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Recommended Citation

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**THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN BLACK HAIR AND THE
ENVIRONMENT: HAIR AS A SITE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABILITY**

By

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

PROFESSOR JENNIFER ARMSTRONG

PROFESSOR MELINDA HERROLD-MENZIES

MAY 11, 2021

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my readers Professor Jennifer Armstrong and Professor Melinda Herrold-Menzies for their guidance and patience as I worked through the process of writing this thesis. Thank you to all my friends at the Claremont Colleges for showing me the nuances of life and academia and for always supporting me in my endeavours. Finally, a special thank you to Tahiv, my family and myself for helping me hold space for grace, patience, and rest through these last four years.

Abstract

Currently, we are facing several global crises that include but are not limited to climate change, food insecurity, pollution of the body and environment, as well as racial, gender, and class inequities. This thesis seeks to understand how the natural hair movement, which strives to omit toxic chemicals while embracing textured hair, can be a tool of reconnecting to nature. As humans we are intrinsically part of ecosystems and nature, we must find our niche in it instead of occupying and destroying our environment entirely. The methodology includes compiling a small array of experiences that show the nuance of hair and how individuals may or may not use it to accept themselves intrinsically and thus find a way to uphold nature in all of its forms. African ecofeminism, the history of hair and corresponding environmental racism, health studies, and an anthology are used to flesh out the existence of this phenomenon. The conclusion suggests that this study warrants further research by further exploring the unique experiences of Black people in relation to their hair and nature.

1. Personal Background

For the first 16 years of my life, I didn't know what my hair texture was. My family moved from Idaho to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania when I was four years old, and every Sunday I would go to a neighbor's house to get my hair cornrowed. My father, a traditional Tanzanian, insisted that I always look presentable. My mother, a white American, would wash and detangle my hair before sending me off with 500 Tanzanian shillings to have my hair braided. I had a love-hate relationship with getting my hair braided. On the one hand, I did not like sitting still for hours while the *msusi* (Swahili for braider) seemed to always be parting my hair for a smaller section. I would sneakily reach up and touch my scalp to estimate how many sections were left, only to be swatted away with a wooden hair pick and a warning. On the other hand, the comfort of sitting

on a mat under a neem tree made up for the tedium and the tender scalp I would have later. I rested my head on the *msusi's* knee and sometimes fell asleep. When she finished, I would walk home with a beautifully intricate hairstyle, ready for school the next day.

Unfortunately, braiding was the least unpleasant aspect of my hair care routine. Every two months, my hair was chemically straightened with a relaxer at a local salon to break down my kinks and, in everyone's eyes, make my hair more manageable. As I waited the 18 minutes the chemicals took to process my hair, I felt the familiar pain of my burning scalp and waited for the relief of the cool water rinse. Once again, my natural roots were conquered before they could make too much of a mess. Nearly everyone I knew had an obsession with neatness and an abhorrence to appearing "unkempt." My best friend in sixth grade, Sekela, had natural hair, and I frequently asked her to relax her hair so that we could see its true length. I wondered why she kept it natural when she could have made her life easier and looked prettier—to me—with straight, relaxed hair.

I formed a deep connection with my community because of this cycle of relax, braid, wash, repeat. I would eavesdrop on the women in the salon as they traded stories about their lives. Most of them had their hair relaxed, too. These strangers were, in all but blood, my aunties. Even though I didn't know these women, they often brought me juice and chips as I waited for my hair to be finished. This was more than just the famous Tanzanian love for children; it was a rite of passage, an initiation into our culture of unachievable hair norm, a struggle we would have to bear together.

When I became a teenager, I inherited the responsibility of caring for my own hair. I was just starting high school, and it was time to relax my hair again. I wanted to look my best. I went to a random salon near my house and asked for my routine service. But this time would not be

like the others. Once hair has been relaxed, only the roots need to be retouched. This time, the hairdresser applied the relaxer from roots to ends and left it in for 45 minutes instead of the recommended 18. I sat there in agony, wondering if I should say something about my burning scalp, yet I stayed silent, trusting her to know best. Later that day, as I combed my freshly relaxed hair, it broke off in little bits and pieces all over my shoulders. I was horrified and vowed to never relax it again. Over the next few months, my curly roots made their debut with the promise of something new and exciting, my natural hair. I cut off the damage to build a new relationship with my hair. But now instead of people jokingly asking to buy my hair as they had in the past, they disdainfully asked why I never combed or oiled my afro. It was dry and frizzy. I longed for the miracle product that would transform my hair into luscious, bouncy locks, but there were none, at the time, that catered to curly hair in Tanzania.

This lack of access changed when I moved back to the United States at 16 to complete my high school education. Leaving my family behind in Tanzania, I traveled alone to live with extended family in Vermont. I went from a predominantly Black African culture to a predominantly white, New England culture, and the difference was stark. To cope, I threw myself into perfecting my fantasy of loose ringlets. This fantasy was exacerbated by the lack of representation of healthy kinky hair textures in the media and hairdressers who couldn't cut or style my hair. I tried many brands before I grasped the fact that my hair texture was unique to me. Thus, I began the journey to embrace my zig-zaggy, tight curls.

To adjust to my new American life, I attended a semester-long environmental program called Mountain Campus my junior year of high school. This program changed my life aspirations. I learned about my local ecology, sustainable business models, and the climate crisis. Here I discovered my passion for environmental preservation and justice. I was moved by the

desperate position the earth is in. Moreover, I couldn't help but connect nature to my hair. I began to see parallels between the treatment of natural black hair and nature. Nature is seen as something to be exploited and manipulated. Both are often described as dirty, unkempt, wild; both are only acceptable when carefully manicured. People only want exposure to the elements if those elements are non-threatening and controlled. In the same way, black hair is often seen as undesirable unless it is loose, long, and forms perfect ringlets.

With the prevalence of relaxers that destroy the composition of afro hair and that are also toxic to the environment, I would argue that natural hair and by extension Black people are subjected to environmental racism. Hair is an essential part of self-conception and often bonds Black people to their communities. By interviewing my peers at Scripps College of the African Diaspora, people who may have similar values but different contexts, I will expand my understanding of natural hair, the ways in which people with afro-textured hair resist beauty standards, and how we can maintain our hair while maintaining our environment.

2. Introduction

In this thesis, I will explore how embracing natural hair and having agency over one's body or appearance may be a means of fostering our innate connection to nature. For Black women to be free of the coercion to style our hair in accordance to European standards as well as transforming the hair market so that products that we consume and thus all humans consume are free of toxins. I will show this relationship by breaking down the history of Black hair in the United States from before the Trans-Atlantic Slavery to contemporary times while engaging with existing concepts of Black ecofeminism. I will interview eight Black women on campus to expand on a diverse experience that they have with themselves, nature and their hair as individuals.

In the absence of robust literature that directly link issues of environmental justice to Black hair or self-acceptance to environmental sustainability, I will unpack the theoretical framework revolving ecofeminism, African ecofeminism, and Black feminist theory. In *Le Féminisme ou la mort*, Françoise D'Eaubonne argues that the exploitation and subjugation of women and the environment are linked through patriarchy and anthropocentrism, respectively. She calls attention to the relegation of women as second-class citizens despite their making up more than half of the world's population and the essential role they play in reproduction and caretaking. She accuses our male dominated society of the desire to possess and control women's reproductive capacity through philosophy and legislation which has led to overpopulation, a threat to both humanity and the environment. Due to the book being written in French, I drew from an analysis by Barbara Gates titled *A Root of Ecofeminism: Ecoféminisme. Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. Gates describes D'Eaubonne reasoning as:

“Overpopulation is ruining both humanity and the earth, for the earth is treated with the same disregard as are women. Urbanized, technological society, which is male-driven, has reduced the earth's fertility while overbreeding, also male-driven, has increased the population. Women must act to save themselves and the earth simultaneously. The two needs are intimately linked.”

While D'Eaubonne builds an important framework to help us understand how environmental and woman degradation are linked, she leaves out the effects of colonialism and corresponding intersections of race, class and sexuality as identities that may worsen or improve a woman's positionality in a hierarchical society. The concern of overpopulation as a global crisis, originally theorized by Thomas Malthus, is tied to the idea that as the human population grows, so does the consumption of natural resources. It has since been called into question for its focus on countries in the “Global South” (which are primarily non-white) to reduce their growing populations. However, it does not address how these countries, their societies and the environment, were destabilized by colonialism, capitalism, misogyny, and racism. It also does not address the disproportionate consumption and growing income inequality seen in wealthier, Western countries. In order to find ethical, sustainable solutions to reduce the world population and recover the environment, these intersectional issues must be addressed.

Other ecofeminists such as (see for example Plumwood 1991; Ruether 1974; Salleh, 1988) build off of D'Eaubonne's theory by adding that the oppression of women and nature is dependent on a value system that posits emotion, body, nature, and women as inferior when compared to reason, mind, culture, human (i.e., male) and men which are seen as superior. Karen Warren (1987, 1990) argues that these values are assumed to be mutually exclusive and are set in a binary and a hierarchy that are then expanded to larger oppressive conceptual frameworks such as sexism,

racism, classism, heterosexism as well as "naturism," i.e., the unjustified domination of nonhuman nature. Salleh (1988) continues to argue that feminization of nature and naturalization of women has led to the oppression of both. Janet Muthoni Muthuki (2006) breaks down S. Lahar's (1991) argument as seeing women-nature connections as political and ecofeminism as a grassroots political movement motivated by pressing pragmatic concerns. These include women's and environmental health, science, development and technology, the treatment of animals, and peace, antinuclear, antimilitarist activism.) This understanding is important because it allows us to see that ecofeminism can be used as a holistic approach to tackle many issues that are faced by women within their intersectional identities and social spheres—including hair.

The relationship between hair, Black women, and nature can be further developed via African Feminisms which reflect a growing discourse in feminism that questions and challenges the potential homogenizing narrative of Western scholarship (see for example: Amadiume, 1987; Amdt, 2002; Kolawole, 1997; Mikell, 1997; Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997). African feminism critiques the focus on gender relations of white, middle class western women and pushes it to encompass the intricacies of oppression in the Global south resulting from histories of slavery, imperialism and the presence of neo-colonial configurations:

“Consequently, African feminism is shaped by African women's resistance to western hegemony and its legacy within African culture. It has grown out of a history of women's integration in corporate and agrarian based societies, which had strong cultural heritages, but were however disrupted by colonialism. African feminisms hold the view that the erosion of women's power is caused by the intrusion of foreign systems with different gender orientation and new paradigms of power organization” (see 13 Amadiume, 1987;

Arndt, 2002; Kolawole, 1997; Mikell, 1997; Mohanty, 2003; Narayan, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997)

Relating this idea back to natural hair we see that its demonization and policing is directly related to positioning it and Black women against whiteness; kinks and coils versus straight and silky. It is also naturalized or animalized as I will discuss below with its comparison to wool in texture. I believe that natural hair can be seen as a woman-nature connection given its roots in African spirituality and culture. Additionally its manipulation and destruction by toxic chemicals can be seen as environmental degradation. Using hair as a site of political and environmental liberation within the framework of African ecofeminism decenters the homogenous theory of feminism by addressing Black women's day to day issues with environmental harm in regards to their hair and developing agency in the face of beauty standards that are systemically racist. In order to understand how hair is even a site for environmental racism, we must look at the entirety of its history using the United States as a case study over the last 400 years.

3. History of Black Hair and Environmental Racism

“The story of Black people’s hair begins where everything began—in Africa. Not surprisingly, the birthplace of both astronomy and alchemy also gave rise to a people in perfect harmony with their environment. Indeed the dense, spiraling curls of African hair demonstrate evolutionary genius. Like natural air conditioning, this frizzy, kinky hair insulates the head from the brutal intensity of the sun’s rays. Of course there is not one single type of African hair, just as there is not one single type of African. The variety of hair textures from western Africa alone ranges from the deep ebony, kinky curls of the Mandingos to the loosely curled, flowing locks of the Ashanti. The one constant Africans share when it comes to hair is the social and cultural significance intrinsic to each beautiful strand.” — Ayana D. Byrd

3.1 Precolonial Africa

To Africans, hair has always served as an important messenger when it comes to indicating a person’s marital status, age, religion, ethnic identity, wealth, and rank within a given society via elaborate hairstyles. For example, in the Wolof culture of Senegal, prepubescent girls who were not of marrying age shaved part of their heads to distinguish themselves as unavailable for courtship. On the other hand, recently widowed women left their hair unkempt for a specific mourning period to indicate her suffering and unavailability to new suitors who would find her unattractive in this state (Byrd 2001). Just as hair was meant to carry social significance, it was also aesthetically important. Sylvia Ardyn Boone (1986) wrote that to most West African societies, long, thick hair on women demonstrated “the life-force, the multiplying power of profusion, prosperity, a ‘green thumb’ for raising bountiful farms and many children.” Here we see the direct connection between women, their hair and their environment. Hair was synonymous with soil and the crops it could provide given the proper care of a bountiful woman. Given that a person’s spirit was believed to reside in their hair, only the most trustworthy individuals (often family members) were in charge of hair grooming. Due to their skills when it

came to washing, combing, oiling, braiding, twisting, and decorating the hair, the hairdresser specialized in knowing the proper tools and oils that would make the hours or days long process easier. They often used hand-carved wooden combs or picks with palm oil and hair care knowledge that was passed down for generations. This intricate ceremony around hair, nature, and familial connection was one aspect that was ripped from the identities of those kidnapped for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

3.2 The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade

With the invasion and settlement of the Americas came a growing need for a free labor force to work on plantations— Africans. The first thing the captors or enslavers did was cut the hair of those captured. Shaving one's hair was considered the highest indignity, interpreted as a way of taking away someone's identity when you remember the aforementioned symbolism of hair. It was a means of homogenizing their diverse identities into a singular one of chattel, a designated status associated with Blackness. Within enslavement, the long working hours, poor nutrition and torture did not leave enough time or resources for the enslaved people to care for their hair. They did not have combs so they used sheep fleece carding tools with steel wire teeth. Ringworm and lice infestations were pervasive and further broke down self-esteem due to the breakage and patchy baldness that would follow. The importance of well kept hair from African tradition and the subsequent cutting and neglect by white enslavers definitely ties into the continued importance of well cared for hair within the Black community to this day. White people referred to Black hair as animal-like—like wool and thus was unattractive and inferior in comparison to straight hair. Pseudoscience was even employed to officially relegate Africans to the bottom of the evolutionary ladder due to their hair. All of this was to brainwash Black women into thinking that they are ugly and inferior which made them and their descendants easier to

control (Byrd 2001). After two centuries in bondage, Black people found alternative products than what was used in their ancestral home to achieve white hairstyles that were seen as the beauty ideal. From bacon grease to butter for shine; cornmeal and kerosene for scalp cleansers. Lye mixed with potatoes to straighten the curls. While effective, it also could burn the skin right off a person's head. Hair was a signifier of enslavement because no matter how light the skin was, hair is what would reveal the true nature of Blackness through kinks and curls. Straight hair often signified freedom. This self-harm only came to be due to the psychological and physical abuse that was inflicted upon the people of African descent.

3.3 1865-1964

This is where colorism and texturism strengthen their hold in the Black community. Colorism is defined as prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. Texturism is defined as favoring or praising Black hair with looser, finer curl patterns and discriminating against tighter, kinkier textures. It's generally associated with mixed and biracial women but of course, that's not always the case. Post Civil War, Lighter skin and straight hair became markers of success and acceptance that determined what jobs, neighborhoods, and even churches you could frequent. To aid with lightening skin and straightening hair, "arsenic wafers for lightening the skin and lye for straightening the hair, were often dangerous chemical concoctions that not only failed to perform miracles but could prove deadly" (Byrd 2001).

Fast forward to the early 1900s and there were mixed ideas on how hair should be treated. On one hand there were those that wanted to conform and others who thought that trying to be white was useless and it mattered more that people build their characters and embraced themselves. On the other hand, some anthropologists such as Shane and Graham White saw the

straightening process as a reminder of ancient rituals around haircare and creativity. Although Black people did try to emulate white styles, they always brought their unique twist to it. The brainwashing that white people inflicted during slavery did a good enough job that it was Black people who now policed and enforced onto each other to be less “inferior” i.e more similar to white people with hair and skin. This internalized self-hatred can be seen with the growth of the hair industry whose sole purpose was to make hair more manageable by any means necessary and the Black owned media publications that ran ads that encouraged the consumption of these products and ideals. Despite Black people conforming and keeping their appearances as close to white people as possible—to find acceptance or prove that they were better than the caricatures that represented them— mainstream America insisted on perpetuating racist stereotypes. They did this through movies and shows that depicted “Buckwheat, the ultra nappy-headed, poorly talking, dimwitted Black character... Images like Buckwheat were mere updates of the Sambos, Coons, and other minstrel show characters of the past.” This can be related to current day where even if a person wears their hair natural or in a straight style, they will still be discriminated against because of pervading anti-Blackness. Malcolm X asserted that Black people who were colonized mentally would not be able to break the chains of racism until they learned to love their appearances— this included their facial features, hair texture and skin color. Part of resistance in the civil rights era which included boycotts, sit-ins, protests, and freedom riders also focused on appearance as a form of resistance. The 1960s brought to white America’s attention, the Civil Rights movement, Black nationalism, and afros.

3.4 1960s-2000s

The perception of the afro in the sixties transitioned from one of style to one of political statement as a means to demonstrate Black people’s connection to their African ancestral roots.

There was a lot of conflict around this movement specifically intergenerationally as young Black people wanted to embrace themselves while their parents or grandparents might have found it a disgrace proving white people right about so-called Black inferiority. With the newfound celebration and wearing of afro-textured hair, Black women were able to experiment with creatively styles such as afros of varying heights, cornrows, braids, and African inspired headwraps known as gelees. Hair became a means of identifying one's politics and even judging them for it. Oddly enough, this meant that some turned to chemicals to "kink up" their naturally straight or wavy hair (previously considered "Good Hair") as a means to claim their Blackness and not be further ostracized. Simultaneously, many Black hair-product manufacturers faced a recession due to the decrease in demand for straight, glossy, "neat" hair. While lye was the main ingredient in hair relaxers and was known for its caustic abilities, it wasn't until 1975 that the federal government decided to regulate its use by ordering the Black owned company Johnson Products to add a warning label on its Ultra Sheen relaxer. This could be seen as a move to protect Black people's health, however, the Federal Trade Commission did not apply this rule to a competing (white owned) brand until 22 months later. During this time, Revlon advertised their hair relaxers as healthier and more reliable, essentially destroying the foothold that Johnson company had in the Black haircare industry.

Towards the end of the 1990s, natural hair began to gain popularity again. Like the 60s, this appreciation for natural hair came with a new urgency for Black people to reclaim their African heritage. The hairstyles consisted mostly of intricate African-inspired braids that increased business for African immigrant braiders. Subsequently, hair product companies jumped to market to this new niche of Black hair care by promoting "exotic" oils and sheens with ethnic names originating from Africa such as "Masai Polishing Mist." It was in this era that we see the

harshest and most dangerous case of greenwashing. Greenwashing is when a company invests most of its money in marketing themselves as environmentally friendly rather than minimizing their ecological footprint. In 1994, World Rio Corporation marketed an all natural relaxer without chemicals that claimed to straighten hair with exotic ingredients from the Amazon rainforest. Instead of the promised silky, bouncy hair, over two thousand people experienced “itchy scalps with oozing blisters, green hair, and/or complete hair loss”(Byrd). After a class-action lawsuit, it was discovered that this “all natural product” was full of highly acidic chemicals and the FDA banned the product from store shelves. Irene Diamond (1990) and Karen Warren (1997) demonstrate how the invisibility of women’s labor and connection to ecological knowledge systems results in their exclusion from policies that affect their livelihood and ecological sustainability. This exclusion on the basis of male bias towards reason, techno-science and capital is to blame for the fact that women disproportionately bear the health risks associated with environmental degradation. This assertion relates directly to the disproportionately high rates of uterine fibroids as well as the burns and hair loss experienced by Black women due to the use of relaxers¹.

¹ See the end of Hair story : untangling the roots of Black hair in America for all the citations the authors used in the book.

4. The Link Between Relaxers and Higher Rates of Uterine Fibroids in Black Women

In 2012, a hypothesis generating study by Lauren A. Wise et al. was released showing a correlation between relaxer use and risk of uterine leiomyomata in African-American women. Uterine leiomyomata are benign tumors that grow in response to estrogen and progesterone. Black women are two to three times more likely than white women to have incidences of uterine fibroids and have a 80 percent lifetime risk to acquiring them. This racial disparity cannot be explained by the established risk factors. Between 1997 and 2009, 23,580 premenopausal women were followed for incidents of uterine fibroids. During that time 7,146 cases of uterine leiomyomata were confirmed by ultrasound (n=4,630) or surgery (n=2,516). Positive trends were observed for frequency of use, duration of use (more than ten years), and number of burns. The authors found that burns and skin lesions on the scalp caused by hair relaxers allowed for chemicals to seep into the body triggering the hormonal changes linked with uterine fibroids. In another eight year study conducted by the National Institutes of Health of over 46,000 women of all races between the ages of 35–74 that linked chemical hair relaxers and dyes to breast cancer. African American women had an astounding 45 percent increased risk of breast cancer compared to other races (Eberle, C. E., Sandler, D. P., Taylor, K. W., & White, A. J. 2020). With these studies in mind, I argue that hair is just one way that Black women's bodies are subjected to environmental racism emphasizing the need to view humans as intrinsically part of nature and worth protecting.

Given this understanding of the history of Black hair and its ensuing manipulation in the United States, we can see that by displacing people of African descent from their natural environments the degradation that follows not only on their hair but also their bodies and spirit. By systematically decontextualizing them, their entire sense of self and autonomy is displaced

leaving them vulnerable to all kinds of environmental injustice. This oppression is why it is crucial to understand how Black women today understand and experience their natural hair. Hair as a site for identity and the framework of african ecofeminism, an intersection of race, gender, and nature, can help prioritize hair as a means of human and environmental liberation.

5. The Significance of Natural Hair Experiences Today

In *Hair It Is: Examining the Experiences of Black Women with Natural Hair*, Tabora A. Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead conducted an internet survey with 529 Black women exploring their experiences wearing their hair in its natural state i.e not thermally or chemically straightened. They found that 95 percent of the women who wore their hair naturally felt accepted in multiple social interactions. While 84.5% of respondents feel that discrimination targeting Black women for wearing their natural hair affects Black women, only 3% indicated that they have been very much affected, and 23 percent indicated that they were somewhat affected. They cautioned readers to take into account that their sample survey mostly included young, highly educated women who might wear their hair naturally more than the general population. The authors also found a positive link between favorable responses from society, earning a middle class income, having advanced degrees and wearing natural hair among Black women. They argue that the days where straight hair was deemed necessary for emotional, financial, and academic success are coming to an end given the growing number of young successful Black women with natural hair (*Johnson, T. A., & Bankhead, T. (2014)*). These authors reinforce my theory of the importance of agency and acceptance of one's natural state of being. Especially when natural Black hair has been demonized for the last 400 years.

6. Anthology of Black Experience with Hair and the Environment

In this section I interview six informants from my college to explore some of the shared themes in the Black experience as stated by all the authors above. The interviews do not serve as conclusive evidence but rather ground the reader in the uniqueness of the Black experience via individual opinions around natural hair, identity, sustainability and the environment. The strongest theme that stood out to me amongst all of the informants' responses is that to wear one's natural hair is to be brave, to resist, and to challenge societal beauty standards and to commit to caring for their hair and body's needs. While all the informants agreed that the natural hair movement is for the Black community and refuting the claim that straight hair is more manageable. However, Informant A and Informant B brought up how the movement is sometimes co-opted or assigned to lighter skinned or biracial Black women with looser curls which takes away visibility from the group most affected dark skinned Black women with tighter kinky coils. Other than informant B who is Ethiopian American, every other informant has had their hair either chemically relaxed or heat manipulated to become straight and more "manageable." Informant D expressed that the only reason she considered her hair to be more manageable while straight is because she and her mother did not know how to care for her curls. In reality, after going natural, she found that straight hair was much harder to upkeep because it took hours to straighten and with a single drop of water or humidity, it became frizzy and had to be redone resulting in further damage to her hair. Informant A said that she only had her hair permed for a short time but due to chemical burns and breakage she went back to natural with protective styling i.e individual braids with extensions. Now that she has had time and resources

to care for her hair, she is able to start to pay attention to the ingredients in her hair products. For informant C, her pre-natural hair care routine appeared as such,

“Oh yes, when I was 13 I got my first relaxer. I wanted straight, long hair so bad. And quite honestly the relaxer more or less gave me that. But, of course my hair was so damaged, fell out, looked horrible. For years after that I would get texturizers every 3 months to achieve the “loose” curl look. I would also straighten my hair everyday, and I mean everyday I would wake up an hour earlier than my peers to put massive amounts of heat on my already chemically damaged hair. It got to a point where if I didn’t have it straight people were shocked. Yes, my scalp burned when I was getting the treatments. For one of the treatments, the chemicals were so harsh that it had to be done outside, both me and the hairdresser wearing masks, and a fan blowing so we wouldn’t become sick.”

Informant E also talks about the burning sensations and chemical burns they experienced while relaxing their hair at the age of 11. A common denominator amongst these young women and their journey to going natural was that their primary caretakers—their mothers— did not know how to care for their hair. Their mothers, those of whom were Black, did not know how to care for their own hair and this goes to show that knowledge of self-care is passed down intergenerationally. So the question becomes, what happens to future generations of Black children whose parents understand and appreciate natural hair? A whole shift of consciousness, self-awareness and self love. Since going natural, all of the informants said that they have a greater appreciation for not only their hair but also their bodies and their communities.

When it comes to the issue of sustainability, Informants A, B, and D expressed that sustainable hair care was not something in their mindset until they went natural and are now much more conscious of the effects ingredients may have on their bodies. Informant D shared an anecdote of how her sister experienced some hair loss from using a shampoo that was recalled and has a pending lawsuit. Informant B is attempting to reuse or recycle the synthetic, plastic extensions she uses for her protective styles and buying higher quality. Informant C is vegan and

always looking for plant based, ethically sourced ingredients. Informant F came to the realization that investing in higher quality products will improve the health of her hair and be better for the sewage systems. Other than Informant C, every other informant expressed an uncertainty when it came to their relationship with the outdoors but were knowledgeable of the stereotypes and barriers that stop Black folks from being in nature recreationally. Part of the reason being growing up in a city with little access to nature or not enjoying the idea of bugs or unbearable heat. I loved what Informant D said about her hair's relationship to nature, " Natural hair is an extension of the body which is an extension of nature. This hair, this body, this world is the only one we'll ever have, we need to take care of all three. The only thing we can do is invest both physically and materially in making them the best they can be. The body and nature provide shelter and in return we need to make them last as long as they can."

All in all this anthology provides a brief overview of why and how these six informants have chosen to embrace their hair as a means to strengthen their identity. They also had the opportunity to connect how hair, the environment and sustainability connects for them in their lived experience. This anthology and thesis is preliminary and would lead to questions for further research.

7. Conclusion

By exploring the intersection between race, gender, environment and hair, I have been able to emphasize the link between white supremacy, oppressive beauty standards, and environmental racism which manifest themselves in the hair of Black people. However, the natural hair movement can also be a powerful tool for liberation from these systems of domination because it focuses on lessening exposure to toxic chemicals and simultaneously breaks down the texturism that came into existence because of slavery. This matters because ensuring the protection and elevation of Black women worldwide will guarantee the protection of all humans when you consider that they are at the bottom of the racial and gendered hierarchy. Humans are intrinsically part of nature and worth protecting. This thesis helps to create a new understanding about the ways in which history informs our present-day realities while also being a solution to our problems. Understanding what was allows us to imagine what can be and this is seen in the examples of how Africans wore and revered their hair and their natural resources. The anthology serves to help us visualize how hair matters across the African diaspora. My hope is that I can further this research within an ethnography to properly encompass the Black hair experience and seeing the ways in which the environment may simultaneously be preserved.

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