

Rachel Lyons

More Than Hair

On September 30, 2016, singer Solange Knowles released her third studio album, *A Seat at the Table*, which included a song titled “Don’t Touch My Hair.” The song is a nod to black women everywhere who have experienced the unwarranted and often disrespectful attention of peers quick to reach for the beautiful locks on their heads with questions like “do you brush it?” or “is it real?” Such micro-aggressive encounters are almost comically relatable amongst African American women, and as a result, Knowles’ song can be categorized as an anthem dedicated to the every-day struggles of black women. As a black woman, I understand the meaning of a phrase like “don’t touch my hair,” but I find that people in other demographics do not. The gravity of the act of touching a black woman’s hair without consent is lost on those without a personal connection to the subject.

The politics of black hair has made it so that black women often have a relationship with their hair distinctly unique from that of other women. So, how exactly did hair become political? And what role has hair played in the lives of black women? In this essay I will examine these questions through the history of black hair in a cultural and political context. Also, I will explore the significance of African American hair on a more personal and intimate level through personal accounts and testimonies. By looking closely at the evolution of black beauty and hair trends, I hope to unravel the weighted relationship between a black woman and her hair—a relationship so complex, unique, unifying, and significant, it inspired a song, as well as countless other works of art, advocacy, and responses in popular media.

I. A Brief History of Trends in Black Hair



This advertisement published in the African American newspaper, Broad Ax, in 1921 promises “soft” and “silky” hair).

Historians often claim that the first self-made female millionaire in America was Madam C. J. Walker, an African American orphan who grew up in the post-Civil War south (Ingham). Her rapid climb up the ladder of both wealth and recognition is easily attributed to her entrepreneurial skills, her ingenuity, and her work ethic. It is not a coincidence, however, that the business that put her name in textbooks and bought her a mansion on the Hudson River was a line of hair products tailored to black women (Ingham). The Walker company developed the “Walker System,” a two-step process that removed the kinks from African American hair texture, lengthening the hair and therefore making it look more European (Ingham). Many members of the black community look back on Madam C. J. Walker as a figure of black female success against all odds and a trailblazer in a land of Jim Crow and rampant racism, whose generous donations to black organizations continue to benefit the community decades later.

Madam C.J. is one of the earliest examples of how black hair has played a significant role not only in black history, but also in the lives of individual women. In the early twentieth century, African Americans were still greatly burdened by the chains of slavery. Freed black women worked domestically as nurses, nannies, or maids for white families. Walker’s great-grand daughter insists that Walker’s wish was to help these black women “grow” hair and “cultivate healthy scalps” —something she viewed as necessary for the thousands of women who worked long hours, often in hot kitchens, and put their hair in damaging environments

(Truesdale). Her business was both a response to these conditions and an exception. She actually employed and educated hundreds of other women, giving them a paid alternative to serving white people (Brown). Also, as a result of her pioneering and the success of her products, permed hair became the trend and stayed the dominating trend for black women for nearly half a century.

This trend that Madam C.J. sparked highlights how the history of black hair often comes with cultural implications. On one hand, the “Walker System” is a symbol of success and liberation for black women in America. But, using another lens, the company that sparked the expectation for African American women to straighten their hair with chemical relaxers can be perceived as an act of assimilation and acceptance of Euro-centric beauty standards as superior.

The latter idea proved especially persuasive for black activists living and working decades after Madam CJ Walker invented her relaxer.

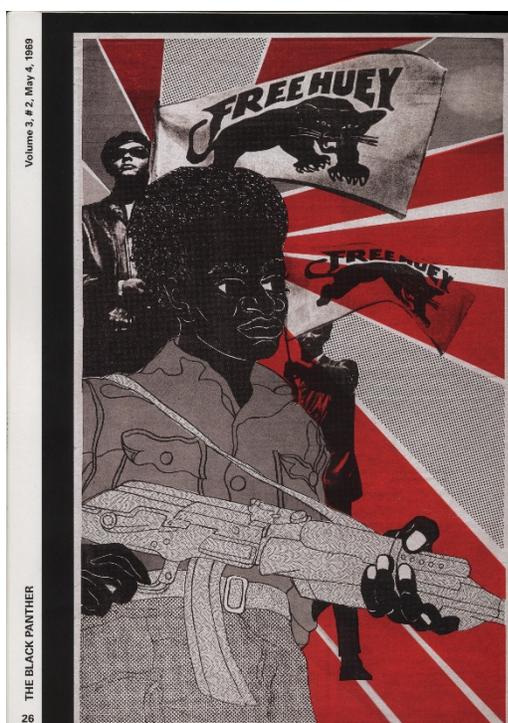
Throughout the 1960s and 70s, many black men and women embraced their natural locks as a part of the “Black is Beautiful” and “Black Power” movements. In addition to calling for civil liberties and racial justice, civil rights



Angela Davis shows off her natural hair in 1972 walking to court where she is on trial.

activists and grass roots revolutionaries sought to reclaim the unique culture of Black America by recognizing its members individually and more generally through their achievements in art and history. Part of these movements was the transition to natural hairstyles. Women who identified with the movements threw away their hot combs and relaxers in exchange for big afros that came to symbolize black beauty and excellence, as well as a rejection of assimilation to

white culture (Martin). Malcolm X was a major influencer in the black power movement; while his reputation is one of great controversy, his contributions to the black cultural movement of the time is undeniable. In his autobiography he wrote about hair straightening as a consequence of white supremacy: “I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are ‘inferior’—and white people ‘superior’” (“Here is what Malcolm X Wrote”).



This graphic from a 1969 issue of “The Black Panther” shows a militant woman sporting short, natural hair.

Malcolm’s words paint the use of chemicals to treat black hair as an act of anti-blackness. However, images, not just words, also fueled this pressure to go natural. Prominent woman leaders of the black power movement, like Angela Davis, Elaine Brown, and Kathleen Cleaver, sported afros while acting as leading activists in the black community (Martin). These female figures did more than advertise the afro and natural hair: they also advertised a new image of power among black women specifically. Tarika Lewis was an artist for *The Black Panther*, a publication dedicated to the Black Panthers. She and other artists helped create an image

of strong black women opposed to “the system,” radically feminist or womanist and active in the black power movement (Martin). Most of these women wore afros. Malcolm X was specifically concerned with the racial implications of natural hair, but female icons of the movement made afros about gender as well. Once again, a revolutionary era for black women coincided with

shifting images of black hair and beauty, affecting how black women viewed their natural hair, and forcing them to grapple with the politicization of their beauty choices. During this era, black women who chose to relax their hair were depicted as both pro-assimilation and submissive to white culture, and anti-feminist by influential women of the black power movement. Conversely, the hairstyles women of these movements propagated gave natural hair a militant and aggressive connotation, mainly the result of pushback to the sometimes violent and separatist nature of groups like the Black Panthers. All of these messages and images work together and against each other to create the complex political nature of black hair that women today still grapple with.

II. Many Choices, Many Messages, Many Pressures

The history I just highlighted only represents a facet of the rich and complex history of black Americans. Additionally, it does not take into account the historical experiences of other members of the African Diaspora, whose families have migrated to the U.S. recently from across the world in line with rapid globalization. However, it does shed some light on the complexities of the role of hair in a black woman's life.



This woman shows off a popular hair style meant to protect natural hair, Havana Twists.

Years of history, from Madam C.J. Walker to the rise of the Black Panthers and beyond, have politicized African American hair choices, of which there are many. With such a heavy and significant history of racism, liberation, advocacy, and achievement that has influenced the meaning of various hairstyles, how do black women decide what to do with their locks?

Frohawks, Puffs, Twist-outs, Perms, Finger coils, Box braids, Havana Twists, Wigs, Weaves: Hair options for the modern black woman are seemingly endless. All the choices a black woman can make with her hair can be separated into two categories: permed or relaxed hair and natural hair. Recently, black women have been embracing the natural 'do, opting to forgo the use of chemical relaxers. This is a stark difference from popular culture just a few years prior, explored by Chris Rock in his 2009 documentary, *Good Hair*. The documentary has a largely economic lens and looks specifically into the value and size of the weave and relaxer industries. One particular business Rock looked at was The Dudley Empire, a relaxer manufacturer and supplier valued at \$100 million ("*Good Hair*"). Rock also uses his film to interview men and women about their hair choices and opinions. Most of the women he spoke to were celebrities, such as Raven Symone and the Salt-N-Pepa duo. A lot of the women spoke about the large amounts of money they spent on their weaves and extensions ("*Good Hair*"). While the documentary was an interesting and insightful look at the complex and extensive industry of black hair, it lacked a necessary political commentary—Rock seemed interested in the financial implications only, and, for a documentary largely about women and hair, he seemed to ask the opinion of men surprisingly often.

The truth is that when Rock's documentary was made, black women chose to spend lots of money on making their hair appear long and straight because of the social benefits, not solely because they personally believed that white hair was more beautiful—a point Rock generally ignores. Relaxers are used to remove the kinks and natural texture of black hair for various reasons. Three of these reasons are outlined in a study of black women's hair by scholar Michael Barnett. According to Barnett, women relax their hair because they are predisposed to hate their natural hair, because they can find a job more easily with relaxed hair, or because it is simply a

tradition (Barnett 2016). It is important to analyze Barnett's studies cautiously. Though Barnett is a renowned academic in the realm of Black and Afro Studies, he is also a man writing specifically about black women and their hair choices. However, I find that there is validity to most of Barnett's assertions. All of Barnett's solutions can be grouped together under the giant umbrella of racism. Racism has created a culture telling black women they do not look pretty or professional naturally. This racism is ultimately what caused women in the Black Panthers to reject relaxed hair, seeing it as an acceptance of racist attitudes and a way to appease racist white oppressors. Patricia Hill Collins speaks more specifically about racist standards in her pivotal work, *Black Feminist Thought*: "blue-eyed, blonde, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (Collins, 2015, 98). Essentially, Collins argues that levels of beauty reside on a scale: historically, perfect beauty has been tied to European features, while ugliness has been tied to African features. Collins references Maya Angelou's "realization that the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become white" to cement her argument (Collins 99). When it comes to the professional sphere, black women are discriminated against time and time again for wearing natural hair; it shouldn't be surprising that women often opt to transform their hair rather than fight a racist system at the risk of unemployment. College freshman Guiny

Thomas reflected on this issue in a personal interview I conducted:

"When I go into work environments, I always feel weird about having my natural hair. I always want to have braids or something, or have my hair pressed when I go into work environments, just so it's not seen as, like, 'crazy' or 'unprofessional.' Because that's how most jobs and professional environments view quote-unquote 'crazy natural hair'" ("Guiny Thomas").

So, there is merit to Barnett's study. And reverting back to Rock's documentary, applying

his words and the work of Collins, one can hypothesize that the black female celebrities highlighted in *Good Hair* saw fame on a world stage and became beauty icons because they spent money on expensive hair treatments and styles that made their hair appeal to all facets of America that still upheld European beauty standards. Black women adopted the styles of women in the media and on radio whom they saw achieve high levels of success. The strongest message to take away from *Good Hair* (probably to the surprise of its producer), is the fact that trends in beauty change quickly. Since *Good Hair* was released, eight years have passed and the sale of chemical relaxers has significantly declined. According to the consumer research group Mintel, relaxer sales “dropped from \$206 million in 2008 to \$152 million in 2013, while sales of products to maintain natural hair are on the rise” (“Hair relaxer”). The same study also concluded that in 2103, 70% of black women over the age 18 were wearing their hair natural (“Hair relaxer”). Since Rock’s documentary, more and more black women are adopting natural hair styles. There are even groups for women with natural hair, like the Boston Naturals Hair Meet Up Group, which has continuously grown in membership (Rudick). Additionally, there has been a rise in popularity of protective hairstyles like buns, braids, and twists. Black celebrities represent a range of natural hair styles on a range of platforms. Lupita Nyong’o was named the most beautiful woman in the world with a shaved head, and actor Amandla Stenberg often shows off her natural curls to over one million Instagram followers.

Amber Henderson closely examined the booming natural hair industry and found that “many African American women are now glorifying those who wear their hair in its natural state as opposed to those who straighten their hair” (Henderson, 2015, 2). Henderson defines the current trend in black hair as more than a beauty fad. Because black women across the country have united to consciously reject American beauty standards and challenge societal norms,

natural hair acceptance is a political movement (Henderson 2). She also gives a brief account of her personal experiences: “When I go out in public wearing my natural curl patten, I am frequently praised for being ‘brave’ enough to wear my own hair and not manipulating it through hair straightening or weaves” (Henderson 2). As a black woman with natural hair, I have also been the subject of similar praise and admiration. At first, this newly popularized celebration of natural seems like a progressive achievement for black women who have consistently battled unattainable standards of beauty and femininity. With more scrutiny, however, it is easy to find flaws with the sweeping movement. Guiny Thomas expressed her personal concerns with the movement:

[The natural hair movement is] definitely geared towards loose, nice curls. On all the hair product ads...literally it’s always girls with, I want to say like 3A, 3B, or 2C hair¹—just like bouncy curls that fall down. For girls who have my kind of hair...they don’t really have people like us on their ads. When people think of nice, natural hair, they don’t think of [my] hair. We do hairstyles so that our hair can mimic that kind of that style, but it takes forever—like twist-outs. I did a twist-out the other day, and it took me so long. But that’s what people think of when they think of natural hair (“Guiny Thomas”).

As Thomas points out, the natural hair movement is prone to its own discriminatory messages and continues to propagate Euro-centric standards of beauty by awarding the most value and recognition to black hair that is naturally light, loose, long, and bouncy. Even within a movement dedicated to celebrating blackness, European beauty standards, though veiled, remain prevalent.

To synthesize the information presented so far, events in black history and the responses to those events politicized different styles of black hair. Additionally, racist attitudes put pressure

¹Hair textures are categorized using a numbered and lettered system of charting. Hair considered “curly” makes up the 3A-3C range. Hair defined as “kinky” is in the 4A-4C range. As a general rule of thumb, the thinner, straighter, and less coarse the hair, the lower the number and letter. This system is used to advertise hair products and styles.

on women to adapt hairstyles mimicking European hair in order to be considered attractive and employable. In response, black women have deliberately chosen to work in opposition to the many expectations they face in a widespread natural hair movement. This movement, while inspiring and powerful, has faults, often forgetting to recognize women with short, tight curls and kinks. So what is a black woman supposed to do in response to all these intertwined concepts that relate to her hair care routines? How do women take control of their lives and the way they are perceived in society? Not surprisingly, black women have claimed power and expressed their identities in different forms. The mixed messages and political nature of hair care has inspired countless women to depict or respond to the cultural, and historical implications of their hair through many mediums.

III. Responding to Complexities, Racism, and Standards

First, black women often work politically to secure their right to choose freely. In an extremely divided and political world, political power lies in choice. In the book *Hair Matters*, author Ingrid Banks interviewed one woman about how she viewed black hair styles: “I just think that a woman is a powerful being, and [she can] use her hair as a means, as a tool to have power” (Banks 70). The woman interviewed goes on to explain that depending on the context, a black woman may choose to wear a weave or wear braids in order to be respected and exert influence and power in the world (Banks 70). In this sense, the politicization of hair today is not so much about any specific hair style; rather, it is about choice. The power to decide how to present oneself in a job interview or in a classroom becomes a political statement. In 2016, black schoolgirls in South Africa were banned from wearing afros and other hairstyles deemed “untidy” by their school board (Chutel). The girls protested the unfair and racist ban and gained worldwide attention in their fight (Chutel). In this scenario, the young girls were fighting for

power over their own bodies, platforms of expression, and the freedom to choose. Black women have also fought unfair discrimination in the workplace based on the way they wear their hair. Recently, social media has become a sort of town hall for criticism of individuals or institutions attempting to limit hair choices available to black women. For example, in 2015, actress Zendaya’s dreadlocks were disparaged on E!’s *Fashion Police* for “probably” smelling like “patchouli” or “weed” (Hoff). Black voices on Twitter were quick to call out the hidden racism in presenter Giuliana Rancic’s words, and demanded an apology for the hurtful words that were ultimately an attempt to limit the freedom of black women in the spotlight (Hoff). In a world where black women face institutional, cultural, and individual racism and sexism on a daily basis, the ability to choose freely is a radical political statement in itself.



Khadijah Wilson’s mask made of hair begs the viewer to think about the often enslaving nature of black hair as a result of oppression and racism.

In addition to political fights, black women have used artistic expression to express the meaning of their own relationships to their hair in hopes of relating to other women who have had similar experiences. Contemporary conceptual artist Khadijah Wilson is an example of one of these artists. Her works call “into question the particular narratives that are aligned with the black body” (WILSON). Her creations often involve synthetic

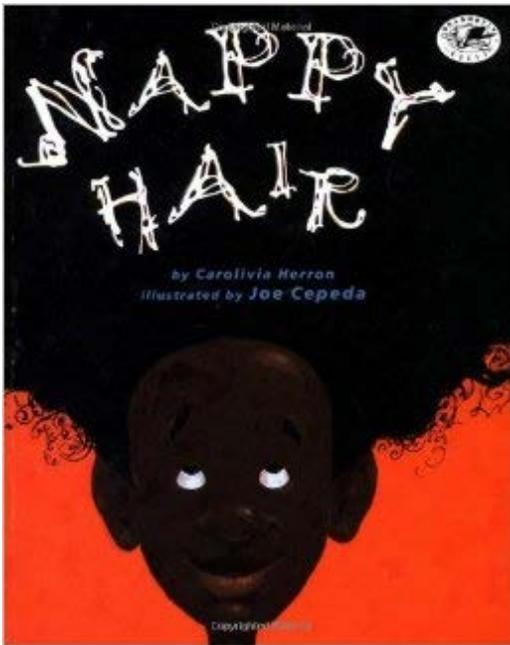
hair in the form of masks and muzzles, as depicted in the images to the left and right. The masks of hair contain clear themes of slavery and oppression. Wilson uses black hair and its connotations to express her feelings of suppression in a country that puts little value on black

women. Black writers have also grappled with themes of identity and pride relating to hair in their works. In the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, one of the main characters, Beneatha Younger, chops off her hair in an attempt to connect to her African roots and reject assimilation to white America (Hansberry 80-81). Hansberry emphasizes the humorous nature of such black and white, hardline views towards black pride and submission and the hair choices tied to each attitude. Using comedy, Hansberry implies that having relaxed or straight hair is not synonymous with accepting white superiority. Nor is wearing natural hair synonymous with cultural awareness or self-realization.



With a combined spirit of political activism and artistic expression, women individually and collectively have worked to increase and improve the representation of African American hair on women and girls in popular media, targeting young audiences and children's literature. Because of the complex and often conflicting messages young girls receive about their hair and how it should look, black audiences have demanded an increase of female role models who shed a positive light on all types and textures of natural hair. In their essay "Children's Literature and Politics of Hair in Books for African American Children," Adaeze Enekechi and Opal Moore

analyzed a popular children's picture book about young African American girl called *Nappy Hair* (Enekwechi and Moore, 1999). They claim that the book is a response to the “story of



The story *Nappy Hair* attempts to provide young African American girls with a story of acceptance they can relate to.

oppression” that “continues in the gradual internalization by African Americans, and African people around the globe, a set of aesthetics and ideals that extol whiteness” (Enekwechi and Moore). The storybook is about acceptance and confidence and tells young, black girls that their natural hair is beautiful.

While the book has received substantial criticism from within the black community, such messages are

becoming more and more popular, with similar

published works like *Big Hair Don't Care* and *Happy*

to be Nappy (Brooks and McNair, 2017). Another study done by Treva Lindsey evaluates TV shows for young viewers. Lindsey focuses specifically on the type of representation in popular series with black protagonists like Zuri Ross from Disney show *Jessie*, and criticizes the way such characters are portrayed:

These shows, although propelled by young, black female stars, rely upon an implied de-racialization of their protagonists. These black girl characters can empower black girls and adolescents through their visibility, but do not necessarily provide racially specific models or narratives of empowered African-American girlhood (Lindsey, 2012, p. 23).

Lindsey argues that it is not enough to merely have a black female lead in a television show in order to create role models for African American viewers. Casting a black woman with dreadlocks or cornrows in a TV show does nothing for black women, unless that woman is also given a complex personality and a meaningful plotline. This is just one of challenges with

representation in popular media, but strides are being made so that young girls with kinky hair, braids, or relaxed locks can relate to their favorite celebrities.

IV. Conclusion

Choosing a hairstyle as a black woman comes with implications. Because of this, African American women are forced to grapple with their hair and beauty standards in a way other women are not, starting at a young age. The rich history of black Americans and their struggle for freedom and equality has led to the politicization of black hair. Social movements and achievements in popular culture help define what it means to wear an afro or a weave. For black women, this politicization and its effects are felt in a distinct way, as they are paired with expectations of beauty in a unique way. Black girls are surrounded by messages, both direct and indirect, about their hair and the styles they chose. Hopefully, this essay explained what exactly those messages look like, and the effects they have on individual black women and their journeys with their hair. I believe, through the use of scholarly essays, historical accounts, and personal narratives, I provided an explanation as to why hair is such an integral facet of black style and identity, the subject of constant scrutiny and praise, the object of appropriation, a source of pride for black women across the country, and the inspiration for the hit song “Don’t Touch My Hair.” After reading this essay, another listen should reveal that the song is not about hair at all. Rather, it is about a continuous struggle black women face: our hair comes with many connotations and in many forms, which often sends false messages to the outside world about who we are. In reality, the black woman is much more than her puff, braids, weave, or twists, but her power to choose what her hair looks like (and who gets to touch it) is a freedom she will never give up without a fight.

Works Cited

Banks, Ingrid. "Splitting Hairs: Power, Choice, and Femininity." *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, NYU Press, 2000, pp. 69–98. Banks' book is an in depth look into the cultural and political implications of black hair with a feminist lens. Femininity and power and what those terms mean for black women in America are topics at the forefront of this exposé. In addition, Banks discusses beauty and standards of appearance for women. Her points are driven by interviews and personal accounts, one of which acts as evidence for this particular essay. The personal account and thoughts of Banks' subjects are best used as support for the politicization of black hair on an individual level. This particular section also provides a distinctly female view and focus on the topic of African American hair experiences.

Barnett, Michael. "THE POLITICS OF BLACK HAIR: A Focus on Natural Vs Relaxed Hair for African-Caribbean Women." *Ideaz* 14 (2016): 69,100,150. *ProQuest*. Web. 10 Mar. 2017. Barnett's essay attempts to identify and explain the reasons African-Caribbean women transform their natural hair, often in favor of straighter or more European styles. Using a scientific approach aided by empirical evidence, Barnett offers three possible answers to his central question: women alter their hair because of shame, economic incentives, and tradition. To provide evidence to his claims, Barnett explores other published works that offer their own ideas on the subject. The scientific approach to his study offers a unique insight into the politics of hairstyling. However, as a man, Barnett's study comes with a lack of personal experience within the subject matter. Also, this study focuses solely on Afro-Caribbean women, rather than African American women. For the

sake of this essay, the experiences of Caribbean women and their hair are similar enough to analyze.

Brooks, Wanda M. McNair, Jonda C. “‘Combing’ Through Representation of Black Girls’ Hair in African American Children’s Literature.” *Children’s Literature in Education*, 2017, pp. 296-307. Brooks and McNair offer an original and insightful review of children’s literature in America with respect to young black girls’ experiences. The work diverges from more common discussions of black hair by focusing on fictional depictions of black hair, providing unique evidence for this essay.

Brown, DeNeen L. "Black Wealth, Racism and the Legacy of the Legendary Madam C.J. Walker." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 01 Sept. 2016. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. This source explores the life and impact of Madam C.J. Walker. I use the source briefly to evidence a claim about the life of Walker.

Chutel, Lynsey. "A South African High School Has Banned Girls from Afros and Natural Hairstyles Because They Are ‘untidy’." *Quartz*. Quartz, 29 Aug. 2016. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. This article provides this essay with an example of a time when the educational system worked against black women by discriminating against certain hair styles.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print. This book is a pivotal piece of work in both the realms of black studies and women’s studies, as it lays the fundamental foundations of black feminism, what it means to be black and a feminist, and what it means to be a feminist that values black women and black issues. It has been cited by many scholars, and therefore can be regarded as a reliable source of information and

discourse. I use this book to discuss unrealistic beauty standards prevalent in America that place high value on Western definitions of beauty.

Enekwechi, A. & Moore, O. "Children's Literature and the Politics of Hair in Books for African American Children." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 24 no. 4, 1999, pp. 195-200. *Project MUSE*. The authors of this source analyze representation in popular works of literature for young people, as well as some television shows. They look specifically at the hair of black women that appear in these works and the effects those appearances can have on young girls growing and learning to accept themselves.

Good Hair. Dir. Jeff Stilson. Perf. Chris Rock. HBO Films, 2009. DVD. This documentary gives an original look into the lucrative black hair industry. Using personal testimonies from black celebrities and investigative journalism, Chris Rock attempts to understand the mysteries of the hair industry and why black women choose to hide or relax their natural hair. While the film provides an interesting angle to the topic of black hair, it lacks meaningful dialogue on racism and beauty standards, which I point out in this essay.

"Guiny Thomas." Personal interview. 29 Apr. 2017. I interviewed a friend who has worn her hair natural for almost fifteen years. Also, she is very interested in black hair care and often does the hair of her friends and peers. These facts made her a perfect candidate to speak to about the relationship between a black woman and her hair. We had a great conversation about her own personal journey that included humorous stories about past experiences with her hair. I wish I could have included more of her words in this essay, but there was only so much space.

"Hair relaxer sales decline 26% over the past five years." Mintel. Mintel, 5 Sept. 2013. Web. 01

May 2017. This source provides reliable information from a study conducted by the research group, Mintel. I use it to provide data and numerical statistics about the decline in the use of relaxers.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *Raisin in the sun*. Place of publication not identified: Methuen, 2015. Print.

I use Hansberry's well-known and world-renowned play as an example of black literature that addresses the political nature of black hair.

Henderson, Amber. *Redefining the Identity of Black Women: "Natural" Hair and the Natural Hair Movement*. Thesis. George Washington University, 2015. Washington, DC: n.p., 2015. Print. This thesis by George Washington graduate Amber Henderson provided a bulk of support for some of my ideas presented in this essay about the flaws and implications of the natural hair movement. While Henderson is not an established scholar in her field, I found her essay to be extremely thorough and well developed. I also award it merit based on the fact that Henderson herself has personal experiences with wearing natural hair as a black woman.

"Here Is What Malcolm X Wrote About Making His Hair Something Other Than Natural."

Texas Liberal. N.p., 01 Feb. 2011. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. I am wary of the legitimacy of this source, however I only use it to quote a portion of Malcolm X's autobiography.

Hoff, Victoria Dawson. "Zendaya Speaks Out After Her Dreadlocks Are Criticized at Oscars."

ELLE. N.p., 28 Feb. 2015. Web. 02 May 2017. This article on ELLE is a news report on the racist remarks of a host of *Fashion Police*. I use the story as an example of when black women have faced discrimination for their hair choices.

Ingham, John N. "Madam C. J. Walker." *American National Biography Online*. American

National Biography Online, Apr. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. This source is simply a factual biography about the life of Madam C.J. Walker that comes from a reliable online resource. I use this bio to lay foundational background about Walker.

Lindsey, Treva B. "'One Time for My Girls': African-American Girlhood, Empowerment, and Popular Visual Culture." *Journal of African American Studies* 17.1 (2013): 22-34.

Lindsey proves her competence and merit as an author by recognizing the importance of distinguishing between descriptive and substantive representation. In addition to looking at how many black women with afros young black girls see growing up, she makes sure to analyze whether or not said women are presented positive and uplifting role models to African American girls.

Martin, Nicole. "The Clayman Institute for Gender Research." *Women Key in Shaping Black Panther Party / The Clayman Institute for Gender Research*. Stanford University, 6 Jan. 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. This source sheds light on the contribution of women to the Black Panther Party in the late 60s and 70s. I use this source to highlight the artistic contributions of female members of the party, as well as the influence those female members had on black women who both identified and opposed their cause.

Rudick, Dina. "Chemical-free Black Hair Is Not Simply a Trend - The Boston Globe." *BostonGlobe.com*. N.p., 28 May 2014. Web. 1 Mar. 2017. This article looks at the growing natural hair movement. I used it at the start of my research about the movement to provide me with brief background information.

Truesdale, Elaine. "What Is Madam CJ Walker's Real Legacy? Part 1." *What Is Madam CJ*

Walker's Real Legacy? Part 1. Atlanta Natural Hair Care, 18 Dec. 2009. Web. 2017.

Truesdale's article is an interview-based look into the legacy of Madam C.J. Walker. I use it only briefly to introduce the idea that Walker greatly influenced black women.

WILSON, KHADIJAH. "Bio." KHADIJAH WILSON. N.p., n.d. Web. 02 May 2017. This is the website of artist Khadijah Wilson, who studies fine arts at the Corcoran school. I use her and her works as an example of a response to the complexities of the relationship between black women and their hair.

Rachel Lyons

Research Reflection: More Than Hair

“More Than Hair” is an essay about the relationship between black women and hair that I wrote for my University Writing class after weeks of researching and editing. However, the essay is not just a piece of academic material to me. Like its content covers “more than hair,” the work is more than a final paper. As a black woman, the topics covered in the essay are deeply personal, which made the paper one of the most challenging works I have ever written. Because I cared so much about the subject and its purpose, there were no short cuts. Developing the essay was, at times, emotionally and mentally taxing. There were moments when I was overwhelmed by the amount of information I had to share and the complexities of the topic. Heavy topics like racism, sexism, beauty standards, and colorism were difficult, yet imperative to address. However, because the thesis was so important to me, I persevered. Through the edits of my professor and classmates, the resources of GWU libraries, and my general curiosity, I was able to produce a piece of writing I am proud to share.

The biggest challenges I faced while writing “More Than Hair” were pinpointing a thesis and organizing relevant ideas. When I first chose my topic, black hair, I did not have an area to focus on or an angle to take. I simply wanted to explore the complexities of the significance of the relationship between African American women and the hair they wear. Originally, there were many facets of this topic I wanted to address, including cultural appropriation, the influence of the hair industry, and the rhetoric surrounding black hair. Dozens of ideas were spinning and overlapping in my head, making it difficult to voice my thesis and even harder to organize my thoughts on paper. I started with a historical approach to my topic. Starting with Madam CJ Walker, a black female pioneer in the hair industry, I researched the ways black hair styles and

their connotations and effects on women have changed throughout time. I used GWU databases to find historical sources that aided in my creation of a timeline of black hair. The historical lens was helpful in directing my focus, but I still lacked cohesion and a thesis. I decided to explore other aspects of the topic, hoping to find my argument. I have always been interested in art and literature, especially that of black artists and authors. Leveraging this interest, I began exploring creative works that addressed the topic of hair. After searching, I found many examples of black female artists exploring hair in their own, personal ways and highlighting the significance of African American hair in a variety of mediums. These discoveries served as the inspiration for my thesis and argument: Why is hair so significant in the lives of black women? What makes getting a new hair style such a unique experience for this particular demographic? I argue that the history of racism and oppression toward black people politicized black hair, and the politicization forced black women to grapple with beauty standards in a distinctly complex way. My intended audience is those who may not understand this relationship. I want to educate those who may have questioned why banning dreadlocks or braids in certain setting is such a severe act of discrimination—those whose stylistic choices have never resulted in a lost job. Finding this argument, purpose, and focus made the rest of my research a bit easier and helped me organize my ideas.

In order to effectively express my ideas and prove my claims, I used evidence from a wide range of both primary and secondary sources, including an interview I conducted personally. I wanted to provide examples from various outlets to relay the significance and prominence of my topic. Most of my sources came from GWU databases. I used a few different databases to find evidence that best furthered my argument, including a collection of African American newspapers and compilations of in-depth biographies. In addition to quotes and factual

support, I incorporated many images into my essay in order to show readers how visual depictions of African American hair styles can affect the way black hair is perceived and understood. Because this essay was argumentative and not just informational, I made sure to include a few essays written about similar topics by other scholars and academics. I found most of these sources online and in print through Gelman Library. Choosing reliable sources was important throughout my research; I wanted to provide strong evidence and examples for my claims. Creating an annotated bibliography helped me evaluate my sources by forcing me to voice exactly what the sources provided and how they would be incorporated. While writing this bibliography, I ended up scratching and replacing a few sources I found to be weak or questionable. Unlike other essays I have written, I placed a lot of merit on personal accounts and testimonies. Because this paper was about black women and their experiences, I wanted the voices of black women to be the strongest. For this reason, I often chose works by African American women over others, even if they weren't objective or neutral. I even interviewed a classmate of mine to hear her personal journey with her hair. I also included a passage from a play, a documentary, and articles from popular press. When incorporating these sources, I made sure to evaluate the merit and importance of each one carefully and analytically. And I distinguished between the different types of sources and their purposes. Ultimately, my bibliography is full of a diverse collection of different sources and mediums.