consumption.

Impersonal institutions and power structures like Racism or racial capitalism emerge as a fact or an objective truth, as seen in the interviews of Aaliyah, Dominique and Treasure. While there are actors at play, since technically there need to be people who are negrophiles and negrophobes, there was not the same active participation of an actor involved (in this case, in the passion or fear of Black culture) as there was for the other categories of reconciliation which I will discuss next. What they spoke of seemed more inevitable as part of a larger, emotionless system that isn’t dependent on individual action.

B: White People (“Obviously...?”)

The second, and larger, grouping of reconciliations of cultural appropriation lies within the prototypes that list “white people” as the main and active perpetrator at hand. The three

subcategories— “white people have no culture,” “white people want it, so they take it,” and “white people envy”—each discuss actions that my participants see being taken by white people, postulating them as specifically personal and conscious acts being taken. 18 out of my 26 participants brought up this category in their prototypes at least once, with 6 mentioned at least two in this grouping.

7 interlocutors mentioned the apparent lack of any form of white culture as we conversed about the cultural appropriation and the difference in treatment when wearing Black hair. They pointed to this aspect of their prototype as I asked them to make sense of the situation at hand: they responded “White people have no culture” (Celeste), “White people don't really have culture...there is no white culture” (Tianna), and Zaya noted “[It's] the lack of culture that they have.” And this apparent lack of culture, to my interlocutors, means:

[While people] always just seem ... bored with like, what is going on in [their] life?...I feel like the biggest thing I hear [about in white culture] is like Irish dancing -Onyx

They're not as exciting as we are, not as versatile as we are... they don't have a lot of things that we have. - Zaya

I feel like they're running out of ideas. - Opal

[There's a] lack of creativity,... they can't come up with their own thing... So I think that's lack of originality.- Janelle

And such idle cultural hands lead to:

[Copying], because they don't have anything for themselves. - Zaya

They have to do what all white people have done all throughout history, which is steal culture from other people and claim it as something that's theirs.-Janelle

[They] just steal another culture... Do [they] think [they're] that boring? - Celeste

[They] grasp onto someone else's culture... [they] can grab from and take from and then use it on [their] own and gain something from it. - Tianna

The speed with which these participants named white people's apparent lack of culture was remarkable, as clearly this aspect of their schemas is crystal clear to them and their prototypes are solid. The same could be said for the second subprototypes, “white people want it, so they take it,” as it was the most popular reconciliation with 13 total participants bringing it up.

This category of reconciliations is similar to one another as each interlocutor is “making it make sense” by answering the question “why do white people culturally appropriate,” thought that was not the express inquiry. Most of the replies speak to an inherent entitlement that white people have and have had with many things throughout history—people, places, cultural items, and more. My participants described their thoughts as:

I think [white people see Black hair] on Black people and think, “Oh, that looks cool, I'll do that. If [Black people can wear Black hair], why can't I?” type of thing. Like they feel like, they should have ownership of like any hairstyle - Sage

It's like wanting something that you don't have and I guess it's like a level of greed too—not being content with what [they] have and seeing how [others] have some sort of success elsewhere and like feeling like you have to take part in it - Onyx

It's a culture of a feeling of entitlement... I mean, isn't that why white people do anything, right? Validation. - Celeste

And I think [white people culturally appropriate Black hair] for similar reasons that like colonizers exploit or exploited anything back in the day. It's just like, “I want that.” - Maya

Some believe there may even be other motives behind this “gimme” attitude white people apparently have towards Black hair:

And I think it's also a way sometimes to keep the Black community small and to take things from them and to make sure like, we don't ever get the upper hand or get the wrong idea about our place in society. So it's like, “Oh, like we suddenly think this is cool, or we're gonna make a white person have it now and now it seems like it's their thing,” or something like that. So I feel like once again, it's a way to keep you or attempt to keep you like quiet and silent and take away like your greatness. -Nala

They will emulate Black culture as like a misguided activism ... Like, it's a way that they think that they're taking a stance against racism, or in some way, helping Black people by co-opting our culture or Black hair. Like they believe that if they, you know, mat up their hair to look like dreadlocks...that Black people perceive them as “brothers” or “sisters” or allies...But when white people take [Black hair] they're able to apply whiteness and all of a sudden, you know, the situation is solved. The situation is cool, hip, you know, racism is over, and they're able to kind of claim that they are doing something for us. And really, we are not helped by that. If anything, it only positions them in a way to benefit from both, you know, escaping accountability from white supremacy and secondly, feeling as though they're like gaining brownie points with similarly minded people -Joy

Joy's assessment of the situation rings true to many themes discussed in this ethnography. The celebration of Black hair she is mentioning is not the kind discussed in Chapter 1—done by Black women and those perceived as such, along with the people they want to include. It is a false celebration committed by non-Black (or white people) for the sake of fake solidarity, commodification, and a desire to move ever further into our supposed post-racial future. Non-Black people can act as though appropriation is an act of celebration, but it really is just another

instance where Black hair is purposefully appropriated and alienated from its originators by the personal actions of white people.

Other narratives in this category believe that rather than entitlement and greed, white people instead are displaying envy for Black hair—and even Black women in general.

Participants in this subgroup see white people as being jealous of the good that comes with Black hair and being Black: whether it is the beauty, or the clout, or otherwise that some associate with aspects of Black culture. They see it as:

We've been given like this shitty ordeal, but they want to access like the cool parts. And like guess one of the best parts of being Black because, you know, despite like all the shit that we have to go through on a daily basis, ...is our connection to our hair, our connection to each other. And I think they see that and they are a bit jealous,...a bit envious of like, that connection that we have with each other that they just like won't ever have - Sage

Like it's admiration, lowkey—that's exactly what it is. "I want to be like them." But in a sense, it's like envy...So like, it's both envy and it's admiration... It has to be l, cuz if you hate a group of people, why are you trying to be like us? - Zaya

I think it's desire...I think just like giving into the desires of [their] flesh...People love beautiful things, and they desire beautiful things, and they desire to be beautiful. - Maya

Black women, we get scrutinized for different features, and it's like, okay, so where do [white people] draw the line? ...You criticize us, but you want to be us? - Malia

The interviewees in this category clearly take the transgressions of cultural appropriation and their prototypes of it with some sort of grain of salt that allows them to bring out some the comic rage discussed prior. While not all responses may be as humors as other described previously, there is still an evident want to place the narrative and blame on white (or non-Black) people in their prototypes, where the causes in their reconciliations are on white people—which is not the case for all the categories, as will be discussed.

A/B: Manned Institution

This narrative group, unlike the envy category, do not see white people as jealous of Black people—rather, they understand the situation as “white people want the positives of being Black, but not the negatives.” I have placed this category at the juncture between category A and

B as it combines elements of both: while it essentially is discussing the same prototype as the negrophilia/negrophobia dichotomy, it includes the personal aspect that sees white people as an active participant in creating these dynamics, rather than just an impersonal power structure. This is seen as my interlocutors describe their thoughts:

Everybody wants to be Black. Everyone wants to be Black without the consequences, without the societal implications, without the trauma that comes with it...They know at the end of the day, they can take out the hairstyle and they're back to white. It's not permanent. They're just like cosplaying. They're Black fishing. - Esmeralda

I feel it's just like "Oh, it's cool and I like it and I can, like, dip my toes in it, but I have the ability to get out of it" So it's like best of both worlds...You don't have to deal with like, the hate and discrimination but you get like the praise, that light comes with the beauty [of Black hair]. - Onyx

They want to be close to Blackness, but not Black. You know, they want to just reach that border because Black is cool, like Black is like a blueprint, Black culture is the shit even though like no one wants to admit it.... So they want to access that but not in a way that demonizes them. - Sage

White people will expect to fit into that bad bitch, powerful woman [stereotype when wearing Black hair]. They want to take all of the positive stereotypes of Black people and at the same time face none of the negative ones... because Black hair is cute as shit and they know that they won't have the cultural consequences,...the socio-economical consequences of wearing that hair because they're so white. - Milan

[The goal is to] look as Black as you can without looking Black. I think because at the end of the day, like they can put on the braids, they can create a little shock factor...but they can go back to their hair. They can go back to having their hair that very day. That's the ideal standard. It's temporary. The thing with Black woman is that it's not temporary. Like we live with this shit. Like it's part of our lives - Amethyst

It's like everybody wants to act Black and nobody wants to be Black...Black girls have a certain type of magic or a certain type of, like, thing to them. And everybody wants a little bit of that. - Tanya

They're just like obsessed, in like they want to be Black...And you're taking, you're capitalizing on that and using your white privilege...because you think it looks good, while we're still getting oppressed. - Samira

This more nuanced view that combines the ideas of negrophobia and -philia while also including an active player just displays the complexity with which my interviewees understand the topics at hand. Just as most of my interlocutors presented reconciliations that involve more than one category, there are intricacies within in each category that create different prototypes.

C: The Black Body

The final category of reconciliations also involves an actor at the center of the narrative, but in these cases, it was more a reflexive look at the situation. These reconciliations involved Black women and those perceived as such, and how my interviewees see their bodies and hair in

relation to the dichotomy of difference in treatment of Black hair. The apparent question that this category appears to answer is one that is at the core of this chapter: “Why, in your opinion, are Black women discriminated against for wearing Black hair, while non-Black women are often praised after culturally appropriating Black hair?” those participants in this section seem to be responding to what aspect of themselves—that non-Black women do not have something is deemed worthy of such discrimination, in the eyes of American society. All expressed that it is something to do with the visual and physical Blackness of themselves and other Black women.

This was articulated as such:

I think hair is such a big part of it, but at the end of the day, like that non-Black person or like that white person still is not Black, so they still don't have those like stereotypes ... and they can still partake in the beauty of Black culture and the beauty of Black hair without, you know, existing in a Black body and like, receiving like the negative aspects or like backlash of just like what it means to exist in a Black body. - Sage

It's like that stigma where it's like, Oh, when a white girl does it it's acceptable, because she's a woman, or she's more feminine, or she's white. Like she's better, [they] must be better...[because] they're not Black, they must be better...As long as you're white, or as long as you're not Black, you can get away with it. And you will, because it's not a Black thing anymore, because you've done it...So it's not that those features are ugly: it's just that we're Black and those features are on us. - Nala

It's not the [Black] hair, it's that whiteness is the epitome of beauty. Right? So anything that [white people] do, people are gonna be like, “I love it,” even though you look like fucking hot garbage. - Celeste

I'd say it's more about the [Black] person and not the [Black] hair... So I think it's like more so like, “Oh, because this hair is associated with a Black woman or Black people, let's discriminate against it.”- Eve

If you're Black, at the end of the day, you're Black. You can't...there's nothing you can do to change that or shut that away. But if you're a white woman, you can obviously take away that hairstyle, obviously revert your hair back to its original way, and in the eyes of some people, you're obviously salvageable, or you can go back to “normal.” - Kara

If a Black hairstyle, something that we know is a part of the Black community, but white woman [wears] it, it's like, “Yes, it's something from the Black community, but she's a white woman. She's not Black, Black is not associated with her,” you know?... I think it's because of the Black person. - Malia

It's more so about being Black than being having Black hair... It's about the body that I inhabit, rather than the hair that I'm wearing. - Azalia

It all comes down to skin color, really. Unfortunately, at the end of the day you can take Kim Kardashian with the exact same hairstyle and you can put a Black woman with the same exact hairstyle right next to her: who are people gonna say is more beautiful? Even if they have identical body everything else?...Yeah, it comes down to skin color - Esmeralda

These quotes show that the schemas in this group see the problem as not something held within the hair but within the wearer. The fact that Black women are visibly Black carries discrimination and prejudice, like those instances discussed in Chapter 2, and non-Black women

will never face that, even if they wear Black hair. This non-substitutable arrangement occurs in the reverse: just as the discrimination Black women shoulder does not transmit to non-Black women when they appropriate Black hair, the positives non-Black women achieve by appropriating Black hair is not carried over to Black women with Black hair. A majority of my participants stated that non-Black women culturally appropriating Black hair are seen as feminine and satisfying American standards of beauty; however, they did not think that that femininity and adherence to beauty standards was applied to Black women wearing Black hair.

Conclusions

Detailing the prototype reconciliations of my interviewees has been a major goal of this thesis. As I mentioned in the introduction, I asked my interlocutors questions that I had often asked myself, and I have always been curious about where others like me stand. When I was younger, I would wonder about the difference in treatment Black and non-Black women receive for both wearing Black hair: why? Why can they “get away with it” and people that look like me are marred by the discrimination we face?

Even if it was not answering the exact question, much like most of my interviewee’s reconciliations, my prototype has always been that “Everybody wants to be Black, but nobody wants to be Black.” It was the exact reasoning my father would give me when I quiz him on why things are the way they are; my and my interlocutors prototype reconciliations speak directly to our understandings of discriminations and cultural appropriation of Black hair.

Such concepts have been heavily shaped by history, our experiences with our own Black hair, and our views of other people’s experiences with Black hair, too. This conglomeration of information leads us to create such prototype reconciliations in our head that, at least for me, have helped me get through the day sometimes. So, while some see the situation as a matter of

big R racism, others see it as the conscious antagonism of white people, and still others view it as circumstances regarding our own bodies—or maybe they even perceive it as somewhere in the middle. Either way, such understandings can speak volumes to what discrimination and cultural appropriation of Black hair means to my participants. Even though this ethnography does not cover the gamut of all Black women's prototypes reading reconciling cultural appropriation, the diversity of reconciliations among Black women and those perceived as such can be seen, despite similar experiences with their Black hair and discriminations as well as their grasps of cultural appropriation of Black hair.

Conclusion

All three chapters of this ethnography display the characteristic connections and relationships between the discrimination of Black hair on Black women and the cultural appropriation of Black hair on non-Black women. Each section adds a piece to the puzzle and not only shows the history behind it, but also the real-world effects on and the need for reconciliations for my participants regarding this dynamic between discrimination and appropriation.

The first chapter details the false reality about our ~post-racial America~ that some would have us believe is true, while the following sections display with concrete evidence that that simply untrue. The historical devaluation of Black hair on Black women has not been remedied by policy: it is still present today in the words and experiences of my participants. Even though some did not mention any such times in their lives, the fact that every single interviewee stated the narrative that, on the whole, Black women are discriminated against and that our Black hair is a specific and common location of that discrimination is a significant finding.

The same goes for the celebration of Black hair on non-Black women, which—sadly—is also not ancient history. Despite media callouts brought against non-Black celebrities for culturally appropriating, the Black hair that they wear has never been devalued in the same way it has for Black people. It is instead praised and complimented, allowing the hair to be detached from the culture and the people where it originates, and is appropriated and alienated into a new and unique trend that non-Black women can wear and be admired for. Simply acknowledging the existence of appropriation does not remedy it, and this is seen in my participants' need for a reconciliation. Even if some may see discrimination and appropriation to be contradictory forces

that do not compound each other, both play a part in the greater anti-Black racism as they add to the devaluing of Black hair on Black women and then the alienation of that same hair while it is praised on non-Black women. Although my use of the term reconciliation is not the normative definition, I think the term can include much more complexity and potential than the colloquial use allows. Reconciliation for this ethnography that in such cases as those discussed here, a remedy or kumbaya may not be the actual or even desired outcome, but rather a hashing out of the issue by those who it affects most and providing them the chance to critically rationalize their opinions of the situation. For some this is a matter of larger institutions like race dynamics in America; for others this is something caused by white people and their envy or desires; and still for others this is a problem based in the perception of the Black body itself. Some reconciled the situation, like I do, as everybody wants to be Black but nobody wants to be Black. This ethnography makes clear that the discrimination and the cultural appropriation of Black hair are two mechanisms of the same machine that continue to marginalize Black Americans, and specifically Black women.

These chapters showcase an important takeaway of this thesis that runs through the entire work where, “we already been knew”—so many parts of my conversations with my interviewees seem implicit and already understood. Even if my participants need a way to reconcile the dynamic of discrimination and appropriation to themselves, these are not novel concepts. The ease with which our discussions began, with little explanation of the topic in the first place, shows that these are ideas we consistently grapple with and think of, even if white America and the media are just catching up.

When such a group as Black women (or those perceived as such) are willing to express their own personal hair journeys and expose their vulnerability to being discriminated against for

their hair, others should take note: taking the time to listen and read the experiences of a marginalized group is important. You do not know how many years I have waited to hear the opinions of people that look like me and have deeply considered these topics, and to be able share that and make others see where we're coming from. Additionally, to be able to talk to people who are in even a more particular situation to mine, as my participants and I attend the Claremont Colleges, is even more interesting to me and hopefully others. Each of us are in a particular time in our lives with more visceral embodiments as we are coming to know about ourselves and our hair more, negotiating our visibility, and will soon be thrust into the world. Hopefully along the way, while we continue to process and exist in the world we do, we can keep just a little bit of that same humor I was able to experience with my participants in our conversations.

...And Beyond?

Future directions of related research could go through numerous routes I wish I could have taken in addition to the one I took. After reading through the transcripts, I see the ways I could have delved deeper into the influences and effects of my participants' understandings of Black hair discrimination and cultural appropriation. Further research in the vein of cognitive anthropology could explore the more psychological inspirations that lead my interlocutors to their categories of prototype reconciliations: What about their life experiences influenced them to see this as a matter of unpersonal forces, rather than one having to do with specifically the actions of white people, or even the perceptions of the Black body? How have experiences in their lives increased or shaped their schemas of cultural appropriation? What does their full schematic prototype of the cultural appropriation of Black hair look like, and how does it compare to others?

The research focused on a particularly situated narratives of college students, who are coming of age and forming communities of solidarity within complex institutional systems that impose intersecting pressures. Further ethnographic exploration of different focus group would expand our understanding of differences opinions and perceptions that likely lie in differences with age, location, demographics of those locations, gender identity, and more. This ethnography also revealed college students' deep-seated anger, anxiety, and despair, and also a sense of humor in dealing with the complex layers of racism, calling for broader consideration on the emotional and psychological effects of seeing non-Black women appropriating Black hair be praised in conjunction with those who have felt they have been discriminated for their Black hair: How has seeing cultural appropriation made them feel about their own hair, themselves, and self-esteem? Has it caused them to change their appearance in any way or develop any anxieties that affect their daily lives in any ways?

Ultimately, however, while this ethnography could have taken many shapes, I am proud to be able to showcase the rich experiences of all 26 of the wonderful and beautiful Black women and those perceived as Black women that I had the privilege to speak with. Their willingness to speak openly and honestly about their opinions was amazing, and I hope I did each of them justice as all of us continue through college (and life) being perceived as Black women with Black hair.

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