MAKING HAIR MATTER:
UNTANGLING BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS

by

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Abstract

Hair is a remarkably complex material-semiotic entity. Caught on the cusp between self/society, meticulously contrived and purposely styled, hair is crucial in the articulation of identity and difference. However, although scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the body as a site of cultural production and identity politics, discussions surrounding hair have been largely ignored and relegated to the realm of the trivial or inconsequential. Addressing this void, this project places hair at the centre of examination in a two-part qualitative analysis. First, hair is reconfigured as sign and examined as a socio-cultural performance achieved through the reiteration of historically contingent practices, and materialized through the body. Particular attention is paid to Black women’s hair/styling practices as a vital site of cultural production, identity negotiation and radical subversion. Following this is a critical discourse analysis of the representation of hair within popular culture, with a specific focus on the way in which Black women’s hair/styling practices are fundamentally implicated in the production of identity and difference. The possibility of resistance through transgressive hair stylizations is also explored. Overall, hair is found to be intimately involved in the (re)constitution of sexed/gendered beings, integral to the process of racialization and a potential locus of resistance. However, this investigation also finds that popular culture displays – even those that purport to offer a critical analysis – fail to destabilize the underlying regimes of domination and oppression that limit and sustain the systems of meaning through which hair is understood.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

“I want to know my hair again, to own it, to delight in it again, to recall my earliest mirrored reflection when there was no beginning and I first knew that the person who laughed at me and cried with me and stuck her tongue out at me was me. I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew that my hair is me, before I lost the right to me, before I knew that the burden of beauty—or lack of it—for an entire race of people could be tied up with my hair and me... I want to know my hair again... before I knew that my hair could be wrong–the wrong color, the wrong texture, the wrong amount of curl or straight. Before hot combs and thick grease... all guaranteed to transform... the coarse, resistant wool that represents me. I want to know once more the time before I denatured, denuded, denigrated and denied my hair and me.”

- Paulette M. Caldwell, “Hair Piece”

Situating the Politics of Hair

Hair is an infinitely complex symbolic entity. It is at once a source of pride and a cause of shame, a menacing presence and a familiar comfort. As a physical characteristic, hair occupies a unique position; emerging lifeless from the flesh it is at once of and not of the body (Rosenthal 2004). Osculating between self/other, life/death, inside/outside, possessed/transferable, hair represents an intriguing bodily site of upheaval (Berry 2008; Tate 2009). As a corporeal entity hair is vital to the production of social meanings, the staging of self and the expression of symbolic values (Brownmiller 1984; Katz-Rothman 2005; Rooks 2001; Rosenthal 2004; Scales-Trent 1995). Inextricably linked to notions of “race”, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, religion and generation, hair holds important and often contradictory cultural, spiritual and aesthetic significance (Angelou 2009; Byrd & Tharps 2001; Banks 2000; Bordo 2008; Collins 2000). Carefully wrought and intensely groomed, hair is never straightforward or depoliticized, instead in its presence

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1 For the purposes of this project “race” is conceptualized as an ideological construction mapped onto the body, “a fiction that is lived, sometimes painfully and sometimes joyously” (Lloyd 2005:61).
or absence hair becomes crucial in the articulation of identity and difference (Brownmiller 1984; Caldwell 1995; hooks 1989b; Scales-Trent 1995; Lesnik-Oberstein 2006; Lopez 1995; Rook 2000; Rosenthal 2004). Uniquely perched in this manner on the brink of self and society hair is deeply personal, entirely public and highly political (Katz-Rothman 2005; Mercer 1990; Prince 2009; Weitz 2001).

For Black women in particular, hair carries special significance as a vital site of cultural production and identity negotiation (Collins 2000; Ebong 2001; hooks 1996; Jones 1994; Prince 2009; Rooks 2000; Walker 2007). Occupying a remarkable position, Black women’s hair is at once extraordinarily pliable in comparison to other physical markers of “race” and gender, and yet in its semiotic fashioning it is difficult to parse from these associations (Banks 2000; Northern 2006; Tate 2009). Inextricably bound to relations of power, Black women’s hair can aid in the reification of hegemonic regimes of domination and oppression (Byrd & Tharps 2000; Collins 2000; Davis 1982). Through particular stylizations it can also transgress and subvert essentialized categories, disrupting naturalized gendered and raced assumptions (Berry 2008; Cunningham & Alexander 2005; Mercer 1990; Rooks 2001; Tate 2009; Walker 2000). Constrained in this way by forces of oppression, and yet extremely malleable, Black women’s hair is an intriguing locus of creativity and resistance.

However, although scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the body as a site of cultural production and identity politics, discussions surrounding hair have been largely negated (Banks 2000; Rosenthal 2004; Synnott 1987). Relegated to the realm of the trivial or inconsequential, hair’s material and symbolic significance has been largely
overlooked (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006). In an effort to address this void, the following project places hair at the centre of analysis. The politics of hair will be explored, with a particular focus on the way in which Black women’s hair/styling practices are represented within popular culture, and fundamentally implicated in the production of identity and difference. Ultimately, it will be argued that popular culture displays – even those that purport to offer a critical analysis – fail to address the politics of hair in its complexity.

What follows is a two-part qualitative analysis, guided by an initial critical engagement with theoretical and methodological concerns. Notably, this project attempts to bring forth the voices of Black women as they discuss their hair/styling practices in relation to broader social and cultural milieu; intentionally problematizing hegemonic ideology which has traditionally served to justify the negation of such situated knowledges (Banks 2000; Dua 2005; Kincheloe & McLaren 2004). Reconciling the personal and political, their narratives stress the nuance complexity of hair as a regulatory force, but also as a site of celebration and liberation, and as a potential forum for negotiating resistance.

**Chapter Overview**

Chapter Two is comprised of a theoretical and methodological overview of the project at hand. Beginning with an examination of semiotics, this section explores the mechanisms through which hair comes to signify, and the ideological function such a process serves. Reconfigured as sign, hair is understood through the cultural
representations that surround its materialization and by virtue of the manifestations that articulate its presence. To further ground this investigation, a Foucauldian approach to discourse will be delineated to explicate how power is implicated in representational processes. The method of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will then be outlined to create a comprehensive methodological framework from which to situate the current investigation. Following this, the tenets of Black feminist thought will be reviewed and applied to establish a critical politics of identity founded on strategic essentialism. Popular culture will also be located as an important site of exploration, especially concerning the figuration of identity, the appropriation of culture and the commodification of resistance. Overall, this chapter delineates the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this project.

Chapter Three constructs a conceptual framework for situating the politics of hair. First, using Judith Butler’s (1999) politics of performativity, hair will be reconceptualized as a performative accomplishment to highlight its complexity and to situate it as a vital corporeal entity. Next, hair will be implicated in the (re)constitution of sex/gender, exemplified through an exploration of the anxieties surrounding female body hair and the ritualized idealization of female head hair. Following this, Black women’s hair is examined as a space where various ideologies converge to limit, homogenize and reify social identity. Finally, the possibility of resistance will be located within transgressive stylizations which emphasize hair’s fluidity, thereby positioning the body as a site of crossing-over, a locale of shifting meaning, and a place of questioning and remaking. Overall, the analysis presented in this chapter forms a conceptual schematic, linking the
reproduction of hegemonic discourse (and the possibility of resistance) to performative hair.

Finally, Chapter Four presents a discourse analysis that critically examines the discursive semiotic configuration of hair within popular culture – with a specific focus on the way Black women’s hair/styling practices are represented and fundamentally implicated in the production of identity and difference – through three popular culture displays: a spread contained in People’s “Celebrity Hair Archive”, a clip from The Tyra Banks Show and the film Good Hair (2009). While the first piece explicitly reduces hair to its aesthetic value, the other two pieces purport to offer a more nuanced assessment. However, it will be argued that all three displays negate hegemonic relations of power that both lead to the materialization of hair/styling practices and confine their interpretations. As the analysis concludes, despite purporting to offer a critical analysis of Black women’s hair, these popular culture displays do not debunk the underlying regimes of domination and oppression that limit and sustain the systems of meaning through which hair is understood. The chapter will conclude with final thoughts and directions for future research.
Chapter 2

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Introduction

As a corporeal entity hair is inexplicably tied to processes of representation which constrain and confine bodily displays. However, as a lifeless extension, hair is also capable of defying corporal limits and acquiring symbolic significance beyond the mere physicality of the body (Rosenthal 2004). By virtue of its symbolic posturing hair is imbued with meaning and vulnerable to manipulation in service of various ideological ends (Mercer 1990; Tate 2009). It is thus essential to explicate the rich and nuanced meaning-making processes embedded in the fashioning and framing of hair. This chapter sets forth to accomplish this task through an application of semiotics and a Foucauldian approach to discourse, which forms the theoretical basis of this investigation. A methodological framework is then constructed using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which synthesizes both of the aforementioned theories to critically examine processes of meaning-making within signifying systems. An overview of Black feminist thought and strategic essentialism further establishes the ontological and epistemological foundations of this project. Additionally, since the succeeding analysis examines representations of hair within mainstream media, popular culture is situated as a central figure in the making of meaning and representation. Accordingly, this chapter articulates a theoretical and methodological basis to critically explore what is rendered invisible, marked as periphery or taken-for-granted within representational practices.
The Semiotics of Hair: A Theoretical Approach

Semiology, also referred to as semiotics, provides an invaluable analytical lexicon to explore the mechanisms through which hair comes to signify, and the ideological functions such a process serves. Chiefly concerned with the study of signs, semioticians seek to investigate how meanings are made, communicated and reified through representational practices (Bingell 2002; Chandler 2007; Danesi 2002). Reconfigured as sign, hair will be explored by means of the cultural representations that surround its materialization, and by virtue of the manifestations that articulate its presence.

Derived from the Greek word semeion (meaning sign), semiology encompasses a vast field of theoretical thought (Bignell 2002:5). At the core of semiotic theory is the notion of the sign. Understood as “anything that ‘stands for’ something else,” signs can take on various forms including words, images, sounds, objects and gestures (Chandler 2007:2). Semiologists contend that human culture is made up of signs which work to articulate and constitute reality through mundane associations. These associations largely function at a subconscious level, through naturalized pairings which produce common-sense renderings. Through the development of a technical vocabulary, semiotics demystifies the complex and multifaceted ways in which signs communicate meaning and construct reality through taken-for-granted renderings (Rose 2005). Semiology, thus,

1 Conventionally, the term “semiology” is associated with the Saussrean tradition, while “semiotics” denotes the Peircean paradigm. For the purpose of this analysis “semiology” and “semiotics” are used interchangeably. This reflects a growing tendency within the field at large (Chandler 2007:8).
2 Additionally, communicative systems such as media, advertising, film, poetry and art are understood as important sign-systems (Rose 2005).
provides an invaluable analytical lexicon to explore the mechanisms through which hair comes to signify, and the ideological functions such a process serves.

The emergence of semiology as a distinct field of study is largely attributed to the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) (Chandler 2007). Saussure first employed the term *sémiologie* in an 1894 manuscript, delineating the theory more fully in *Courses in General Linguistics* (1916) published posthumously. According to Saussure, the sign is the fundamental unit of language, constituted by two components: the signifier (*signifiant*) and the signified (*signifié*) (Chandler 2007:14). Divisible at the analytical level, in practice the signifier and signified are completely interdependent; the signifier can be defined as the form the sign takes, while the signified is the concept brought forth by the signifier. Saussure employed the term *signification* to refer to the impending meaning(s) produced by the sign within a particular cultural context. Saussure’s theory focuses primarily on linguistic signs, describing the signifier as non-material in form. However, contemporary theorists have applied his work to visual signs as well, commonly using the signifier to refer to the material or physical manifestation of the sign (Chandler 2007; Rose 2005). Saussure argued that there is no inherent relationship between a given signifier and signified. Rather, their association and supposed stability is conceptual (determined by social convention) and relational (generated by their affiliation to various other signs) (Hall 1997). This recognition of the arbitrary link between signifier and signified is crucial because it exposes meaning to contestation; if there is no inherent link between signifier and signified, then associations can be problematized and relations...
between signs can be scrutinized. Denaturalizing the relationship between signifier/signified “opens up meaning and representation in a radical way” situating the possibility of resistance in the shifting of meaning and the constant production of new meanings and interpretations (Hall 1997:32); signs are reconceptualized as dependent on various systems of difference within specific cultural contexts. Semiotics, then, lays bare taken-for-granted processes of meaning-making, explicating the ideological conventions concealed within seemingly mundane representational practices.

Although Saussure’s theory has contributed substantially to the fundamentals of semiotics, there is concern as to whether a theory developed on the basis of linguistic signs can grapple with the specificities of the visual (Rose 2005). Opponents rightly question whether “a theory of semiotics based on linguistics will fall short of offering a complete account of visual signification” (Iverson 1986:85). Thus, while Saussure’s model provides a useful delineation of the fundamental structure of signs and the manner in which systems of arbitrary signs operate (Rose 2005), Pierce’s “richer typology” contends more directly with the particularities of the visual, enabling “us to consider how different modes of signification work” (Iverson 1986:85). More precisely, a semiotic analysis of non-verbal signs benefits substantially from Peirce’s particular theoretical distinctions.

Peirce suggests that there are three types of signs – iconic, indexical and symbolic – with each category indicative of a different relationship between the signifier and signified. According to Peirce, an iconic signs resembles what it represents, that is the signifier and signified share a likeness to one another. This type of sign conceals
meaning-making processes especially well as it is difficult to parse the signifier from the signified. To employ Saussure’s terminology, an iconic sign directly resembles its referent\(^3\); for instance, a photograph of a tree is an ionic sign of that tree. Bignell (2002) notes that ionic signs account for the apparent “realism” of photographic media because the signifier, signified and referent share a likeness, and are thus difficult to separate. Peirce himself remarks that photographs appear to be “exactly like the objects they represent,” though he cautions that “this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point [to their referent]” (Pierce 1955:106). Indexical signs entail a recognizable, culturally specific link between the signifier and the signified (Rose 2005). Unlike iconic signs, the signifier/signified do not resemble each other, but the presence of the signifier implies the signified. With indexical signs the signifier is “expected to connect itself to some other [signified] experience” (Pierce 1955:109); as is the case of smoke indicating fire, the signifier signals the presence of the signified (Bignell 2002:15).

Symbolic signs complete Pierce’s triad. A symbolic sign involves an arbitrary relation between the signifier/signified. With no visual or physical link between the two, the sign stands for something else in an arbitrarily conventional way (Rose 2005). Hair often functions on a symbolic level (Dyer 1982), as is the case in William Blake’s eighteenth century engraving “Europe Supported by Africa and America,”\(^4\) where

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3 The term referent is used by Saussure to describe the temporal object or mental construct to which the sign refers (Rose 2005).
4 See Rooks (2000:5) Figure 3 for a copy of this piece. Originally printed in John Gabriel Stedman’s Narrative of a Five Years’ Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam in Guiana on the Wild Coast of South America; from the Year 1772 to 1777 (see page 409 for his interpretation of the painting).
European hair symbolizes civility, modernity, purity and morality, in contrast to African (read: Black) hair which represents primitive inferiority (Rosenthal 2004:5). Depending on the circumstance, hair can also function as both an ionic and indexical sign. In the case of Blake’s work, it could be argued that hair simultaneously functions as both a symbol and an indexical sign; while symbolizing qualities listed above, hair also functions as an indexical sign, implying the presence of particular racialized bodies. Accordingly, Pierce contends that these sign categories are not mutually exclusive; signs can belong to more than one simultaneously (Bignell 2002).

This idea of simultaneity is later drawn on by Roland Barthes in his exploration of myth. Applying Saussure’s model of the sign, Barthes uses semiotics in the analysis of popular culture. Much like the current project, Barthes employs a methodological approach to semiology to situate popular culture as an important site of analysis, explicating the ideological foundations inherent in representational practices (Storey 1998). Introducing the concept of *mythology* Barthes explores the way in which signs themselves can signify on multiple levels (Rose 2005:90). According to Barthes, myth is a “second-order semiological system” in which a sign is made to function as a signifier on another level (Barthes 1982:99). This second-order signifier is then accompanied by an additional signified creating a second-level sign (Rose 2005). Barthes identified this additional level as “secondary signification” or “connotation”, in contrast to the first level of signification which he terms “denotation” or “primary signification” (Storey 1998:93). Barthes understood myth as “the falsely obvious”, taken-for-granted ideas and practices that actively promote and protect the interests of the dominant classes (Barthes 1973:11).
More precisely, myth functions as common-sense truths about the world which facilitate particular ideological interests over others; myth produces understandings while simultaneously imposing them upon us (Barthes 1982). As Barthes (1982) explains:

Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them natural and eternal justification, it gives them clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. In passing from history to Nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with... [everything] beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth... it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (132)

Functioning under the guise of “depoliticized speech”, myth works to solidify and naturalize particular messages about the world, masking the arbitrary production of meaning (Barthes 1982:131). Barthes concept of myth and his associated work has been very influential. Founded on the work of Saussure and Pierce, it has served to establish semiology as a useful technique and relevant method of analysis (Storey 1998).

Developed independently, these respective works forms the basis of contemporary semiological thought (Chandler 2007). While informed by Barthes work, the current investigation primarily employs Saussurean terminology, complemented by Peircean notions where applicable. This blending of Saussurean/Peircean paradigms reflects a common trend within contemporary semiotics at large, especially in relation to the analysis of cultural phenomena (Dansei 2002). Although the two theories are not isomorphic, their unification serves to further explicate the nuanced processes involved in representational practices (Chandler 2007). Overall, the analytical lexicon developed by Saussure and Pierce, devoted to unmasking the “domain of signifying structure” (Hall 1997:43), provides a strong foundation from which to explore the way hair comes to
signify. More precisely, reconceptualizing hair as sign serves to highlight the intense processes of meaning-making implicated in the fashioning of hair.

A Foucauldian Theoretical Approach to Discourse

Semiology provides a useful analytical framework to trace the way hair comes to signify, reconfiguring it as an essential meaning-making entity. The overriding semiological focus on language and meaning, however, tends to obfuscate how power is implicated in representational processes, eschewing larger regimes of representation which work in conjunction to produce knowledge (Hall 1997:232). Discourse analysis works to resolve this by shifting the focus to the production of knowledge (as opposed to simply meaning) and focusing on discourse (as opposed to merely language) (Hall 1997). Thus, semiology and discourse analysis will be used in tandem to produce a more comprehensive theoretical framework to situate the current investigation. As such, I now turn to Foucault’s theory of discourse to further theoretically ground this project.

Michel Foucault’s work has been central to the development of discourse analysis (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002; Mills 1997). In particular, his concept of discourse resides at the core of this methodology. In conventional language discourse is used as a linguistic concept to refer to dialogue or conversation in the form of written or spoken expressions. However, Foucault’s concept of discourse entails a much more complex process involving the production of meaning, the creation of knowledge, the (re)production of

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5 This term is borrowed from Hall (1997) who defines regimes of representation as “the whole repertoire of imagery and visual effects through which ‘difference’ is represented at any one historical moment” (232).
power and the formation of “truth” (Hall 1997; Phillips & Jorgensen 2002; Mills 1997). According to Foucault, discourse is “made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined... posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality” (Foucault 1972:117). Discourse, then, both defines and produces what is known, establishing meaning and the boundaries thereof. In doing so, it enables and limits our ability to convey and construct knowledge(s) on a given topic, such that certain ways of knowing become easily attainable, while others are restricted or placed beyond accessibility (Hall 1997; Rose 2005). As such, Foucault insists that nothing has meaning outside of discourse as it both forms and informs the objects of our knowledge. As he maintains, discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1972:49). According to Foucault (1972), the material world retains no meaning beyond the discourses that articulate its presence. This, however, does not preclude material existence. As Stuart Hall (1997) explains, “the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist but about where meaning comes from” (45). Thus, the material world exists outside of discourse, but we can only know and attribute meaning to it through discursive formations. Importantly, Foucault does not argue that discourses obfuscate an “authentic world” but that they are always situated within a particular historical and cultural context, producing (or restricting) what is (or can) be known about a particular object or phenomenon (Hall 1997; Mills 1997; Rose 2005).

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6 As Rose (2005) asserts, Foucault adamantly opposed “penetrative models” of analysis which seek to uncover the “authentic” or “real” meaning hidden beneath the surface (139).
Consequently, the concept of discourse entails much more than language. Discourses inform our understandings, as well as social practices (Hall 1997). It is here that Foucault bridges the traditional gap between language and practice. Discourses are both conceptual and substantive; they possess a linguistic dimension, but are also embodied through various social practices. As Foucault maintains, “[discourses materialize] in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior [sic] in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, inform and maintain them” (Foucault 1977a:200). Thus, discourse involves much more than merely language, in addition to systemic structures it also encompasses “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, [and] speaking” (Gee 1996:viii). By informing social practices discourses are directly implemented in their own (re)production and reification. They do not simply represent the world they constitute it through various social practices and processes of signification7 (Locke 2004).

As the above implies, discourses do not originate from a singular source, but emerge from and maintain a combination of systemic structures and social practices (Mills 1997). Through these discursive formations discourses work to sustain what Foucault (1979) terms a regime of truth (46). As he explains, “each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true” (Foucault 1979:46). “Truth” in this sense is not absolute or universal; it is neither an intrinsic quality nor an objective fact. “Truth” is reconfigured as a product

7 With this in mind, it is apparent that semiology compliments discourse analysis by clearly explicating the processes through which signs and signification function.
of particular discursive formations within specific historical and cultural contexts.\(^8\)

Importantly, discourses do not serve to mask some absolute “truth” nor do they reflect it. Instead they are actively involved in producing, sustaining and extending it (Mills 1997). Foucault argues that it is therefore pointless to question the “truthfulness” of a given object or statement, as attention should be devoted to understanding how “truth effects”\(^9\) are created (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002:14). Thus, analysis shifts from whether something is an accurate representation of “reality”, to the mechanisms through which a given representation is positioned as “reality” (read: the dominant discourse) and the consequences thereof\(^\text{10}\). For Foucault power and knowledge are deeply implicated in the production of “truth” and thus both become key elements in discussions of discourse.

Forwarding a radical reconceptualization of how power operates, Foucault reasoned that power is not something possessed by a singular source and exercised in a top-down fashion through physical coercion of a sovereign. Power, for Foucault, is dispersed; it circulates and is derived from mutually reinforcing social practices and institutional apparatuses\(^\text{11}\).

Relations of power permeate all levels of social existence and work to constitute

\(^8\) As Perry (1998) simply puts it, “truth is generated only as a result of multiple constraints” (106).

\(^9\) This phrase, borrowed from Phillips & Jorgensen (2004), is defined as “the discursive processes through which discourses are constructed in ways that give the impression that they represent true or false pictures of reality” (14).

\(^\text{10}\) I have put “reality” in quotation marks to highlight and acknowledge Foucault’s (1972) suggestion that “reality” is not a universalized truth; conceptions of “reality” cannot be parsed from the discourses that produce and sustain them.

\(^\text{11}\) Apparatus are both linguistic and non-linguistic and can include “discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulations, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic propositions, morality, philanthropy, etc.” (Hall 1997:47).
discourse, knowledge, bodies and subjectivities\(^\text{12}\) (Hall 1997). Discourses are implicated in the reproduction of power relations, serving to legitimize particular knowledges while subjugating others (Hall 1997). Enmeshed in relations of power, discursive formations attempt to fix, restrict and normalize particular ways of knowing. Thus, Foucault (1977b) argues for the imbrication of power/knowledge, as all knowledge is inextricably tied to power\(^\text{13}\); “power and knowledge directly imply one another… there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations” (Foucault, 1977b:27).

Not only are knowledge and power mutually reinforcing, but they work in tandem to produce and sustain various doctrines of “truth”. As Hall (1997) explains, “knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of ‘the truth’ but has the power to make itself true” (49). Thus, “truth” is reconceptualized as the product of various power/knowledge relations, within specific historical contexts, rather than a universalized fact or transcendental phenomenon.

A Foucauldian approach to discourse is also useful for thinking about resistance in relation to power and the production of knowledge. Foucault simultaneously locates discourse as a point of power transmission and a potential site of power disruption in that “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and

\(^{12}\) In this sense power is not merely negative or constraining but also a productive force aiding in the creation of various conditions of being, ways of understanding and methods of communication. As Foucault (1980a) insists, “[power] not only weighs on us as a force… it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network” (119).

\(^{13}\) As Hall (1997) asserts, knowledge itself is always a form of power (48).
exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (Foucault 1978:101). Hence, resistance forms a part of discursivity, emerging through the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges”, the voicing of the antagonistic “other” whose presence destabilizes power’s claim to “truth” (Foucault 1980b:101). If power entails the universalization of “truth”/knowledge, then resistance exists in the voicing of alternative truths and sedimentary knowledges, which destabilizes claims of universality and exposes power as normalizing processes (Hall 1997).

Foucault’s approach to discourse is essential to this project as it provides a useful theoretical framework for examining representational practices and the relations of power inherent within. By drawing on the importance of discourse, and interrogating the role of power in the production of knowledge, Foucault’s approach demystifies regimes of domination that limit and sustain systems of meaning. Reconfiguring “truth” as discursive construct problematizes knowledge production and allows for a critical investigation of how various overlapping, interrelated and conflicting discourses influencing the representation of hair.

Forming a Critical Methodological Approach

A methodological approach to semiotic discourse analysis is difficult to parse from a theoretical delineation. Unlike other qualitative approaches, the intricacy of sign systems and the complexity of discursive formations makes it difficult to establish overarching, clear-cut methodological rules (Myers 1983; Rose 2005; Wodak 2008). That being said, the field of critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA), largely spawned by
the work of Norman Fairclough, has made great strides towards developing systemic guidelines (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002). Merging aspects of both Foucault’s theory of discourse and semiology, CDA focuses on the dialectical relationship between discourse (which includes various semiotic systems) and social practices, within specific socio-historical contexts, providing a comprehensive methodological framework from which to situate the current investigation (Locke 20004).

Emerging from the field of discourse analysis at large, CDA is chiefly concerned with how (unequal) relations of power are (re)produced through discourse and maintained (or challenged) by various social practices (Widdowson 2007). Specifically, proponents of CDA focus on the reproduction of social and political domination through various discursive formations (Mills 1997). Primarily concerned with the social modality of discourse, CDA seeks to demystify processes of meaning-making, striving to problematize representational practices in an effort to initiate social change through critical, reflexive analysis (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002). As with discourse analysis at large, CDA theorists do not purport to offer a “more real” or “truthful” version of reality; on the contrary, truth itself is understood as a discursive construction (along with power/knowledge). Critical discourse analysts recognize that they too are caught up in the discursive formations they seek to expose and that they must therefore be self-critical with regards to their own claims of ascribing meaning to texts (Mills 1997; Phillips & Jorgensen 2002; Widdowson 2007). Accordingly, the current investigation does not

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14 This phrase refers to a concern with the ideological and material consequences of discursive practices (Rose 2005).
allege to reveal a “truer reality”, instead it seeks to offer “a contingent articulation of elements” in an effort to explore and challenge discourses surrounding the politics of hair (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002:49).

Relying heavily on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning,” CDA is centrally concerned with critically examining linguistic and visual forms of representation to lay bare the process of meaning-making within signifying systems (Fairclough 1992:64). Merging aspects of both Foucauldian and semiotic theory, CDA focuses on the dialectical relationship between discourse, sign-systems and social practices, within specific socio-historical contexts (Locke 20004). Given that CDA is concerned with the articulation of discursive practices, intertextuality becomes an important methodological tool. Intertextuality involves “[the] accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images” (Hall 1997:232). Specifically, it highlights the propensity of texts to draw on, incorporate, intersect, challenge and modify each other, thus explicating the ambivalence of discursive formations (Mills 1997; Phillips and Jorgensen 2002).

In addition to the above, the current investigation is informed by five core methodological features of CDA. First, this project entails an explicit recognition of the

15 As outlined by Phillips and Jorgensen (2002:61-64).
(shifting) linguistic-discursive dimension of social phenomenon. This includes both written and spoken language as well as visual images; hence the importance of semiology. Representational practices are understood as situated within particular linguistic-discursive contexts which both constrain and produce meaning. Secondly, corresponding to Foucault’s theory of discursive formations, discourse is understood as both constituting and constituted by the social world. As social practice, discourses do not simply reflect the social world, they shape and are shaped by various social structures and customs. Thirdly, linguistic modalities used in the production of discourse and within representational practices are interrogated. Attention is paid to the misappropriation of “truth”, “fact” and “objectivity” commonly used to reinforce the authority of particular knowledges or social institutions. Critical language awareness, wherein the researcher explicates the discursive practices inherent in language use and consumption, will be used as a technique to emphasize the relations of power reflected and reinforced through representational practices (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002: 89). Fourth, while ascribing to a Foucauldian view of power, unlike Foucault, CDA does not completely depart from the Marxist tradition, enlisting the concept of ideology to theorize the subjugation of particular social groups in relation to others. Accordingly, this project focuses on the discursive formations that constitute social practices, as well as “the role that these

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16 Using the media as an example Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) explain: “the mass media often present interpretations as if they were acts... by choosing objective rather than subjective modalities (for example, by saying ‘it is dangerous’ instead of ‘we think it is dangerous’). The media’s use of categorical, objective modalities both reflects and reinforces their authority” (84).

17 Ideologies are understood as “constructions of meaning that contribute to the production reproduction and transformation of relations of domination” (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002:75).
discursive practices play in furthering the interests of particular social groups” over others (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002: 63). Finally, in line with CDA, by critically analyzing the representation of Black women’s hair in popular culture this project aims to expose and destabilize prevailing systems of knowledge and meaning, unmasking “taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings, transforming them into objects of discussion and criticism, and thus [rendering them] open to change” (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002:178). Thus, like CDA, the overall goal of this project is to be socially transformative by engaging with the complexity of discursive formations, accentuating the ambivalent, unstable quality of meaning and the nuance character of representation in a critical exploration of the politics of hair.

Feminist Foundations: Black Feminist Theory

The work of feminist scholars has been a vital component of critical academic research. By placing women’s experiences and agency at the centre of analysis, feminist explorations have served to highlight the androcentric tendencies of traditional academic scholarship (Pollock 2003; Smith 1987). As renowned art historian and post-colonial feminist Griselda Pollock (2003) eloquently expresses:

Feminist interventions take part in the profound attempt to shift the bases of our thought and knowledge systems towards not merely a polite acknowledgement but a deep self-transforming and culturally shifting recognition of power politics

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18 In this sense I align my investigation with Hall’s (1997) counter-strategy The Eye of Representation which “locates itself within the complexities and ambivalences of representation itself, and tries to contest it from within... It accepts and works with the shifting, unstable character of meaning, and enters as it were, into the struggle over representation, while acknowledging that... meaning can never be finally fixed” (274).
of Eurocentric, phallocentric, heternormative universalization by which anyone other than the white, straight, European Christian is an other. (xxvii)

Specifically within the field of sociology, this (re)valuing and (re)investment in women’s knowledges and lived experiences has been invaluable. Such research has generated productive new insights and intriguing new directions for future inquiry (Judith & Thorne 1997; Smith 1987; Whittier 1997). Ontologically and epistemologically rooted in Black feminist theory, the current investigation seeks to contribute to this realm of vital scholarship.

Contending specifically with the particularities of Black women’s experiences, Black feminist thought emerged out of the homogenizing silences of first and second wave feminism (Bennett & Dickerson 2001; Cassidy, Lord & Mandell 1998; Elliot & Mandell 1998; Johnson 1997). Drawing attention to the systemic oppressions that constitute Black women’s lives, Black feminist thought eschews universalist notions of “women” predicated on presumptions of white, middle-class, heterosexuality (Elliot & Mandell 1998; Johnson 1997). Instead, the traditionally marginalized experiences of Black women are actively asserted and thoughtfully examined, forming the crux of analysis (Collins 2000; hooks 1989a). By focusing on the nuanced complexities of Black women’s experiences, Black feminist theory debunks totalizing metanarratives that aim to narrowly define realms of existence and obscure the specificities of lived experiences (Dua 2005). Through this (re)claiming of marginalized herstories, Black feminist theory contests the presumptive authority of (white) feminists to speak on behalf of all women (Collins 2000; hooks 2000).
Grappling with the multifaceted nature of Black women’s lives, Black feminist thought provides an empowering space for Black women to “talk-back”, (re)articulating their experiences in expressions of consciousness that form a self-defined, collective standpoint (Collins 2000; hooks 1989a). By serving as a medium for “individual expressions of consciousness [that] are articulated, argued through, contested, and aggregated in ways that reflect the heterogeneity of Black womanhood”, Black feminist thought generates a collective group consciousness committed to resisting oppression (Collins 2000:36). In fact, by pointing to the taken-for-granted knowledges that arise from occupying a particular socially situated standpoint, Black feminist theory constitutes a powerful act of resistance and empowerment, for “it is not difference that immobilizes us, but silence” (Lorde 2007:44). The use of the term Black feminism itself “disrupts the racism inherent in presenting feminism as a for-whites-only ideology and political movement” (Collins 2006:63). As Collins (2006) explains, “inserting the adjective ‘black’ challenges the assumed whiteness of feminism and disrupts the false universal of this term” (63). Thus, opposing the silencing of Black women’s situated knowledges, Black feminist thought brings forth the voices of Black women in powerful multilayered acts of self-definition and determination.

Informed by the tenets of Black feminist thought, the current investigation places the lived experiences of Black women at the centre of exploration, in an attempt to articulate the nuanced complexities of identity through a critical analysis of hair. Black women’s personal narratives are imbricated throughout this project, in an attempt to debunk hegemonic conventions that have traditionally delegitimized their significance.
Additionally, hair will be reconceptualized as a significant element in the fashioning of self and in the (re)production of domination and oppression. Arguing that the interlocking discourses of gender, “race”, class, sexuality and nation are inextricably linked to practices of representation, these embodied categories of oppression are conceived as intersecting, multifaceted, interwoven histories and experiences that fundamentally shape Black women’s substantive lives. Thus, this project aligns with a longstanding legacy of activism, committed to resistance and the advancement of Black women’s empowerment through critical exploration. Ultimately, this project seeks to readdress the marginalization, suppression and silencing of Black women’s bodies and knowledges, by critically examining representations of Black women’s hair and the underlying regimes of domination that produce and constrain such displays.

**Strategic Essentialism**

This project’s reliance on identity politics renders it vulnerable to accusations of essentialism. Critics claim that speaking of Black women as a substantive social group contributes to the production of a homogenizing transhistorical identity, which reifies and naturalizes subjecthood (Kolmar & Bartkowski 2000; Lloyd 2005). In this frame of thought identity politics are said to function adversely by subsuming diversity under a universalizing normative identity, morphing the “differently similar” into “the same” (Lloyd 2005:52). Proponents argue that to speak of a “sisterhood” among Black women, is to suggest that there is a pre-constituted, intrinsic quality that unites their identity on the basis of subjective being (Kolmar & Bartkowski 2000).
Rooted in Black feminist theory, this project does evoke a collective group identity. However, to suggest that this identity is purely homogenizing and reifying indicates a very narrow and misconstrued understanding of its theoretical foundations (Frye 2000). The collective identity employed by Black feminist thought, is in fact aimed at facilitating concrete political action. Black feminist thought itself emerged in response to essentialism within the mainstream feminist movement (Elliot & Mandell 1998). Firmly opposed to the homogenization of identity, Black feminist thought is acutely concerned with the expression of plural identities, aiming to empower self-identified Black women despite systemic oppression (Collins 2000; hooks 1989a). Moreover, far from advocating for the existence of pre-discursive identity, Black feminist theory works to problematize and debunk discursive constructions of “race” and “gender”, while simultaneously respecting and acknowledging the material consequences of these embodied categories (Collins 2006; Davis 1982; Johnson 1997). Neither prescriptive nor normalizing, Black feminist thought is rich, complex and nuanced in both theory and application.

Consequently, while the current investigation does evoke a collective identity, it does so with the hopes of facilitating meaningful political action, aimed at engaging with the multiplicity of Black women’s experiences in an effort to disrupt repressive silences,

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19 This has led some theorists to question whether criticisms of “essentialism” have been used tactically to divert attention away from, and eschew the legitimacy, of counter-hegemonic claims. In particular, Frye (2000) questions whether the anti-essentialism movement of the “postmodern turn” is used to avoid “direct, interactive, responsible engagement with women of color” (57). Moreover, as Reed (1992) observes, “the deployment... of a collective identity (woman, gay, African-American, native) is most likely to be recognized as strategic from inside that collective where intimate knowledge of internal difference is greatest; it is on the outside that such gestures are most likely to be mistaken as essentialist [emphasis added]” (150).
debunk naturalized understandings and address systemic oppression. Hence, this type of critical identity politics is more accurately described as strategic essentialism, wherein the articulation of “otherness” is utilized strategically by marginalized communities for political mobilization (Spivak 1996). Through strategic essentialism identity politics can in fact abandon notions of pre-discursive identity (a major criticism it has faced in the past), while simultaneously grappling with the concrete, material consequences of discursive identity formation. As Lloyd (2005) explains, “to invoke a stable subject as the active agent of [identity] politics is not to refer to a subject that precedes discourse or politics; it is to performatively enact that subject as the initiator of politics. It is to understand the political effects this mode of subjectification generates [emphasis added]” (58). Reconceptualised in this manner, a coherent (though unstable and contestable) collective identity is essential to political struggle and liberation. Theorists who have utilized this strategy argue that as identities are always already infused with relations of power, they become an important site of emancipatory struggle (Collins 2000; hooks 1990; Lorde 2009). It thus becomes both powerful and productive for marginalized communities to critically utilize and engage with such categories, “refusing their actual subordination by appropriating for themselves the role of the subject” (Lloyd 2005:65). Accordingly, the establishment of a collective identity is essential for critical mobilization and political advancement, for in the words of acclaimed feminist scholar Audre Lorde (2007), “without community, there is no liberation”20 (112). Black women’s

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20 Similarly, Collins (2000) asserts, “groups organized around race, class, and gender in and of themselves are not inherently a problem... [However when these marginalized groups] see little hope for group-based advancement, this situation constitutes social injustice [emphasis added]” (23).
voices must be brought forth as a heterogeneous collective in order to critically engage in resistance strategies that offer the possibility of liberation.

Thus, although traditionally claims of essentialism have centred on the fear that employing identity politics results in the reification of a stable subject (Lloyd 2005), I argue that (collective) identity can be invoked without the assumption that it is infinitely stable and unified; indeed, I focus critically on how the handling of hair often treats Black women as a homogenous group. By directly pointing to the heterogeneous nature of Black women’s identities and experiences at various points throughout this investigation, as well as centring on the contradictory readings such identities produce, I hope to demonstrate that while collective identities must be cohesive to a certain extent, this does not preclude the existence of fluidity and diversity. Thus, while this project explores the ties that unite Black women in their shared struggle against oppression, it is equally imbued with recognition of the rich and complex differences that reflect the heterogeneity of Black womanhood.

**Popular Culture as Site of Analysis**

Popular culture is the final focus of this chapter. As this project centres specifically on representations of Black women’s hair within mainstream media, popular culture becomes a vital site of analysis. Within scholarly domains, popular culture occupies a contentious place—it is simultaneously a site of compliance and dissent (Hall 1998; 21)

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21 For the purpose of this investigation *popular culture* is interchangeably referred to as mass culture, consumer culture, mainstream culture and commercial culture.
Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002; Storey 2003). For this reason, delineating a functioning definition is a difficult, though necessary task. As a fluid and shifting entity, popular culture evades a simplistic definition (Storey 1993). Proponents of popular culture speak of it as a liberating, transformative force; a people-centered culture, astutely created by the masses as a means of empowerment (Fiske 1989; Hall 1998; Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002). Critics on the other hand see popular culture as debase, devoid of any real potential; a mechanism for lulling the masses into a state of passivity (Hall 1998; McGuigan 1998; Storey 1993). For the purpose of this investigation, popular culture will be located directly within this oscillation—paradoxically futile and radically transformative—depending largely on historical context and reception\(^\text{22}\). However, it will also be argued that given the current state of contemporary popular culture (definitively mass produced for mass consumption) the later stance may be more accurate. Finally, feminist understandings of popular culture will be used to locate it as an important site of exploration, especially concerning the figuration of identity, the appropriation of culture and the commodification of resistance.

As a site where “collective social understandings are created” popular culture has the potential to be a powerful and progressive political force (Hall 1982:65). Deeply engaged in the politics of signification, popular culture is an important site of analysis. Some theorists suggest that popular culture is linked to the rejection of elitist investments

\(^{22}\) In this sense I align myself with Hall (1998) who understands popular culture as constantly in flux, and historically situated. Hall’s (1998) notion of “the popular” will be explored subsequently in greater lengths.
in “high culture”\(^{23}\) (Gans 1975; Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002). Materializing out of the customs and traditions of marginalized subsets of the population, popular culture, in this sense, symbolizes a reverent act of resistance, a radical subversion of dominate notions of “taste”\(^{24}\). Moreover, as demonstrated by influential social movements of the past, popular culture can be a site of power contestation\(^{25}\). However, despite their veracity, theorists argue that such grassroots, folk-based movements of the past have little in common with the mass-produced and manufactured commercial pop culture of today, wherein notions of taste and “the popular” are exploited for the purpose of profit\(^{26}\). As Macdonald (1998) expresses:

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\text{[T]he differences are more striking than the similarities. Folk Art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves... Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. (23)}
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According to Macdonald (1998) popular culture has become “solely and directly an article for mass consumption,” devoid of emancipatory potential. The ingenuity and originality of past grassroots endeavours is lost in contemporary commercial culture,

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\(^{23}\) “High culture” includes dominant cultural institutions, such as the museum, art galleries and opera (Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002). Traditionally the arbitrary distinction between high/low culture, has been used to maintain the superiority of an elitist framework wherein the pastimes of the upper class are seen as inspired and productive, while popular culture, produced and consumed by the lower classes, is framed as frivolous and inauthentic (Gans 1975; Storey 2003).

\(^{24}\) As Storey (1993) maintains, “taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of ‘class’ (using the term in a double sense to mean both a social-economic category and a particular level of quality)” (7). For more on the connections between “taste” and class see Pierre Bourdieu (1984) \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste}. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.


\(^{26}\) Notably, even theorists who discuss the utility of folk-based popular culture movements concede to the risk of cooptation and appropriation within capitalist societies, where acts of resistance can be tactfully commodified (Walker 2000).
wherein acts of resistance are commodified and sold in mass for profit (Macdonald 1998).

Macdonald’s (1998) view is shared by many critics who are sceptical about popular cultures’ alleged potential as political resistance. Far from a liberating force, these theorists situate popular culture as “hopelessly commercial... massed produced for mass consumption” (Storey 1993:10). In this view, popular culture is understood as manipulated in service of maintaining the status quo; producing and securing hegemony within capitalist societies by pacifying the masses with “the pleasures of conformity, consumption and consumer ideology” (Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002:31). Consumed uncritically by non-discriminating consumers, popular culture is seen as debase (Storey 2003). Yet it is precisely “the seeming simplicity and innocence of popular culture [that] serve as powerful vehicles for capitalist inculcation” (Jenkins, McPherson & Shattuc 2002:32). From this perspective then, popular culture is perceived as a destructive force: uncritically consumed, though tactfully produced for the purpose of manipulation (Storey 1993).

Stuart Hall (1998), however, cautions against strict adherence to either of the above views, which dichotomize popular culture as completely defiant or entirely compliant. As Hall (1998) argues, such understandings are overly simplistic. According to Hall (1998) popular culture itself is highly fluid and unstable; its various articulations can only be understood as situated within the particular historical context from which

27 As Storey (1993) puts it, such theorists see popular culture as both “brain-numbingly” produced and consumed (10). However, as Hall (1998) contends, this problematically assumes that people are passive, “cultural dopes”, unaware and uncritical (443).
they are coded and decoded. In other words, the politics of popular culture is much more nuanced and complex than a dualistic model can allow for. As Hall (1998) explains, materializations of popular cultural are not “contained within themselves,” they emerge and are read within particular contexts. There is no guarantee as to how a particular display will be perceived, and interpretations will shift over subsequent articulations (Hall 1998). Popular culture, then, is a site of intense upheaval, a place where meaning is continuously created, altered and reproduced. As Hall (1998) contends, seemingly benign cultural artefacts are constantly adopted and reconfigured as novel acts of rebellion, whilst acts of resistance risk cooptation. Accordingly, current cultures of resistance become commercialized commodities, only to become the basis of future counter-hegemonic struggles. Therefore, as Hall (1998) emphasizes, popular culture resides at the crux of this constant oscillation between futile and radically transformative.

With regard to the current project, Hall’s (1998) approach to popular culture proves useful. However, given the state of contemporary commercial culture (mass produced for mass consumption) such displays must be approached with much apprehension (Macdonald 1998). Within the current investigation, popular culture is understood as constantly engaged in the struggle over meaning –attempts to narrowly constrain representational practices through the continued reiteration or absence of particular narratives (Fiske 1989; Jenkins, Kirea 1999; McPherson & Shattuc 2002; Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc (2002) similarly note the importance of historical and cultural context when interpreting popular culture displays.

28
Storey 2003). Accordingly, a critical feminist lens will be used to interrogate popular culture. As Kirea (1999) asserts:

Feminist intervention in popular culture might offer feminist politics a pragmatic strategy to shift the balance of power and prepare the ground for change, and thus help transform society. Since popular culture is a significant site for struggle over meaning, which offers the culture’s dominant definitions of women and men, it is therefore crucial to intervene in the mainstream to make feminist meanings a part of everyday common sense. (105)

Put differently, feminist explorations involve the critical assessments of popular culture texts, explicating the hegemonic discourses of race, gender, class and sexuality implicitly reproduced there (Bordo 1993; Leavy 2007; van Zoonen 1994). Feminist analyses have also worked to problematize supposed acts of “resistance” emerging within popular culture, demonstrating that even these displays often work to rearticulate dominate narratives and ideas (see Kern 2008 or Bird 2008). Thus, as “a site where ideas are created, disseminated and consumed (often including extreme and stereotypical imagery)” popular culture will be positioned as a central figure in the making of meaning and representation (Leavy 2007:224). While understood as potentially transformative, popular culture displays are also conceptualized as manufactured productions, used to propagate particular perspectives and narrowly confining representational practices and their reception. Therefore, by examining what is presented, rendered invisible, marked as periphery or taken-for-granted within particular popular culture displays, the current investigation critically explores representational practices surrounding hair.
Summary

This chapter has established the theoretical and methodological basis of the current investigation. Both semiology and Foucault’s approach to discourse were used to construct a theoretical framework for examining representational practices, and the relations of power inherent within. By providing a technical vocabulary semiology explicates the complex ways signs communicate meaning and construct reality through taken-for-granted renderings. Additionally, by drawing on the importance of discourse and interrogating the role of power in the production of knowledge, Foucault’s approach works to further demystify regimes of domination that limit and sustain systems of meaning. Though a methodological approach to semiotic discourse analysis is difficult to parse from a theoretical delineation, CDA was utilized to establish a functional methodological framework. Focusing on the reproduction of social and political domination through various discursive formations CDA works to problematize and subvert representational practices. The current investigation is also ontologically and epistemologically rooted in Black feminist theory, predicated on strategic essentialism. Accordingly, while this project explores the ties that unite Black women in their shared struggle against oppression, it is also equally imbued with recognition of the rich and nuanced differences that reflect the heterogeneity of their lived experiences. Finally, through the application of a critical feminist lens, popular culture was positioned as a site where “ideas are created, disseminated and consumed” (Leavy 2007:224). It was argued that while popular culture displays do hold the potential for resistance, they more frequently participate in the reproduction of hegemony through the continued reiteration
or absence of particular narratives. Building off of this chapter, the analyses to follow engage with the complexity of discursive formations and signifying systems to explicate and destabilize prevailing systems of knowledge and meaning, unmasking “taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings, transforming them into objects of discussion and criticism, and thus [rendering them] open to change” (Phillips & Jorgensen 2002:178).
Chapter 3

The Politics of Performative Hair

Introduction

This chapter constructs a conceptual framework from which to situate a critical exploration of representational practices surrounding Black women’s hair within popular culture by examining how hair comes to signify. Essentially, Judith Butler’s (1999) politics of performativity will be delineated and applied to the politics of hair. Hair will be reconceptualized as performative to highlight its complexity and to situate it as a vital corporeal entity, central to the production of identity and difference. Hair and hair grooming practices will be explored as important sites of aesthetic and cultural expression and gender production. Accordingly, hair is understood as deeply imbued with meaning and inextricably tied to power relations. Specifically, an exploration of the anxiety surrounding female body hair, and the ritualized idealization of female head hair, is used to highlight hair’s involvement in the construction and reiteration of gender. By integrating an analysis of racialization, focusing on Black women and their hair, the constitution of both “race” and “womanhood” through performative hair will also be emphasized. Finally, the possibility of resistance through transgressive stylizations will be examined. Ultimately, while the previous chapter establishes a theoretical and methodological framework for the project, this chapter delineates how hair comes to signify performatively. Overall, hair will be conceptualized as an important corporeal stylization, deeply implicated in the production and constitution of identity.
Judith Butler: Performative Gender

Judith Butler’s work has contributed significantly to understandings of gender within the realm of identity politics (Lloyd 1999). Central to her writings is the notion of performativity, delineated in her seminal essay “Performance Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (2004a). In the following section, key aspects of Butler’s notion of gender as performative will be examined, largely in relation to the seminal text noted above, but also as expanded on by others. Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity will be used to establish the foundation for an understanding of the performativity of hair and its participation in the process of racialization.

Drawing on both Foucault’s theory of discourse and semiotics, Butler uses the notion of performativity to aid in the radical reconceptualization of gender, shifting it from a “being” to a discursive creation (Butler 1999:25). This shifting of gender from a noun to verb, from an essence to a process, from a person to a discourse, is crucial. As Butler (2004a) asserts, “if gender attributes... are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to reveal” (162). Through Butler’s (2004a) reconceptualization, gender is thus radically altered; becoming the stylized repetition of performative acts, a corporeal style, as opposed to a substantive truth (Butler 1999). This is similar to Haraway’s (1991) assertion that “bodies are not born; they are made” (208). In other words, gender, far from revealing an internal essence, becomes a performative accomplishment, achieved through the reiteration of...
historically contingent practices materialized through the body (Butler 2004a). As Butler (2004a) elaborates:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*... through the stylization of the body... the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (155)

Thus, the gendered self is to be understood as a process, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999:43-44). These “acts”, as Butler (2004a) contends, are inextricably tied to historical context, and are highly regulated and rigid; bound by social sanction, taboo and discourse. According to Butler (2004a) the mere presence of such regulatory measures, speaks to the fictitious nature of gender. As she states:

Performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be a sign that on some level there is a social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated. (Butler 2004a:162)

Thus, for Butler (2004a), gender is the compilation of sedimented acts, as opposed to a predetermined essence or facticity. Consequently, repetition becomes central to performativity. As Lloyd (1999) explains, “it is not in a single act of constitution or invention that the subject is brought into being, but through re-citation and repetition” (197). As Butler (2004a) maintains, such repetitious displays are always already constrained by, and reiterative of, the normative standards of regulatory regimes such that
“this repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (160).

Through her work, Butler also refutes the problematic heteronormative underpinnings of gender, and the sex/gender divide. As Salih (2007) explains, “[Butler collapses] the sex/gender distinction in order to argue that there is no sex that is not always already gender” (55). Thus, through conceptualizing gender as performative, Butler also aims to disrupt naturalized notions of sex, dissolving the sex/gender binary. As Butler (1999) asserts, “the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (6). This disjuncture serves to predicate the natural existence of two mutually exclusive yet complimentary sexes a priori to culture, and implies that two corresponding genders is simply the derivative of this. As Butler (1999) argues, not only does such a notion prevent any critical interrogation of biology’s link to culture, but it also solidifies gender as the discursive manifestation of sex. Consequently, this configuration results in a “casual continuity among sex, gender and desire”, which serves to affirm and naturalize heterosexuality (Butler 1999:22). However, in opposition to arguments that conceive gender as a consequence of sex, Butler (1999) suggests that “sex itself is a gendered category” (7). In other words, gender reifies sex. As Butler (1999) explains:

Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex; gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and established. (Butler 1999:7)
Accordingly, gender is not a concrete pre-linguistic identity, but a product of discourse that constructs the very distinction on which it supposedly rests. By refuting the notion that gender identity is indicative of an internal core or essence, Butler (1999) also contests the naturalization of sex. Thus, through performativity, sex/gender is reconceptualized as a process, which achieves a facade of stability through the constitution and reconstitution of acts.

Understanding the distinction between performativity and performance is also essential to an understanding of Butler’s (1999) theory. Although within Gender Trouble the two terms at times seem conflated (Lloyd 1999; McNay 1999; Salih 2007), there is a clear and crucial difference. While the traditional notion of performance assumes the existence of a prediscursive subject—an actor that adopts a script—performativity challenges this notion completely (Salih 2007). As Lloyd (1999) asserts, while performance implies a constituting agent, “performatively, there is no subject that precedes or enacts the repetition of norms... the subject is the effect of their compulsory repetition” (201). In other words, performativity is a condition of existence, through which subjectivity is constituted. It is irreducible to performance, which presupposes a uniformed subject. Delineating this further, Butler (1999) draws on Nietzsche’s claim in On the Genealogy of Morals—“there is no ‘being’ behind the doing... the deed is everything” (as cited in Butler 1999:25) – asserting, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender... [it] is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1999:25). Thus, Butler (1999) contests the
problematic assumption of pre-discursive existence, by framing the gendered subject as the effect of discourse as opposed to its foundation.

Unfortunately, however, Butler’s (1999) notion of performativity has frequently been misread and misappropriated (Disch 1999). Supporters have often taken performativity to mean pure autonomy and unfettered choice, while critiques have argued that Butler completely dismisses selfhood and agency (Disch 1999). However, as Butler (2004a) explains, neither interpretation is accurate:

[As] performative act, gender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pregiven cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves preexist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies... the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives. (161)

Thus, for Butler (2004a) performative gender does not dismiss agency, nor does it imply absolute autonomy. Instead, through performativity, Butler (1999) refutes the notion of a stable, fixed subject, an “essence” that gender expresses, while also remaining highly optimistic about the possibility of resistance through subversive displays. As Lloyd (1999) clarifies, “gender performativity may be inevitable but gender identity is always open and incomplete” (200). Moreover, emphasizing the fluidity of performative gender, despite its constraints, Butler (1999) explains, “the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (148).

As the previous statement highlights, despite certain claims to the contrary, Butler (1999) does not purport that performativity denounces agency and resistance
(Mills 2000). Instead, Butler (2004a) suggests that the very processes of reiteration and reconstitution which form the basis of performativity, also produce a radical space for subversive action. In other words, critical agency becomes possible through the very practices that constrain and produce gendered subjects. As Disch (1999) asserts, “performativity open[s] the ‘contingent and fragile possibility’ of turning power back on itself by reiterating a norm in such a way as to expose it as an entrenched convention” (550). Butler (1999) specifically explores this through parody and drag, which she feels exposes the contingent quality of identities. Salih (2007) explains:

[For Butler this subversive power rests within] gender performatives that do not try to conceal their genealogy, indeed, that go out of their way to accentuate it, displace heterocentric assumptions by revealing that heterosexual identities are as constructed and ‘unoriginal’ as the imitations of them. (58)

As suggested by this statement, despite the inevitability of performativity, resistance and agency remain paramount. Thus, although constrained by gender, Butler (1999) also emphasizes the capacity for differential constitution and subversive repetition. Such displays of defiance are vital, and serve to denaturalize gender/(hetero)sex(uality) thereby disrupting its naturalized facade (Butler 1999).

As a final point, Butler’s (1999) challenge or dismissal of the pre-discursive body has significant implications for the current exploration. Butler (2004a) cautions against the use of “women” as a reified and universalize category, but does not discount its usefulness. Citing the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1985) and Julia Kristeva et. al (1981), Butler (2004a) underscores the value of using “women” as a political tool, but cautions against assigning the category univocal ontological properties. Hence (in line with the theoretical foundations of the current investigation) Butler (2004a) argues
for a strategic essentialism, which employs the category “women”, while also underscoring its mutability. As she asserts, “it remains politically important to represent women, but to do that in a way that does not distort and reify the very collectivity the theory is supposed to emancipate... [language] does not simply report a prelinguistic experience, but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis” (164).

Accordingly, Butler (2004a) is very concerned with the unintentional consequences of using “women” uncritically, such that it serves to reinforce restrictive binaries and heterosexual underpinnings. Nevertheless, much as is done in this investigation, she concedes the importance of vocalizing women’s experiences, in a manner that draws attention to their multiplicity and discursivity (Butler 2004a).

**Extending Butler’s Theory: The Performativity of Hair**

Butler’s (1999) theory of gender performativity has drastically altered identity politics (Lloyd 2007), and its implications exceed far beyond its initial site of focus. One such extension of Butler’s (1999) theory of performativity is how hair comes to perform, how hair is performative. Like the performativity of gender, the performativity of hair centres on how hair, discursively and substantively, comes to signify. The performativity of hair, is intricately connected to notions of sex/gender, and (like performative gender) does not expose an inner core or essence, but instead constitutes the very identity it claims to reveal through “a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 2004a:154). Hair, then, is a corporeal style, composed of a series of undertakings; it is not a being, but a doing, a performative accomplishment, achieved through the reiteration of historically contingent
practices materialized through the body. Thus, as with gender, one’s hair cannot be said to reveal or typify an internal essence or core (Butler 1999). Instead, selfhood and identity, as read through hair, do not precede its construction, but are produced through the constitution and reconstitution of various stylizations. Thus, relating directly to semiology, performative hair functions primarily as sign, communicating meaning and constructing “reality” through taken-for-granted renderings (Rose 2005). Functioning as sign, hair is “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (Butler 1999:140). Thus, in an application of Butler’s (1999) theory, the following section explores the performativity of hair, and its implication in the constitution of selfhood, specifically gendered/sexed selves.

Hair is a symbolic marker which (discursively and substantively) serves to humanize individuals within contemporary culture. Hair maintenance practices act as powerful cultural signifiers, which –through repetition and reiteration – decisively construct identities (McCracken 1995). These identities are always historically contingent, socio-temporally located and intimately connected to discourses of gender and sex(uality). Specifically, in its presence or absence, hair allegedly reveals one’s identity as a sexed (male/female) and gendered (masculine/feminine) being, thereby substantiating discrete sex/gender distinctions. However, an understanding of hair as performative allows for a reconceptualization of this relationship; hair is repositioned as engaged in the construction of gendered beings as opposed to indicative of them. Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) provides a useful example of this in her exploration of women’s body hair. As she notes, there is a striking absence of women’s body hair within both
mainstream culture and academic discourse. As such, she contends, “women’s body hair is truly configured as a taboo: something not to be seen or mentioned; prohibited and circumscribed by rules of avoidance; surrounded by shame, disgust and censure” (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006:2). Taking a Butlerian approach, Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) is interested in the meanings produced through the ritualized absence of body hair; an absence which is its dominant manifestation.

Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) addresses the linguistic designation of female body hair as “unfeminine”, “excessive” and “monsterous” – the antithesis of femininity. This is an argument paralleled by MacDonald (2006) who, similarly, notes the repeated absence of women’s body hair from art and film. As MacDonald (2006) contends, through folklore and myth, female body hair has come to signify danger, promiscuity and lust. Moreover, through its repeated connection with witchcraft it carries with it assumptions of mental instability, “deviant” (read: queer) sexuality, animalistic qualities and demonic associations (MacDonald 2006). Applying the politics of performative hair, the monstrosity of female body hair lies in its ability to destabilize, transgress, and reveal sex/gender as discursive fiction. As Haraway (2004) notes, “monsters have the same root as to demonstrate; monsters signify” (117). Thus, the perceived atrociousness of female body hair comes from its ability to signify, and in doing so, to contest the stability of meaning. As Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) explains:

Its visibility does indeed reveal femininity as that which hides within itself the potentially masculine. This revelation of the masculine in the feminine is impermissible – and precisely this emphasizes the threat that is posed by a female body not constituting itself as ‘absolute’ other: as ‘lack’ in opposition to the masculine ‘presence’. (11)
Consequently, allowing female body hair to be visible becomes a subversive act that serves to denaturalize the discrete and oppositionary posturing of sexed/gendered bodies, challenging heterosexuality as regulator fiction. Characterized as “vulgar,” “unwomanly,” “excessive” and “monstrous,” it is seen as both the antithesis of femininity and a threatening rejection of (white, bourgeois) womanhood (Srivastava 1993).

Accordingly, norms concerning the strict removal of female body hair are discursively enforced (along with the idealization of the hairless female body) because they prevent the anxiety and uncertainty triggered by its presence. As Butler (1999) contends, such rules, regulations and apprehensions intended to control bodily displays, further demonstrate the tenuous nature of such performances; “that reassurance is so easily displaced by anxiety... should be a sign that on some level there is a social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled” (Butler 2004a:162).

Likewise, Lesnik-Oberstein (2006) acknowledges that the “madness” induced by female body hair, reinforces the fluid, volatile nature of meaning, and emphasizes that “the body will never become stable, ended or ‘mastered’” (10).

**Crowning Glory: Womanhood and Hair**

Head hair is also implicated in identity production, although its presence imbues a substantially different meaning. While the presence of body hair is viewed as the antithesis of femininity, head hair is admired and valued as the absolute signifier of the feminine (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006). In stark contrast to body hair, head hair\(^1\) is readily

\(^1\) From this point on “head hair” is referred to as just “hair”.

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exalted in film, paintings and photographs (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006). Seen as integral to a woman’s beauty, value and desirability, it is a key signifier of femininity and womanhood (Banks 2000; Holland 2004; Prince 2009; Synnott 1987; Tate 2009). As the well-known epithet goes, a woman’s hair is her crowning glory—the most cherished aspect of her “feminine self”\(^2\). Hair is a women’s “badge of beauty” (Collins 2005:196); accordingly, it is “valued and admired, spoken, written and sung of as one of the ultimate signs of femininity” (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006:1). An entire industry is devoted to styling, colouring, modifying, extending, replacing, enhancing, regulating and improving it (Jones 1994). Our understandings of hair, however, are mediated by hegemonic ideology—founded on idealized notions of femininity and womanhood, and predicated on assumptions of white, middle-class, (hetero)sexuality. Thus, while particular hairstyles are encouraged as desirable displays of femininity (read: white, middle-class, heterosexual), others are denigrated because they transgress conventional norms (Weitz 2001).

Like performativity, which involves an understanding of the social temporality of identity (Butler 2004a), hair/styling practices must be understood in relation to the socio-historical context in which they materialize (Mercer 1990). Within the West, long, silky straight hair in particular, carries with it particular assumptions. As Esther Berry (2008) notes in her exploration of the global hair trade, historically and contemporarily “long

\(^2\) Espoused enumerable times, since its first recorded utterance by St. Paul to the Corinthians: “[I]f a woman hath long hair, it is a glory to her” (1 Cor. 11:14-15).
hair has been associated with women’s youth, heterosexuality, femininity and domesticity” (67). Such hegemonic associations homogenize women, and re-appropriate the continuity of sex, gender, and desire which Butler (1999) works to disavow. Understood performatively, such perceptions take shape and are solidified through the iterative practices required to maintain long hair. As Berry (2008) suggests, “the longer its lengths, the more discipline is required for its maintenance within the patriarchal structures that can at times determine its discursive configurations” (Berry 2008:67). Like restrictive feminine clothing, long hair “is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion” (Veblen 1934 as cited by Synnott 1987). As Susan Brownmiller (1984) explains:

Silky, long hair automatically inspires a cluster of preoccupied gestures that are considered sublimely feminine because they are sensuously self-involved: an absent-minded twisting of a stray curl, the freeing of loose ends that get caught under a coat collar, the dramatic toss of the entire mane, a brushing aside of the tendrils that fall so fetchingly across the forehead and into the eyes. A mass of long, soft hair is something to play with, a reassuring source of tactile sensation and a demanding presence that insists on the wearer’s attention. (73)

According to Brownmiller (1984) even the seemingly mundane “act of unpinning and letting down a cascade of long hair is interpreted as a highly erotic gesture”3 (61).

Understood performatively, long hair is not indicative of an essentialized feminine essence, but aids in the production of docility, femininity and (hetero)sexuality through

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3 Similarly Gelbart (2004) notes that “long, cascading hair can have dangerous sexual allure [emphasis added]” (207).
Lustrous hair also carries with it particular connotations regarding women’s identity. Labelled “voluptuous”, it is seen as reflective of femininity and womanhood (McCracken 1995). As Berry (2008) states, “voluptuous hair makes voluptuous bodies’, the fullness and curves of long, abundant hair is synonymous with the fullness and curves of a normatively idealized female form” (82). However, through a politics of the performative this synonymy can be understood as “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result” (Butler 1999:25). In other words, voluptuous hair is not a reflection of femininity and womanhood, but instead participates in the production of both. (Hetero)sexuality is also deeply embedded in perceptions of voluptuous hair. Just as McNay (1999), drawing on Butler (1999), argues that performative gender involves the “sedimented effect of reiterative or ritualized practices; the repeated inscription of the symbolic norms of heterosexuality upon the body”, so too does the performativity of hair (Banks 2000; McCracken 1995). Produced within a heteronormative framework, understandings of voluptuous hair are distorted and limited. Restricted within the confines of heterosexuality, voluptuous hair is read as an attempt to gain male attention, thereby reifying the supremacy of heterosexual desire (Brownmiller 1984; Synnott 1987).

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4 This production of femininity through hair maintenance practices is not a new phenomenon. One need only consider the elaborate, towering hairstyles of women of the eighteenth-century elite, whose exaggerative hairdos symbolized leisure, luxury and hedonistic consumption, but also produce feminine bodies through the patience and time required for maintenance (Rosenthal 2004).
In addition, as Berry (2008) contends, hair maintenance practices such as the production and consumption of hair extensions also emphasize and reiterate colonialist discourse. Specifically, Berry (2008) explores the global hair trade, which involves the harvesting of Indian women’s hair to create extensions for women in the West. As she asserts, through this industry, not only are the bodies of “Third World” women (read: “women of colour”) used to reinforce the supremacy of Western (read: white) femininity, but the commodification and consumption of Indian women’s hair, also reiterates many racial assumptions regarding worth and beauty. Using the notion of “crossover appeal” she explains:

Indian hair represents an ‘almost-blackness’, a blackness that can be rendered invisible, Indian women being ‘crossovers’ who ‘combine many [...] desired “natural” physical features such as generally long and thick hair [and] brownish but not black skin’. Indian hair, with its valorized ‘European’ texture (smooth, shakeable, touchable), as well as its ‘soft’ blackness, is unlike African hair, which has, historically, been deemed unsightly (kinky, nappy, frizzy, woolly, unkempt), bestial (‘demonic, licentious [...] pubic’) and even monstrous. Indian hair thus maintains a specific position within western conceptions and hierarchies of beauty and femininity: it is black’s new blonde, ‘not quite black, but exotic nonetheless’. (Berry 2008:73)

As this statement emphasizes, hairstyling practices not only participate in the production of sexed/gendered beings, but also constitute and reconstitute raced bodies5. Additionally, as Berry (2008) argues, hair used to produce extensions (what she calls “the zombie commodity”) also highlights the fluid character of identity— it is both subject and object, dead and alive, inside and outside, possessed and transferable –thereby destabilizing fundamental dualisms of the West. Berry (2008) also suggests that the popularity of hair

5 Intriguingly, the attributes used to describe Black hair are akin to those applied to female body hair. This point will be taken up when dealing with hairstyling as resistance.
extensions among Western women may be due to anxieties regarding lack. This argument is founded in the psychoanalytic tradition, and involves the “construction of woman as lack,” symbolized through the castration complex as discussed by Lacan (see Jonte-Pace 1992:14). Berry (2008) suggests that excessive hair may be a form of compensation; as she states, “the West’s penchant for women’s hair and its lustrous lengths... has historically operated to fill in a perceived bodily lack” (Berry 2008:64). Moreover, Weitz (2001) maintains that “conventionally attractive hair [long and voluptuous] gives women power, or at least makes them feel powerful... [there is] power embedded in doing femininity well” (673). However, this “power” is highly ambiguous and tenuous; gained through the societal approval received for reiterating conventional ideals. As Butler (2004a) contends, such social sanctioning is key to social regulation, encouraging reifying displays while restricting threatening subversions. Thus, as these various accounts espouse, hair maintenance practices are powerful cultural symbols deeply implicated in the process of racialization and production of sexed/gendered beings.

*Knotted Pleasure: Black Women and Hair*

The following section deals with the peculiarities of Black women’s hair, examining how the imbrication of “race” and gender affects its materializations. As emphasized by Berry’s (2008) examination, any attempt to understand hair as performative will quickly be hampered without recognition of the ways in which other regimes of domination influence such displays. Butler (1999) is similarly interested in other regimes of regulator production, including “race”, which shape the materiality of
bodies; as she asserts, “my view is that no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another” (Butler 2004b:95). In other words, Butler (1999) does not see “race” and gender as discrete, but as interconnected, reciprocal modes of power, both of which are deeply implicated in the formation of subjecthood. Many theorists have in fact applied Butler’s (1999) theory of performativity to “race”, asserting that “race”, like gender, is a fictitious narrative, the result of reiterative practices, the junction of discourse and embodiement, always historically situated and never a pre-constituted body⁶ (Giardina 2003; Inda 2000). As Michael Giardina (2003) explains:

To say that race is a performance is to take up Judith Butler’s (1990) theorization of a politics of the performative… the argument here, then, is that ‘race resolutely does not refer to a pre-constituted body’…. ‘it works performatively to constitute the body itself’. However, this does not mean that the racial(ized) body has no material existence, only that materiality trades on the im/materiality of signification. That the racialized body—like that of Butler’s (1990) gendered body—is performative ‘suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality’. (Giardina 2003:68)

Thus, “race” like gender is a social construction and the performativity of hair both contributes to its discursive production, and is in turn convoluted by its presence.

What does it mean to speculate that the performativity of hair is implicated in the production of “race”? Simply put, just as hair is associated with embodiments of femininity, so too is it intrinsic to the embodiment of racial identities. As Barbara Katz-Rothman (2005) powerfully asserts, “in the doing of hair one does race [...] the history

⁶ I myself, put “race” in quotations to emphasize that it is a social construct (albeit with very real material consequences).
and the politics of hair is the history and the politics of race” (206/208). Through its material and symbolic presence, hair participates in the construction of “race”; hair articulates, hair signifies, hair is political (Dash 2006; Lopez 1995; Tyler 1990). A similar assertion is made by Orlando Patterson (1982) in his comparative study of slavery. As Patterson (1982) maintains, hair type is deeply implicated in racial politics as a signifier of racial difference and inferiority. According to Patterson (1982), despite common misperceptions hair texture, more so than skin complexion, carries “the real symbolic potency” (61). As he explains:

Difference between whites and blacks were sharper in this quality [hair] than in color and persisted for much longer with miscegenation. Hair type rapidly became the real symbolic badge of slavery, although like many powerful symbols it was disguised, in this case by the linguistic device of using the term ‘black,’ which nominally threw the emphasis to color. (Patterson 1982:61)

This sentiment is paralleled in Willie Morrow’s (1973) investigation of the history of black hairstyling practices, wherein he asserts that “hair was used to justify the subordination of Africans… the pride and elegance that once symbolized curly and kinky hair immediately became a badge of racial inferiority” (as cited in Banks 2000:7). Thus, the tight curls and coarse kinky texture associated with Black hair, not only symbolize a particular heritage, but also carry assumptions of racial inferiority and subordination.

A similar tension is found between discourses of “race” and womanhood where Black women are positioned as absolute other in relation to womanhood founded on notions of “whiteness” (Collins 2005). This disjuncture is acknowledged by Haraway (2004) through her term “oxymoronic singularity” (53). For Haraway (2004), who like Butler (1997) enjoys using language to diffuse power and disrupt hegemonic
associations, “oxymoronic singularly” refers to the personification of two diametrically opposed conditions, blackness and womanhood, in one being, the Black woman.

Haraway (2004) contends that by virtue of their subjectivity, Black women defy and destabilize discourses that seek to position womanhood in opposition to Blackness. Many feminist writers have noted that this disjunction between womanhood, femininity and Blackness is often personified through the discourse of hair. As self-proclaimed academic and Black feminist Jacqueline Johnson (1997) notes, “from Barbie to wonder Woman... the long-haired women who dominated my books, television, and playtime seemed to be self-reliant, confident, exciting, and free” (397). However, as she claims, they were also (“of course”) white (397). Moreover, as Judy Scales-Trent (1995) asserts in her semi-autobiographical exploration of “race”, throughout her youth she attempted to tame and control her “wild” African hair, straightening out its kinky texture because, “looking beautiful meant looking white, and looking white meant straight hair” (52).

Patricia Hill Collins (2005), in particular, contends that hair is vital to the construction of hierarchies of femininity, which are founded on assumptions of whiteness. In line with Patterson (1982), Collins (2005) asserts that in the face of new color-blind racism and increasing racial heterogeneity, hair becomes a crucial marker of racial distinction. Thus, as she contends, Black women, subordinately marked by their skin and hair, occupy the lowest rung of such schema, seen as neither feminine nor womanly (Collins 2005). Berry (2008) similarly notes that Black hair is seen as unsightly, unkempt, bestial and monstrous; all of which are attributes that, as previously discussed, are established in opposition to femininity and womanhood. Specifically, the
association of Black hair with monstrous, animalistic qualities is telling. As discussed prior, a comparable association is made with regards to female body hair, which is seen to transgress and subvert established categories. Thus, through a discourse of hair as performative, Black hair, like body hair, is seen as grotesque precisely because it transgresses, destabilizes, and threatens to reveal womanhood and its racial underpinnings as discursive fiction.

Importantly, then, the feminine bodies produced through performative hair are also always specifically raced. Ann duCille (2004) demonstrates this further in her exploration of the commodification of “race” and gender difference through the production of multicultural Barbie. As duCille (2004) found, young Black girls exulted in the long combable hair of the Shani doll (read: Black Barbie). She suggests that the long tamed locks of the Shani allowed Black girls a momentary “escape” from their own short, kinky ones. Recounting a childhood experience duCille (2004) then links this yearning for straight hair directly to a longing for “whiteness”. As she recounts:

[This yearning for the long hair of the Shani doll] recalled my own torturous childhood struggles with the straightening combs, curling irons, and relaxers…during one of those bi-weekly sessions with my mother and the straightening comb, I was foolish enough to say out loud what I had wished for a long time: that I had straight hair like the white girls at school. I still remember my mother’s hurt, her sense of her daughter’s racial heresy. (duCille 2004:273)

Both duCille’s childhood yearnings and her mother’s solemn reaction further highlight the racial tensions entangled within the politics of hair. However, although for Black women a desire for straight (read: white) hair is often interpreted as a form of self-hatred (a degradation of black physical features, in favour of an idealization and imitation of whiteness) simultaneously integrating notions of “race”/gender suggests that something
quite different is taking place. A yearning for long, straight hair may not be so much an attempt to embody whiteness per se, but a longing to embody womanhood which is inextricably bound to whiteness. The narratives of many acclaimed scholars suggest that this may indeed be the case. In her exploration of transnational adoption, Katz-Rothman (2005) recounts a similar story to that of duCille (2004). As she asserts:

I’ve seen black women – grown, educated, professional, competent black women – brought to tears by the sight of a black girlchild putting a scarf on her head and “pretending” hair. “Shaky hair, I want shaky hair,” a black friend’s daughter said. And her mother’s eyes filled. There’s a history here that we need to pay attention to. (Katz-Rothman 2005:209)

As Katz-Rothman (2005) emphasizes, clearly the emotional response invoked in the child’s mother suggests that there is a complicated myriad of discourses at play. However, whether the child’s donning of a scarf and longing for lustrous hair is an attempt to embody whiteness, or an attempt to embody the long flowing tresses so readily associated with womanhood, is less certain. In her personal narrative, Wallace (1982) details a similar childhood experience:

On rainy days my sister and I used to tie the short end of a scarf around our scrawny braids and let the rest of its silken mass trail to our waists. We’d pretend it was hair and that we were some lovely heroine we’d seen in the movies. There was a time when I would have called that wanting to be white, yet the real point of the game was being feminine. Being feminine meant being white to us [emphasis added]. (5)

As explicitly stated in Wallace’s (1982) narrative, the yearning for lustrous hair is immersed in the quest for womanhood, a longing to embody an idealized femininity that

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7 In fact, this narrative of simulated hair play is a reoccurring theme within the literature (see Banks 2000:113; Cunningham & Alexander 2005:28; Johnson 1997:397; Prince 2009:75, 98; Tate 2009:87; Zook 1990:85)
is inextricably linked to notions of whiteness. Perhaps this is what the child who desires “shaky” hair is actually pursuing. Not whiteness as such, but the embodiment of femininity and womanhood, which is so enmeshed with (white) hair. As duCille (1996) explains with regards to her childhood desire for “white” hair:

I knew I was black and female, and I was too much my mother’s daughter not to be in some way fiercely proud of that fact... What guided my fantasy life... was less a wish to flee my own black flesh than a desire to escape the limitations that went with such bodies... even as a girl of seven or eight I was at once aware of and frightened by the burdens that seemed to me natural by-products of living in a Black women’s body [emphasis added]. (13)

As duCille (1996) suggests, for many Black women, the yearning for straight, silky, flowing hair does not reflect self-hatred and a desire to be white, but a desire to attain the “privileges” –beauty, desirability, femininity and womanhood – afforded white woman but denied to Black bodies. In fact, getting one’s hair pressed or straightened for the first time often serves as an important rite of passage for Black women, marking their entry into womanhood (Byrd & Thars 2001; Ebong 2001; hooks 1989b; Rooks 2000).

Perhaps the point is most succinctly articulated by acclaimed scholar bell hooks who asserts, “for each of us [Black women] getting our hair pressed is an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be White... We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be...

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8 As Katz-Rothman (2005) asserts, “we white women are doing something when we casually flip our hair back, run fingers through it, toss our heads in that way” (209); keenly pointing to the mundane, nuanced gestures involve in the performance of femininity and the embodiment of womanhood.

9 Indeed, hair grooming itself is remembered as a time of intimacy and familiarity. The “pleasure of unbroken closeness” (Bordo 2008:402) afforded by hair grooming rituals communicates affection, facilitates bonding and ensures the transmission of cultural and experiential knowledge.
women. It is a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood [emphasis added]” (hooks 1989b:382).

Thus, the long flowing tresses admired and valued as the absolute signifier of femininity and womanhood are also inextricably linked to “whiteness” (Angelou 2009; Banks 2000; Collins 2005; Scales-Trent 1995; Weitz 2001). The sentimental longing for blonde hair is another example of this (Angelou 2009; Banks 2000; Brownmiller 1984). Blonde hair is uniformly positioned as the most desirable hair, often appearing with the other highly coveted, irrefutably feminine attribute, blue eyes\(^{10}\) (Weitz 2001:672). Taking the fairytale princess as one of the most powerful symbols of femininity within the west, Brownmiller (1984) wistfully remarks, “who can imagine a fairy princess with hair that is anything but long and blonde, with eyes that are anything but blue” (67). However, this coveted feminine hair (the ultimate ideal, the epitome of femininity) is also undeniably and inextricably tied to white bodies (both symbolically and substantively). Ultimately this association works to venerate whiteness; the assumption being that only white bodies possess blonde hair. Though there are natural blonde haired Black women, there is no room made for this possibility within a racial imaginary which eschews heterogeneity for homogenizing sameness (Ebong 2001:140; Tate 2009:45). Describing the symbolic

\(^{10}\) The idealization of blue eyes and blonde hair is one of the most poignant symbols of white privilege. The valuing of these attributes over all others eschews the bodies of (most) Black women. Toni Morrison’s acclaimed novel, The Bluest Eye (1970) demonstrates a remarkable attempt to tackle the complex symbolism behind this ritualized valuing of blue eyes and blonde hair. Through the tragic narrative of protagonist Pecola Breedlove and her quest for blue eyes, Morrison explores damaging assumptions of immutable inferiority forcibly imposed upon the Black female body. In a society where “the white female body can evoke the freshness of milk, the sweetness of candy, prized baby dolls, and the glamour of movie stardom, while the black female body can only conjure images of dandelion weeds, cracks in the sidewalk, and brood mares”, Pecola’s quest for blue eyes is a deeply prolific and moving tale (Dickerson 2001:198).
fashioning of blonde hair within the West Gelbart (2004) notes, “to be blonde…is to be 
*fair*, the opposite of foul. Blondness signifies not yellow, but light. It ‘cleaves closer to 
white,’ hence to ‘heavenly effulgence,’ ‘solar radiance,’ dazzlement, truth, sanctity, 
youth, beauty, pure goodness” (209). Performatively, then, valued as an absolute signifier 
of femininity, blonde hair participates in the (re)production and (re)constitution of 
feminine bodies, though this valorization also simultaneously eschews the bodies of 
(most) Black women.

**Styling Resistance**

Approaching hair as performative necessarily implies the possibility of the body 
as a site of resistance; it positions the body as a site of crossing-over, a locale of shifting 
meaning, a place of questioning and remaking, a space where the construction of raced, 
gendered and sexed bodies is brought forth. Hair, then, becomes a site of upheaval, and 
presents an opportunity for radical subversion. Specifically, Butler (2004a) suggests that 
the very processes of reiteration and reconstitution, which form the basis of 
performativity, also produce a radical space for subversive action. As Butler (2004a) 
explains:

> If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time and 
not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation 
are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of 
repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (155)

Thus, understanding hair as performative entails its ability to destabilize and threaten 
hegemonic regulatory regimes. Moreover, applying semiotics to performative hair 
(working to denaturalize the relationship between signifier/signified) radically explicates
meaning and representation, situating the possibility of resistance in the constant production of new meanings and interpretations (Hall 1997).

The potential for resistance through performative hair is highlighted by Black women’s sporting of the afro. As a hairstyle the afro straddles gendered and raced readings; a powerful political statement of racial pride and autonomy, it also signals a clear rejection of feminine norms. As Scales-Trent (1995) expresses:

How wonderful was it when the Black Power movement came in the 60s…hair was free, and so were we! We cut our hair short and wore it ‘natural’… it was the first time my nappy hair and style were on speaking terms. It was a time when I not only made peace with my hair, I exulted in its thickness and wildness. It was a wonderful time. (53)

Thus, the afro is deeply embedded in the politics of liberation as a sentiment of racial pride. However, it also demands that an alternative form of feminine beauty be recognized and respected. As Walker (2000) explains, prior to the popularization of the afro, Black women were expected to straighten their hair as a measure of modernity and cleanliness. Straight hair was, thus, seen as an indication of “good” grooming practices and “appropriate” femininity, while the afro was seen as dirty and unkempt (Walker 2000). However, throughout the mid-twentieth century, culminating in the late 1960s, Black women embraced the afro as a declaration of agency, and as a rejection of repressive grooming regimes (Walker 2000). As Kelly (1997) asserts, “for black women, more so than for black men, going ‘natural’ was not just a valorization of blackness or Africanness, but the rejection of a conception of female beauty that many black men themselves upheld” (348). The afro then serves as a means of empowerment; an affirming alternative to Eurocentric beauty norms and a direct challenge to “the violence
of hegemonic control” which seeks to define “standards of beauty in one particular way” (Prince 2009:19).

In addition to the afro, there are a variety of other natural hairstyles worn by Black women which similarly refute notions of “acceptable” hair. As pointed out by feminist scholar Maxine Craig (1997) Black women who wear their hair in natural styles challenge the dominant norms of femininity. In addition, there are a vast variety of braided hairstyles, which in their elaborate patterns and intricately woven designs, make “high art with the body, in defiance of a culture for whom that body has been associated with everything untamed and primitive” (Bordo 2008:412). Dreadlocks are another “time-honored, culturally significant tradition” which commemorate and embrace the qualities of Black hair, straddling gendered and raced readings. Traditionally, racial doctrines position dreadlocks as uncivilized and unclean, while gendered narratives assign them masculine qualities, such as aggressive and militant (Banks 2000; Byrd & Tharps 2001; Johnson 2008). Thus, Black women who choose to wear their hair in

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11 Natural hair is unprocessed hair. Natural hairstyles do not involve or require the use of heat or chemicals to style the hair. Some scholars disagree with the conflation of natural hair/styles and liberation politics. As they contend, such an understanding sets up a false dichotomy between straight/natural styles. As they assert, even so-called “natural” hairstyles involve a great deal of work to be deemed “presentable” and, in some cases, are still artificially achieved (Bordo 2008; Mercer 1990; Tate 2009; Walker 2000; Zook 2009). While I agree that even natural styles involve preparation and cultivation, I also maintain that they serve as important displays of racial pride, and (whether intentionally or unintentionally) they do denaturalize hegemonic norms that attempt to restrict beauty and femininity to white hair and bodies. I do not, however, seek to support the dualistic divide between straight/natural styles and accommodation/resistance. Instead, I concede that even straight hairstyles can be conceptualized as a form of resistance within particular socio-historical contexts and through a strategic reworking of the “straight hair” ideal.

12 Some of these connotations are derived from the association of dreadlocks with Rastafarianism. However, as Byrd and Tharps (2001) explain, “Rastafarians did not ‘invent’ dreadlocks... the style dates to before the fifth century... various groups have adopted dreadlocks as a style endowed with symbolism, reverence, and aesthetic meaning. It is a hairstyle over which no group can claim ownership” (129).
dreadlocks challenge both pervading “race” and gendered assumptions. Peformatively then, Black women’s hair can serve to both reconstitute and reiterate establish standards of beauty and femininity, yet through particular displays it can also transgresses and subvert essentialized categories. Importantly, by situating the body as a fluid dynamic space, ripe for resistance, such displays work to “re-present[s] the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction while at the same time disrupting and subverting the existing regimes of representation” (Patterson 2008:390).

Some theorists, however, question whether such transgressive stylizations can actually lead to meaningful social change, when people often overlook their significance. According to Rose Weitz (2001) even if read accurately radical performances provide only temporary modes of social change. As she explains, when subversive acts —such as the adoption of alternative presentations of beauty and femininity— become mainstream they lose their provocative capacity, and become devoid of political meaning. Susannah Walker (2000) notes a similar concern with capitalism’s strategic capability to commodify acts of dissent, thereby thwarting their transformative capacity. Specifically, Walker (2000) examines the commodification of the afro. As Walker (2000) explains, gaining immense popularity in the 1960s, initially the afro was adorned for political purposes, as a sign of Black pride and as a radical break from acceptable norms of femininity. However, as the beauty industry realized the profitability of the style, they

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13 For many Black women, adopting dreadlocks is perceived to be “the highest expression of acceptance of self” (Johnson 20008:25). As expressed by Alice Walker, acclaimed Black feminist and poet, “once you dree your hair, everything falls into place. I could not have written The Temple of My Familiar with straight hair, what I call ‘oppressed hair’… I would like to say to other Black women looking at me and my hair… You don’t have to be afraid… you can just be free.” (as cited by Byrd & Tharps 2001:127).
worked to trivialize its political significance, and instead marketed it as a stylish act of “rebellion” that could be adorned or abandoned at will (Walker 2000). Citing renowned activist Angela Davis, Walker (2000) contends that the afro was reduced from “a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion” (536). However, I would argue that although transgressive acts always run the risk of misinterpretation and/or misappropriation – “subversive actions always signify in unexpected ways and with unintended effects” (Lloyd 1999:207) – this instability merely serves to further highlight the importance of context and reinforces the fluidity of action. Even Walker (2000) admits that as the afro faded from prominence, it regained its political significance through those who continued to wear it. As she concludes, “ultimately the Afro had a symbolic power and a material influence on African American women... that went beyond the narrow meaning that commodification gave it” (Walker 2000:563).

Hence, adopting Butler’s theory of performativity inherently entails recognizing the potential for resistance through transgressive stylizations. In fact, Berry (2008) argues that in biological terms hair is always defiant; eclipsing death, avoiding decay, rupturing, and falling out, frequently symbolizing political subversion, obstinance and revolution (Berry 2008). Within the present analysis, hair’s subversive capabilities are evident throughout: from the destabilizing capacity of female body hair (Lesnik-Oberstein 2006); to the fluid and transgressive, although problematic, nature of the “zombie commodity” (Berry 2008); to the subversive character of the afro (Walker 2000). Thus, discursively and materially “the distinctive properties of hair render it synonymous with resistance” (Berry 2008:76).
Summary

Through an application of Judith Butler’s (1999) politics of the performative, this chapter has focused on establishing a conceptual framework from which to situate the politics of hair. Particular focus was dedicated to the way in which the process of racialization complicates matters of identity as understood through performative hair. By utilizing Butler’s (1999) theory, hair was reconceptualized as a corporeal style, composed of a series of sedimented acts, deeply implicated in the production and constitution of identity. Specifically, an exploration of the anxieties surrounding female body hair, and the ritualized idealization of female head hair, have underscored hair’s performative involvement in the construction and reiteration of gender and (hetero)sexuality. Moreover, by integrating an analysis of racialization, focusing on Black women and their hair, the constitution of both “race” and “womanhood” through performative hair has also been emphasized. Finally, the possibility of resistance was located within transgressive stylizations which point to the fluidity of the body and the instability of discourse surrounding “race” and gender. Ultimately, this analysis developed a conceptual framework, linking the reproduction of hegemonic discourse (and the possibility of resistance) to performative hair. In the following chapter this argument will be advanced further through a critical analysis of performative hair within popular culture displays.
Chapter 4

Analysis of Black Women’s Hair in Popular Culture

Introduction

This chapter presents a critical discourse analysis on the representation of hair within mainstream media. Extending the previous chapter’s analysis of performative hair, this chapter focuses on three specific popular culture texts: People’s “Celebrity Hair Archive”, a clip from The Tyra Banks Show and the film Good Hair (2009). Endemic of larger regimes of representation, each piece will be critically examined and discussed in relation to the ideological underpinnings that shape their materialization. In particular, the representation of Black women’s hair/styling practices is examined as interlaced with the (re)production and (re)constitution of identity and difference. In addition, as popular culture can be a site of power contestation – and in fact the later two texts purport to offer counter-hegemonic displays – the potential for resistance will also be examined. Relying heavily on both semiology and a Foucauldian understanding of discourse as “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (Fairclough 1992:64), this analysis seeks to explicate the taken-for-granted renderings produced through representational practices. Focus is devoted to explicating the underlying regimes of domination and oppression that limit and sustain systems of meaning through which Black women’s hair is understood and represented. This chapter will conclude with final thoughts and directions for future research.
Worthy of Mention: People Magazine’s “Celebrity Hair Archives”

The first portion of this analysis focuses on a spread in *People*. Founded in 1974, *People* is currently one of North America’s most popular magazines. Its content includes a mixture of celebrity news, human interest stories and advertisements. *People.com* serves as an electronic extension of *People*’s traditional print format, though only celebrity news and advertisements are made accessible. *People.com* also serves as a database, containing thirty-six years of the magazine’s archival information, including a section entitled “Celebrity Hair Archives”. This hair archive features past articles that deal exclusively with celebrity hair. At the time of this analysis the archive consisted of seventeen separate pages from issues produced between April 2000 and February 2009. Of these seventeen pages, only five include celebrities who are Black women and often their presence is peripheral\(^1\). The piece chosen as the focus of the current project was selected because it is the most current spread (produced in March 2007) that features Black hair in the forefront. In the following analysis, this piece will be examined in relation to larger discursive formations which constrain and produce meaning in the seemingly insignificant fashioning of hair. During the later portion of this investigation, specific attention will be devoted to addressing the representation of Black hair within the spread, and intertextually in the archive as a whole.

Magazines are composed of complex sign-systems, involving the integration of both visual and linguistic signs to produce meaning (Bignell 2002; Danesi 2002). This

\(^1\) This absence, in itself, speaks volumes. Denigrated and devalued, Black women’s hair is seen as less worthy of public praise.
particular piece is no exception. The spread, entitled “Going to Great Lengths”, features the images of four actresses (Beyonce Knowles, Reese Witherspoon, Nicole Kidman and Gwyneth Paltrow). A short description following the heading reads: “What’s the crowning glory for an elegant, sophisticated look? These stars took a cue from Rapunzel and opted for long, stick-straight locks”. To draw attention to their hair, only the upper bodies of the women are depicted, and while Knowles’ photograph is positioned in the top right hand corner, the other three pictures fall beneath it in a row. All of the women are smiling, their makeup impeccable, and their faces framed by long, shiny, sleek locks.

The magazine borrows from the old adage “a woman’s hair is her crowning glory,” using hair as an ionic marker of sophisticated womanly beauty (“What’s the crowning glory for an elegant, sophisticated look?”). Three of the four women featured have blonde hair, which is discursively situated as the most desirable, “essentially feminine” colour (Brownmiller 1984; Synnott 1987; Weitz 2001). Moreover, as all of the women are celebrities, there is an implicit association between long hair and notoriety; long hair comes to signify glamour and fame. The spread also draws on Western mythology by referencing Rapunzel (“These stars took a cue from Rapunzel”). According to the fairytale, Rapunzel is said to possess “long and beautiful hair, fine as spun gold” making her “the most beautiful [woman] under the sun” (Grimm & Grimm 1938:54). Within Western mythology, her lustrous blonde locks serve as an indexical sign of beauty, love and sensuality. By paralleling the women featured in this spread with

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2 Discussed previously in Chapter 3. This sentiment is also reiterated by Tyra Banks during her “real” hair reveal.
Rapunzel, their hair similarly comes to signify this mythic femininity, and the beauty, elegance and (heterosexual) desirability it entails. This association in turn works to sustain heteronormativity predicated on the discrete and oppositionary posturing of sexed/gendered bodies (Butler 1999; Ingraham 2002). Rendered synonymous with “romance, laughter, [and] abounding beauty” the message conveyed to the reader is that long hair is an irrefutably feminine quality (Gates 2007:33). Captivating and “flawless”\(^3\), the women featured symbolize visual materializations of idealized femininity, their hair performing to concretize this identity through corporeal stylization.

Hair also performs within this spread to shape the body racially. Though the stylization practices imposed upon Knowles’ hair in some ways eschew Blackness (her hair is as silky-straight and long as the three white women featured), the spread also works to linguistically reiterate Knowles’ hair as Black (despite its silky straightness) by describing it as artifice. Written beneath Knowles’ photo is a statement describing the look as manufactured by her stylist using “a flat iron and 1.5-in. curling iron”.

Meanwhile, the bone-straight locks of the other three women – though also meticulously straightened and thoroughly groomed – are portrayed as “natural”; Witherspoon is described as not wanting to do “too much” with her hair, while Kidman’s hair preparation is described as merely placing it “over one shoulder to accommodate her dress”, and Paltrow is said to stick “to her tried-and-true basics: her usual long, straight look”. The written descriptions work to further naturalize the association between feminine hair and white bodies, while reconstituting Black hair as unfeminine unless appropriately

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\(^3\) By which I mean the magazine strategically represents the women so as to appear flawless.
manipulated and worked upon. Furthermore, this manipulation is assumed to be
necessary, the presumption being that long straight hair is a necessary requirement for
Black women’s beauty. Hence, while Knowles’ racialized body proclaims itself to be
Black, her hair also functions performatively to mark her body as such. The same is true
for Witherspoon, Kidman, and Paltrow, whose flowing locks are use to racialize their
bodies as white.

Examining this spread intertextually, it is apparent that Knowles’ straightened
tresses are a reoccurring trend within People’s “Celebrity Hair Archive”. In fact,
whenever Black women are featured their hair is always straight. This is representative of
discursive practices which link straight hair with femininity, and is endemic of a colonial
legacy that equates unstraightened Black hair with racial subordination (Collins 2000;
Morrow 1973; Rooks 2000; Russell, Wilson & Hall 1992). In fact as established in the
previous chapter, many theorists argue that historically hair texture has served as the
primary marker of racial classification (Banks 2000; Byrd & Tharps 2001; Lopez 1995;
Patterson 1982). Hairstyles that accentuate natural Black hair textures are, thus, perceived
as an aggressive challenge to mainstream hegemonic values. The “unruly” quality of
natural Black hair induces anxiety by subverting notions of what is “appropriately”
feminine (cultivated, controlled modernity). Straight hair is seen as a non-threatening
display of (assimilated) Blackness, while natural Black hair is perceived to be a sign of
“radical” politics (Mercer 1990). It is not surprising, then, that a mainstream forum such as People magazine would choose to primarily display Black women with straightened hair. Visually depicting only straightened Black hair evades the anxiety and confusion instigated by kinky locks.

Thus, as demonstrated through this analysis, representational practice work to substantiate regimes of domination through naturalized pairings and common-sense renderings. Within People’s “Celebrity Hair Archive”, ideology functions semiotically to construct meaning through strategic stylizations of hair. Black women’s hair, in particular, is carefully manufactured to conform to hegemonic ideation and thus, sustains relations of power.

**Superficial Renderings: Tyra Reveals Her “Real” Hair!**

The second portion of this analysis deals with the season five premier of The Tyra Banks Show (an American talk show, hosted by former world-class model Tyra Banks). The show deals with the latest in beauty, fashion, celebrity gossip and a variety of sensationalized topics. The episode in question is entitled “Tyra Banks Reveals Her Real Hair!”. For the purposes of this investigation a two minute introductory clip of the episode will be used for analysis. Since the event that garnered attention was the act of

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4 Take for instance, the silken tresses of First Lady Michelle Obama, who appeared on the cover of People in August 2008, November 2008 and February 2009. As Prince (2009) explains, “Michelle Obama’s hair is politically correct... she cannot afford to have ‘political hair’... for the First Lady, natural hair would be too Black, too ‘out there,’ too strong” (142). The assumed neutrality of straight hair is in itself highly political.

5 The fact that Knowles is also considered to be a “light skinned” Black women, further reduces this anxiety as she is seen to conform more closely to a Eurocentric sensibility (both phenotypically and with regards to perceived behavioural attributes).
Tyra revealing her “real” hair, I have chosen to focus specifically on the moment of this exposé and its ramifications. As in the previous section, Black hair will be examined as a performative, corporeal stylization, fundamentally involved in the (re)production and (re)constitution of identity and difference. Since Tyra situates her revelation as an act of resistance, its destabilizing potential will also be examined.

The episode begins with Tyra walking onto the stage. Her audience (composed mainly of young women) claps and cheers as she makes her way in. Upon reaching the front of the stage Tyra pauses, and then proceeds to turn slowly in a full circle, allowing everyone to glance at her hair. She smiles and welcomes everyone, and then proceeds to describe her hair as an “unsolved mystery” which she felt she needed to “solve”. She admits to using various weaves and wigs since emerging on the public scene as a young model, but now, as she explains, “I wanted to show the real me, I wanted to show the raw me”. Adding as she turns around a second time “this is me y’all, this is me”. The clip ends.

Upon first glance the clip itself may seem rather insignificant, however, it was the cause of a media frenzy and came to be featured on various other popular media outlets, including The Today Show, CNN, Larry King Live, Entertainment Tonight and Time magazine. On a subsequent show Tyra herself admits that she was “surprised” by the immense response evoked by her revelation. However, as she explains “I just felt myself

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6 The media frenzy instigated by this event is highly intriguing in and of itself. It situates Black hair as spectacle – it is fascinating, alluring, exotic, “other”

changing a lot and I was ready to show more of the real me... here I am in my glory, my crowning glory... I’m feeling alive and truly free” (Banks 2009). As this statement suggests, for Tyra, the decision to publically reveal her “real” hair signifies self-acceptance and empowerment (“I’m feeling alive and truly free”). Tyra’s statement also symbolizes a continuation of larger regimes of representation that link dramatically changing one’s hair (whether through cutting, growing, coloring, etc.) with personal transformation. Tyra draws on this discourse in her explanation, noting that the decision to reveal her “real” hair came as the result of personal growth and the desire to express it tangentially (“I felt myself changing a lot and I was ready to show more of the real me”) (Banks 2009). Tyra also situates her hair as an important symbol of self. Her acknowledgment (“this is me y’all”) is confirmation of this. For the viewer, this association calls attention to the body as a site of creative expression. It highlights the body as “something more than an inert, passive object on which ideology inscribes meaning,” repositioning it as “an agential reality with its own causal role in making-meaning” (Hames-Garcia 2008:327). Consequently, such an act has the potential to denaturalize the concretized social body, recapitulating it as a fluid, dynamic space, open to questioning and remaking. However, despite this promising potential a closer examination of the clip reveals that Tyra’s revelation ultimately does little to disrupt hegemonic ideation.

First, although Tyra purports to reveal her “real” hair what she in fact reveals is a highly calculated manifestation of her hair which does little to destabilize dominant
discourse. The hair she reveals has been chemically altered\(^8\), so as to appear less “kinky”, and has been combed back and fashioned into a neat, sleek, contained look. It is also sopping wet, water can be seen dripping down her back when she turns. Tyra claims that her hair is wet because she “just got out of the shower”; an improbable explanation given her heavily applied make-up. In actuality, water is used to ensure that her hair achieves maximum straightness and length (as per the ideal) working to diffuse the presence of her “unruly” (though processed) Black hair. This type of controlled stylization is a materialization of hegemonic femininity, predicated on whiteness and Eurocentric beauty norms. Thus, though her revelation is couched in terms that seem to valorize her natural Black hair (“I wanted to show the real me, I wanted to show the raw me”) her display disavows it. Manufactured in this way, Tyra’s conventionally feminine hair works to reify hegemonic ideology, failing to denaturalize associations or contest meaning in any radical way.

Another disconcerting feature of Tyra’s revelation is her (continuous) use of the adjective “real” when describing her hair. This reifies the dichotomy between real/fake hair\(^9\) and suggests that hair can exist independent of the discursive formations that sustain its materializations. Tyra’s use of the descriptor “real” suggests that this version of her hair is more “authentic” than those that came before it. However, if hair is performative then the “reality” of hair is only produced as an effect of its performance (Tate 2009). In other words, “hair is never a straightforward biological ‘fact’ because it is

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\(^8\) After viewer inquiries Tyra admits that her hair is in fact chemically processed in an episode entitled “Chris Rock, and Reaction to Tyra’s Real Hair Reveal,” which aired on December 28, 2009.

\(^9\) This distinction is also explored within the next section when discussing the film *Good Hair*. 

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almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally ‘worked upon’ by human hands” (Mercer 1990:248). In this sense, hair is never “real”, it is always manufactured and manipulated in service of various ideological ends. With regards to this particular episode Tyra subsequently introduces her hairdresser who proceeds to style her hair on stage. For the remainder of the episode her hair is worked and re-working, with heat and rollers, making it as “done” as any style she previously adorned. Thus, Tyra’s constant reiteration of her hair as “real” is counterproductive as it invisiblizes the rich meaning-making processes embedded in the framing and fashioning of hair (whether human, synthetic or otherwise).

Overall, although Tyra’s revelation harbours the potential for resistance, in actuality it does little to challenge hegemonic ideology. Instead, Black hair is reified as fit for the public sphere only once it has been appropriately “controlled” and made to conform to hegemonic norms of femininity. Moreover, Tyra’s focus on “real” hair obscures the discursive production of meaning and the performative iteration of hair. Far from destabilize hegemonic conceptualizations the strategic presentation of her “real” hair merely serves to (re)constitute gender and “race”.

**Scraping the Surface: Chris Rock’s “Good Hair”**

The final portion of this analysis examines the film *Good Hair* (2009) produced and hosted by comedian Chris Rock. This documentary style film alleges to explore the complexity of Black hair, positioning it as a vital element of cultural production. However, aside from a fairly promising examination of the global hair trade, the film
does little to debunk underlying regimes of domination and oppression that limit and sustain systems of meaning through which Black women’s hair is understood and represented. Within the film, Rock reifies the notion of real/fake hair despite being presented with a rich opportunity to challenge bodily boundaries. Moreover, while referencing the idea of “good hair” on several occasions, Rock fails to examine the ideological foundations of this concept, instead positioning “good hair” as a vanity that only Black women pursue. Overall, the film acts as an extension of discursive practices that aim to isolate and pinpoint Black hair. It positions Black women’s hair as a specimen to be examined, explained and consumed by white audiences; the exotic “other” used to secure Eurocentric hegemony.

As Rock explains in the introduction to the film, it was his daughter’s inquiry (“Daddy why don’t I have good hair?”) that sparked the film’s production. However, the film itself does little to delve into the origins of this concept, and the legacy of colonialism and racial degradation it entails. Instead, the documentary crudely decomplexifies the issue, suggesting that “good hair” is simply straight hair that closely approximates the European norm, while “bad hair” is Black hair in its natural form. There is no attempt to challenge or refute such associations, no insight into the historical origins of the concepts, and no deconstruction of “race” as regulatory fiction. Rock does not denaturalize the relationship between signifier (straight hair) and signified (good hair, femininity, womanhood, beauty, whiteness)\textsuperscript{10} and is thus unable to explicate the

\textsuperscript{10} Conversely the signifier (Black/nappy hair), and the signified (bad, inferior, unkempt, ugly, bestial, primitive).
processes of meaning and representation in any radical way. The potential for valuable insight is eschewed in favour of a simplistic explanation that neatly ties “good hair” to whiteness, and “bad hair” to Black bodies.

Throughout the entire film, Rock never disputes the assumption that kinky hair is undesirable, nor does he refute the notion that Black women have “bad hair”. Instead, the film focuses largely on “solutions” to Black women’s hair “problem”, whether in the form of extensions, weaves, or relaxers—all designed to compensate for the undesirability of “nappy” hair. Specifically, Rock highlights Black women’s use of the relaxer\(^\text{11}\), calling it “the closest thing to a nap antidote”. Statements such as this sustain “the presumption that long straight hair is necessary for Black women’s beauty” (Tate 2009:39) and reify the notion that Black hair in its natural form is unacceptable (literally “poisonous”) and in need of manipulation. Moreover, though Rock later investigates the health hazards of sodium hydroxide\(^\text{12}\) (the key ingredient in relaxers) he individualizes the issue, chastising Black women for their use of the product, as opposed to questioning an industry that sanctions, encourages and legitimizes its use.

Rock further reiterates the undesirability of Black hair when attempting to sell it to various vendors on the street, all of whom abruptly turn him down. Through this particular segment he situates Black women’s hair as socially inadequate, aesthetically repulsive and monetarily worthless, but neglects to connect the issue with its discursive origins –“the racialized paradox of beauty” (Tate 2009:19). As a result he renders

\(^{11}\) Also called a perm, the relaxer uses sodium hydroxide to chemically straighten hair.

\(^{12}\) Shown to cause both scalp and lung damage when used over an extended period of time.
invisible the link between whiteness, beauty and the racialized hierarchy embedded in the language of hair. Rock claims that Black women straighten their hair in an effort “to look white”, but takes for granted that iconic beauty is founded on whiteness, “acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstituted in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life... it is itself (re)produced through its embodiment, through the acts that strive to approximate it, through the idealizations reproduced in and by those acts” (Butler 2004c:48). Rock thus naturalizes the undesirability of Black hair, reducing it to the texture of the hair itself, as opposed to regimes of domination and oppression that discursively determine how it is perceived. Negating this complexity Rock narrowly construes the issue as a narcissistic longing on the part of Black women.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite these shortcomings, the film does offer a fairly insightful exposé of the global hair trade. Rock traces the production of human hair weaves to India (one of the biggest manufacturers of this product), examining some of the politics involved in the production and consumption of human hair. He visits the Sri Venkateswara Temple in Tirupati, India where more than ten million people tonsure\textsuperscript{14} their hair each year in a religious ceremony as a sign of self-sacrifice to the Gods. Ironically, as Rock reveals, the sacrificed hair is then processed and sold to distributors around the world. As he explains, “in a few weeks their [sacrificed] hair will be on the heads of doctors, [and] lawyers... These people have no idea where their hair is going or how much it is worth”. As Rock’s

\textsuperscript{13} Interestingly when Jason Griggers, a (white) hairdresser, is shown visiting a dermatologist to receive Botox injections Rock makes no comment. Yet Botox also involves the “unnecessary” use of hazardous chemicals, which in this case are injected directly into the bloodstream.

\textsuperscript{14} Tonsure is used as both noun (the name of the religious ceremony) and adjective (the act of shaving one’s head as part of religious sacrifice).
statement espouses, the human hair trade reinscribes colonial boundaries, serving as a materialization of “the exploitative relationship between Third World producers and First World consumers” (Berry 2009:64). Through the human hair trade, the bodies of Third World women, literally and figuratively come to structure and reinforce the supremacy of First World femininities (Berry 2009; Jones 1994).

Rock’s exploration of the global hair trade also involves a visual demonstration of how “raw” human hair is processed and prepared for redistribution. Fragments of hair are shown being washed, brushed and sown together to be sold in bundles. The scene highlights the luminal quality of hair; shown to “exist as much outside of and between bodies as within or on them” (Berry 2009:64). Watching fragmented hair being prodded and processed in this manner, also rearticulates it as separable from the body, challenging its signification as a racial determinant. Manufactured and contrived, hair is seen as a disembodied entity, pointing beyond our embodied selves. Re-thinking hair in this way “challenges the ways in which blackness has been reduced to the body and the way that the body and hair have been taken for granted as natural signifiers of race” (Northern 2006). The scene works to decentre gender and “race” as natural bodily phenomenon; Indian hair (whether male/female) becomes “white-like” when weaved onto the bodies of Black women, thereby disrupting perceived bodily boundaries and resituating Black hair/styling practices as irreducible to homogenous terms.

Rock’s exploration of the global hair trade and the manufacturing of human hair temporarily highlights the transgressive potential of Black hair/stylization practices. However, immediately following this scene, Rock recapitulates hegemonic
conceptualizations of Black hair by reifying the divide between real/fake. Amidst images of Black women tossing and swinging their silky-straight hair, Rock features actor Tracey Marrow (Ice-T) stating that he was “always bothered by [Black] women who had it [‘fake’ hair]”, adding parenthetically, “you don’t get points for that”. This statement reifies the dichotomy between real/fake and reinforces the notion that only “real” hair matters. Wigs and extensions are conceptualized as inauthentic bodily displays, used to compensate for Black women’s perceived “deficiencies”. Rock reiterates this sentiment in a subsequent scene when rapper T-pain is featured stating “it definitely matters if a girl got weave,” and Rock himself adds, “it’s like plastic fruit [...] you can’t touch the weave!”. Thus, although the previous scene utilized extensions to position hair as a fluid entity that exists beyond the confines of the discrete physical body, throughout the remainder of the film Rock situates hair extensions and wigs –whether human, synthetic or otherwise – as unnatural, artificial, “fake”. Ultimately this reifies hegemonic ideation, narrowly construing bodily boundaries, rearticulating hair as inseparable from the body and reconstituting it as a natural signifier of gender and “race”.

**Summary**

This chapter has explored the discursive configuration of hair within popular culture, with a specific focus on the way in which Black women’s hair/styling practices are represented and fundamentally implicated in the production of identity and difference. Through People’s “Celebrity Hair Archive”, *The Tyra Banks Show* and Chris Rock’s (2009) film, hair has been linked to larger discursive formations which constrain and
produce meaning. Notably, several findings from the preceding chapter’s analysis of performative hair materialized in this analysis as well. Most notably, hair was implicated in the (re)production of sex/gender and “race,” serving to (re)constitute and (re)establish hegemonic notions of femininity and womanhood, predicated on Eurocentric beauty ideals. Consequently, as affirmed substantively through each text, Black women’s hair is conceptualized as inappropriate and undesirable unless properly worked upon, concealed, manipulated or extended. However, while Chapter Three’s analysis suggested that hair offered a means of critical resistance, this analysis has demonstrated that such potential remains largely unrealized. Instead, by rearticulating dominate narratives and ideas these texts participated in the reproduction of hegemony, failing to address the influence of hegemonic power and the interrelated discourses that both lead to the materialization of Black hair/styling practices and confine their interpretations. Even displays that purported to offer a critical analysis (namely Tyra’s hair revelation and the film Good Hair) ultimately failed to refute hegemonic ideology that limit and sustain systems of meaning, thereby reifying dominant discourse even in attempts to resist.

Conclusions, Future Directions, and Final Thoughts

In sum, through a two-part qualitative analysis, guided by a critical engagement with theoretical and methodological concerns, this investigation has explicated the discursive mechanisms through which hair comes to signify. Reconfigured as sign (to highlight the intense processes of meaning-making implicated in its semiotic fashioning) and connected to discourse (to expose the underlying relations of power inherent in the
production of knowledge) hair has been situated as a vital corporeal entity, central to the production of identity and difference. A critical application of Butler’s politics of performativity suggests that hair works performatively to constitute the very identities it purports to reveal; its reality produced as an effect of its performance. In particular, functioning as an ionic sign of femininity and womanhood, hair works to (re)constitute gendered/sexed beings. In addition, as a mechanism of racialization hair participates in the production of “race”. Consequently, hair/styling practices are inextricably tied to discourses of femininity, womanhood, beauty, power, domesticity and modernity, and fundamentally implicated in the (re)production of colonialism and Eurocentric hegemony.

In particular, it was argued that Black women’s hair serves as an intriguing locus of creativity, carrying immense transformative potential as a “monstrous” subversive presence. However, a critical discourse analysis of three popular culture texts reveals that representational practices narrowly constrain Black women’s hair within the confines of a Eurocentric sensibility, thwarting attempts to perpetuate resistance. Through various representational practices Black women’s “kinky” hair is repeatedly conceptualized as unfeminine, inappropriate and undesirable, unless properly worked upon, altered, concealed, manipulated and/or extended. The findings from this investigation suggest that commercial pop-culture does not provide an appropriate forum for launching counter-hegemonic displays, as it is unable to contend with the complexities of discourse, thereby reifying hegemony despite attempts to resist. This however, does not preclude the possibility of dissent through subversive hairstyling techniques. On the contrary, as
discussed in Chapter Three, approaching hair as performative necessarily implies the possibility of the body as a site of resistance. Future research would be wise to further explore this potential of resistance through transgressive stylizations, moving towards an effective politics of resistance by highlighting women’s agency in their perpetuation of subversive hair/styling displays.

Thus, as this project has demonstrated, whether “natural” or synthetic, human or otherwise, hair matters. As an infinitely complex symbolic entity, hair points to our embodied selves, as well as beyond them, and works to shape their various materializations. Existing liminally hair represents an intriguing site of bodily upheaval, harboring the potential for radical subversion. Imbricated with notions of “race”, gender and sexuality hair holds important cultural, spiritual and aesthetic significance. For Black women in particular, subjugated on the basis of both gender and “race”, hair carries unique significance as a vital site of cultural production and identity negotiation. Indeed, “from head to toe, no other physical attribute for a Black woman is as culturally, socially, or politically charged as her hair” (Ebong 2001:1). As an extension of the physical body, Black women’s hair serves as a powerful symbol of self, vital to the production of social meanings and the expression of symbolic values. Furthermore, as this investigation reveals, although conceptualizations of Black women’s hair can serve to (re)constitute and (re)iterate establish standards of beauty and femininity, through particular stylizations it can also transgress and subvert essentialized categories, and disrupt naturalized gendered and raced assumptions. Thus, caught on the cusp between self/society, meticulously contrived and purposely styled, hair is crucial in the
articulation of identity and difference. Ultimately, by engaging in a critical exploration of hair’s discursive semiotic materializations, this project demystified discursive formations that limit and maintain systems of meaning through which hair is understood.
References


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