

Summer 8-11-2011

Hair Matters: African American Women and the Natural Hair Aesthetic

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HAIR MATTERS: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND THE NATURAL HAIR
AESTHETIC

by

BRINA HARGRO

Under the Direction of Kevin Hsieh

ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the negative cultural and social connotations of natural hair for African American women. This issue is examined throughout history from slavery to present day with a visual analysis of hair care advertisements. Presently, natural hair is gaining more positive implications; which can be affected by creating more positive images with natural hair. Using art as the vehicle for social change and using research to inform art has a positive impact on teaching and learning in the art classroom.

INDEX WORDS: Natural hair, Natural hair texture, African American women, Black hair, Hair straightening, Hair care, Hair problem, Art education

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BRINA HARGRO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art Education

In the College of Arts and Science

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

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AESTHETIC

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August 2011

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my cohort of my fellow art educators in the masters of art education that began in Fall 2009. We shared classes, field trips, writing assignments, and gallery visits. All of you have motivated and inspired me. Best wishes to you all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the art education professors that have helped this thesis reach its fullest potential: Dr. Melody Milbrandt, Dr. Melanie Davenport, and special thanks to Dr. Kevin Hsieh. I also give a special thanks to Mr. Raymond Veon for his art course and Mrs. Teresa Reeves for her art history course.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
INTRODUCTION	1
Description of study	1
Timeline and Outcomes	2
Reflection Plan	3
METHOD OF STUDY	6
Detailed Method of Study	6
Problem of the Study: Hair Matters	6
Definitions of Key Terms	27
Limitations and Delimitations	28
DEVELOPMENT, INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTION OF WORKS	29
Creation of Art Work	30
Reflection on the Process	34
IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE	34
Impact on Teaching and Students	36
Impact on Art Education Research	37
CONCLUSION	37
Thesis Overview	37
Topics for Further Study	38
REFERENCES	39

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: (1950, January). “All Over” Hair Glamour. *Ebony*, 5, 52.

Figure 2.2: (1963, November). “Men . . . Women . . . Let Perma-Strate Straighten Your Hair.” *Ebony*, 19, 178.

Figure 2.3: (1997, March). “Beautiful Beginnings” *Ebony*, 52, 118.

Figure 3.1: Hargro, Brina. Natual Poster. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”

Figure 3.2: Hargro, Brina. Shea Butter Poster. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”

Figure 3.3: Hargro, Brina. Love Thy Hair Poster. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”

Figure 3.4 Hargro, Brina. Natual Poster Sketch. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14”

Figure 3.5 Hargro, Brina. Shea Butter Poster Sketch. 2010. Pen and ink on paper. 11x
14.”

Figure 3.6 : Hargro, Brina. Love Thy Hair Poster Sketch. 2010. Pen and ink on paper
11x14.”

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Description of Study

The American experience has produced a unique struggle for African American women to create their unique beauty aesthetic. In the United States, Eurocentric beauty standard has been the ideal, African American women have had carve out their own aesthetic and appreciate the very features that distinguished them. However, hair texture is one of the remaining stumbling blocks on this journey to create an aesthetic that embodies every color, shape, size, and texture. It is a subject fraught with politics and emotional implications.

Post emancipation African American culture did the double duty of investing in two things to “fix” their Blackness, their otherness. Skin bleaching and hair straightening were the dual remedies. Skin bleaching has dramatically fallen out of fashion, and is now seen as a politically incorrect ritual of self-hatred. However, altering hair texture is still a booming business in African American communities.

By default, many African American women alter their hair texture by straightening. The default is for Black women to either chemically or thermally alter their hair texture from an early age. This is because natural hair carries many negative connotations.

My thesis will examine main research question of how society has influenced African American women’s perception of their natural hair. Additionally, how has advertising reflected and influenced African American women’s negative perception of their natural hair? How can the image, namely fine art, be used to promote a positive

perception of natural hair? What impact does this examination have on art education? My thesis will examine several hair care advertisement that span half of the 20th century. The main research question be addressed by examining historical events have influenced natural hair care. These advertisements are a window to the zeitgeist of the African American community towards natural hair. Image is part of the problem, image can create the solution. I will use propaganda style posters with images that promote natural hair to counteract hair alteration.

My art is a part of the Black Hair Movement, a grassroots social movement among African American women, from adolescents to adults; that teaches them how to appreciate and groom their natural, coily hair texture. I would like to study this subject because my of my personal experiences as an African American woman. art is propaganda for Black women to proudly wear their natural hair. I want to take my viewers on a postmodern journey, and my art is similar to that Afri-Cobra and the Black Arts Movement

Timeline and Outcomes

I have created seven artworks related to my thesis. Three of the works heavily reference the style of Mucha with their style and layout. Pen and ink on paper was the media, and three of the other artworks were also pen and ink on paper on larger paper. The largest work was mixed media on canvas. The posters will be limited in size to 12x18” or smaller, as I used markers to add color. Even though all of the artwork was focused on natural Black hair, this paper was primarily focused on the three Mucha-esque artworks.

My anticipated outcome was that viewers begin a closer examination of the cultural practice. African American women may have been inspired to stop the hair alteration practice and start to wear and appreciate their own hair texture. For non African American viewers, they may have been inspired to examine parallel cultural aesthetic process that may have also grown out of assimilation into the melting pot.

Reflection Plan

My thesis conducted a historical study of perceptions of the natural hair in the African American community from slavery to the present day. The study examined the interaction of the American beauty standard on the hair culture of African American women throughout history, particularly through advertisements. The impact during the years of slavery, emancipation, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Power movement will be examined.

Alphonse Mucha predominantly influences my artistic style. I was drawn to Mucha because his work reflects his nationalist pride by showing monumental, classical images of women. The artist also creates advertisement posters that feature women. The women's beauty and sensuality is used to attract viewers to the product. Additionally, the women's hair is often exaggerated to emphasize its length and volume. During Mucha's Art Nouveau era, there were very few images of positive images of women of African descent that idealized their beauty. In contrast, the trend of Black caricature was common in American advertisements.

Combining African American women and Mucha's style has been created on the cover of the Supreme's album "Let Sunshine In." It features a full body of Diana Ross in the center with the faces of the other two members on either side. The women were

donned with Mucha's signature oversized flora and fauna. Each woman's face has been rendered to reflect Mucha's graphic style of flat shapes. And the composition and text was heavily ornamented with motifs.

My work was influenced heavily from Lorna Simpson. Much of her art has focused on hair by isolating the hair into an object itself. She has compositions with Black women with their backs to the viewer, giving a full view of her hair. Simpson's work, such a *Stereo Styles*, simply featured Black women and their hair. She has drawn the viewer in to examine the styles and textures. Similarly, some of my work was just about the hair and the wearer was secondary.

Shepherd Fairey created an iconic image of Angela Davis, titled *Afrocentric*, that featured the subject looking upward with her signature Afro. The slogans "power & equality" and "power to the people" were shown in the poster with patterned, Eastern ornamentation that features the peace symbol. Fairey cleverly hid these symbols seamlessly into the design. This work was connected to my work in its using Black females to convey pride in natural hair.

In creating my art, I adopted key elements of Mucha. Namely, outlined objects, limited values, natural objects, text, and ornamentation. Unlike Mucha, limitations prevented me from using lithographs to create art. Instead, I used art markers, namely Prismacolor and Sharpies, to create the Mucha-like compositions. To create value variances, I layered a single color on top of another until there was a subtle difference to depict shadows. Or, I created an under painting with a neutral marker and overlay it with a single color.

My examination of this subject has influenced my teaching in two significant ways. I encourage students to revisit work of the old masters by recreating a masterpiece. Therefore, they take a post-modern approach to the work. My students have the opportunity to integrate their personal voice with an artist's ideas. In this, like my art, they take style or content from previously created work to communicate a social issue, humor, or to add interest. Students are encouraged critique their work through writing and reflect on their own process. They have to ask themselves why they are drawn to a particular artist, why they chose the particular elements that they added, and whether or not their finished art was successful.

Secondly, my thesis research has raised questions about how the visual culture of advertisements influences youth. My students can examine print ads and analyze how sexuality, economic prosperity, or other subtle elements influence their consciousness. I can encourage them to identify and scrutinize their own cultural values and how they are reinforced or negated by society.

CHAPTER 2: METHOD OF STUDY

Detailed Method of Study

Main research question.

How has society influenced African American women's perception of their natural hair?

- What historical events have influenced natural hair care?
- How has art/advertising reflected and influenced African American women's negative perception of their hair?
- How does creating positive imagery for natural hair change both the viewer's and my own perception of natural hair?
- What implications does my thesis have on classroom teaching?

Problem of the Study: Hair Matters

Hair alteration is the default aesthetic process for African American women. Many women have questioned this practice? Even though America's hostility towards African Americans has been greatly alleviated, hair straightening has still a vestige of the past. Skin bleaching has fallen out of fashion. Perhaps because it didn't provide the instant gratification of hair straightening.

In order to illustrate the issue, I present a fable, based on a summary of my research of Chenzira's film *Hair piece: A film for nappy-headed people* (1985):

Near the turn of the 20th century in an American city, there grew a small enclave of Irish immigrants. Coincidentally, every Irish immigrant of this particular city had red hair. This characteristic made them very distinct from the native populations. In addition to grappling with the stigma of being "fresh of the boat," squalid, poor and being

relegated to menial labor; the small Irish community found themselves being called “red-headed devil.” Being called redhead soon became an insult in both the native and Irish communities. Being a redhead meant poverty, shame, and ignorance.

The next generation of the small enclave was eager to disassociate themselves from these stereotypes. They wanted to appear less Irish and gain the same opportunities as the city’s non-Irish. Soon it became the fashion for both men and women to dye their hair either blond or brunette as soon as they came of age. Delighted in finally appearing to be sophisticated, the dyed Irish felt more confident in their interactions with the natives. However, hair dying proved to be only cosmetic change. The dyed and non-dyed Irish alike still faced brutal discrimination in their adopted city for most of the remaining century. Fortunately, the Irish community eventually made tremendous gains for social equality.

However, hair dyeing remained a vestigial sub-culture among Irish American women. Being redheaded was still maligned. Temporary dyes, considered less caustic than permanent dyes, were given to Irish girls from age four. Blond or brunette wigs for girls were common occurrences in elementary and secondary school classrooms. When a young woman reached puberty, she was given her first permanent dye, which was reapplied every 4-6 weeks thereafter. If a dyed girl had the misfortune for having her red roots show, she was inevitable taunted by her community as being “redheaded,” and warned that she was unkempt and uncivilized. Should a young girl forego a wig or dyeing, wearing her red mane, it was commonly assumed that her family could not afford to “fix” her hair or that she was one of those defiant Irish who considered dyeing too

“American.” Either way, she was deemed unattractive or too masculine, since Irish men would forego wigs and dyeing.

A parallel aesthetically disparaging practice of hair alteration remains in the Black community. Most Negroid hair texture is tightly coiled, and often described as “nappy” or “kinky.” Both terms, however, carry a double meaning. The word nappy is used disparagingly just as being called a redhead in the fable. Kinky is a term used to describe sexual deviance. Don Imus famously referred to the collegiate women’s basketball team as “nappy headed hoers.” This comment was derogatory and only fueled the prevalent belief that nappy hair is undesirable. Why is kinky hair such a problem? What is the big deal? The texture has so many negative implications attached to it: poverty, slavery, filth, insanity, and laziness.

Natural Hair: Historical Implications

Since emancipation, African American women, and men on a smaller scale, have altered their texture to make it as straight as white Americans. Thus, they may attain the status of having “good hair,” which is commonly used to describe hair that has a looser coil pattern, wavy, or straight. Comedian Chris Rock recounted his own experience when his daughter tearfully approached him asking, “Daddy, why don’t I have good hair?” (Hunter, 2009). The melting pot undoubtedly has a perming cream in it.

Through generations, hair alteration has become status quo for African American women. Although its original purpose has been outgrown and Black nationalist movement has inspired appreciation for a Negroid aesthetic, hair texture alteration among African American women has a tenacious hold. Modern African American women will justify it by explaining that they are not trying to conform to a Caucasian beauty standard,

but that they find their natural texture too foreign; as if they have never worn it in its original texture since childhood. Or it may be unmanageable, undesirable to the opposite sex or a potential employer, or just ugly.

Valcin's film, *Black, Bold & Beautiful: Black women's Hair*, is a collection of interviews of Black women, even the producer, of diverse generations and experiences with their hair; both natural and processed. Valcin herself decided to wear her hair straight for just one day to please her mother. Although her hair delighted her mother, she thought her hair lacked "personality" (Valcin, 1999). Another African American mother remarked that if her daughter had dreadlocks, then their bond would shift (1999).

As Valcin (1999) documented in her short film, hair and its appearance is a big deal for many Black women. It defines them as Black women. For others it is a struggle. Being natural has been described as "too painful" or "too nappy to be long" (Valcin, 1999). One woman believes that "who you [are] is about your hair" (Valcin, 1999). Straight hair is "better," and connected to playing with Barbies. Therefore, hair must be straight to be beautiful and womanly (1999). A white adoptive mother of an African American child was unaware of her daughter's hair texture and culture surrounding it. African American women tell her that she had to do something with her daughter's hair. She felt judged as a mother based on how her hair was style (Douglas, 1998). Hair still connotes social status. Undoubtedly, kinky hair requires more time and has to be groomed on its own terms.

Chenzira (1985) goes a little further by saying that African American women have a "hair problem" (1985). Common saying that have been issued to women as a warning, "No job wants a nappy headed woman!" and "No man wants a nappy headed

woman!” (1985). Since our hair “doesn’t move” [like straight hair] and has no perceived beauty of its own, natural hair was not seen as necessary in hair ads, magazine, and on TV” (Chenzira, 1985). Until the last decade, the otherness of natural hair has had little to no representation in popular media. Our kinky hair is not acknowledged in advertisements and magazines because it did not fit the mainstream. Since African American women lacked the imagery to reinforce their beauty, many opted to “play it straight” (Chenzira, 1985).

As a result, straight hair is associated with grooming and care. Nappy hair cannot be combed, washed, or styled like straight hair. It reflects light not so much in a shine, but more of subtle sheen. Kinky hair grows upward and away from the scalp instead of downward like looser textures. Because of its coils, kinky hair is more susceptible to breakage. Its coils also make styles such as braids and dreadlocks easier to achieve because the curl pattern is easy to interlock and tangle hair. The drastically different grooming required for kinky hair, combined with its foreignness to many African American women, have made the perfect recipe for ignorance and disdain.

African American women are hard pressed to find a natural stylist outside of large cities and possess an “ignorance of most Black women regarding their own hair” (Byrd, 2001, p.162). Lily Douglas, an elderly Black woman describes the secret ritual of doing Black hair in the dorms as a young woman in Baptist Missionary Training College. They had the “problem of how to keep their hair” (Douglas, 1998) and how do they keep it neat. White classmates were fascinated and it was akin to “coming out of the closet.” (Douglas, 1998) Another African American woman, an actress, says her hair length

matters and straightness and relaxers are something that she's used to (Valcin, 1999). Both experiences are very common to African Americans regarding their hair.

Natural Hair Care Basis

To straighten kinky hair, it can be flat ironed, blown out with a blow dryer, or straightened (pressed) with a hot comb. These processes have to be repeated after each washing because humidity and water cause the hair to revert to its natural state. Using the hot comb is a part of upbringing, and a bonding experience with matriarchy (Valcin, 1999).

I distinctly remember the time-consuming experience of pressing my hair as a youth. My hair would often be washed, parted, and plaited while damp one day and pressed the next. Before the washing and pressing, I would have to wear a baseball cap to school to cover up my unpressed hair. As an adult, I witnessed a young African American girl who was donning a baseball cap at a restaurant. When she attempted to remove it, her father swiftly reprimanded her; and he spanked her several times on her arm. He scolded her by saying she was not to take off her cap until they went to the hairdresser. Undoubtedly, the girl, like myself; received a clear message that her natural, kinky hair was too controversial to be publicly viewed.

Pressing usually happened on a Saturday morning for three to four hours. I was seated in a child-sized chair next to the stove. My mother was seated behind me and heated the iron pressing comb on the stovetop's coils. She would take a lock of my hair, liberally apply hair grease, and then apply the heated comb. As the hot iron met the cool, fragrant hair grease, there was a sizzling sound like frying bacon and the smell of burning hair would fill the kitchen. With a bath towel draped on my shoulders, I had to sit

perfectly still with my neck bent in awkward positions for long minutes or risked being burned. As the hair at my neck's nape, commonly called the kitchen, was straightened, I felt each warm lock fall limply on my neck.

After pressing, my hair would be parted and plaited again, and I was released from my un-cushioned child's chair with the pride of just having my hair done. On special occasions, such as Easter, my pressing was followed by a receiving two ponytails with ringlets created by an electric hot curler, festooned by satin ribbons. Undoubtedly, this pressing process was very labor intensive and time consuming.

To bypass pressing, kinky hair can be permanently straightened with a chemical perm or a relaxer. Treated hair will not revert to its coily texture. Getting the first perm is a rite of passage. Its wearer could have more autonomy because they didn't have to rely on mothers and hairdressers to manage their hair (Valcin, 1999).

Chemical relaxers must be reapplied every four to six weeks to "new growth," a common moniker for the part of the hair strands that emerges from the scalp. New growth presents a problem because its kinky texture is drastically different from the treated hair. Chenzira describes this return to its natural state as "[turning] back" and perms a "white hot" (1985). All of these were attempts to tame our "rebellious" (Chenzira, 1985) hair. Perms can cause painful chemical burns to the scalp. Perms are often referred to as "creamy crack" because it is a creamy, white substance and obsessively sought by those who use them, despite the negative consequences.

Personally, I've heard, given, and received comments that reinforce the notion that kinky hair is not acceptable. As an elementary student, I recall telling a friend that plaited natural hair was okay for youngsters, but straight hair was for older students. I

spent much time examining my hairline to ensure that it was straight enough to be seen in public. I recall examining other African American women's hair rituals are applying heavy gels to their hairlines and wearing scarves at night to train their new growth straight. I've had other African American women remark on my natural hair, "Oh, your hair would be long if it were straight." It's almost as if we have been pre-programmed to value our hair after it has been processed into straightness, not on its own terms, short and nappy. An aunt remarked on my nearly waist length natural hair, "Oooo, I would hate to have to press all of this!" We both laughed, and I responded how funny it was that she could not see my hair as is – without the impulse to fix it somehow. She then praised my generation for being bold enough to wear our natural tresses.

Hair Care from Slavery to Post-Emancipation

One must look back to history to get the source of these "solutions" for naturally kinky hair. Around 1850, Martin H. Freeman wrote in *Anglo-African* magazine,

“ . . . kinky hair must be subjected to a straightening process-oiled, and pulled, twisted up, tied down, sleeked over and pressed under, or cut off so short that it can't curl, sometimes the natural hair is shaved off and its place supplied by a straight wig . . . Now all this is very foolish perhaps wicked, but under the circumstances it is very natural.” (Byrd, 2001, p.20)

History confirms that the hair “problem” has vexed African American women since we came to America. Each of their hair alteration processes were not to enhance it, but to disguise kinky hair and make it conform to the New World. The problem was not with hair, but Blackness itself. The hair is a representation of the Blackness, the otherness

itself. Straightening it is putting a toe in the melting pot. Coupled with skin bleaching, is an attempt to dunk oneself in to the melting pot

Byrd further explains, “To gain access to the American Dream one of the first things Black had to do was make White people more comfortable with their very presence” (Byrd, 2001, p.26). Thus, African Americans had to subject their Negroid hair and skin to straightening and bleaching to minimize the difference between themselves and whites.

These beauty practices were used as a means to determine social status. After emancipation, Black men that grew out their hair and facial hair were “considered uppity and wild.” Long styles that imitated their white counterparts on Black women were considered “well-adjusted by white society” (Byrd, 2001, p.22). Additionally, post-emancipation African Americans had more time to devote to appearance and time was spent on “obsession with straightening the hair and lightening the skin” (Byrd, 2001, p.22). Comb tests were even used to determine membership to Black churches (2001, p.22). Should a prospect’s kinks prevent a comb from moving smoothly through its strands, they were denied.

These practices cannot be solely attributed to self-hatred. Hair straighteners also promised a key to a better life (Byrd, 2001, p.23). In early 1900’s, straight hair became the preferred look to signal middle-class status” (2001, p.30). This was a generation that had heard stories of or personally experienced enslavement, and they were eager to dissociate themselves from the slave class. Furthermore, others argued that it was not so about emulating the dominant culture as it was about “embracing the modernity” (Byrd, 2001, p.40). Natural hairstyles, such as cornrows and plaits represented the older and

rural generations, and were usually not depicted in African American advertisements (2001, p.37). This same argument is a common refrain. However it does not hold water because the culture shifts more towards straightened hair instead of kinky hair. If there weren't such a pull in one direction, if the scales weren't so unbalanced, one can argue that hair straightening was a choice. But with so many African American girls not having a choice to keep their natural hair. Getting a perm being a rite a passage synonymous with menarche or wearing their first pair of high heels. How can this be a choice when it so firmly ingrained in African American culture?

Hair Care and the New Negro

The New Negro looked like Eurocentric features “included hairstyles” (Byrd, 2001, p.28). As early as the 1930's, hair straighteners and skin bleaching creams were [ironically] “Black beauty” advertisements commonly seen in Black Northern periodicals (Tate, 2009, p.36). However, especially with the emergence of the Black nationalism in the 1920's, the hair straightening and skin bleaching became hotly debated within the African American community. Political, social, and religious leaders debated about the practice of hair straightening, Black Nationalist Marcus Garvey said “don't remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!” (Byrd, 2001, p.38). The Crusader even featured women with traditional African hairstyles on its cover (2001, p.38). Booker T. Washington stopped hair culturist from being trained in his school and denied hair product companies from his National Negro Business League (2001, p.37-8).

Madame C.J. Walker was a Black hair care mogul that is erroneously credited as inventing the hot comb (Byrd, 2001, p.35). Her employees, the hair culturist, that were shunned by Washington. Walker did not advocate straightening hair specifically, and told

the Indianapolis Recorder, “I make hair grow. I want the great masses of my people to take a greater pride in their appearance and to give their hair proper attention” (2001, p.36). This ignorance of basic hair care for natural hair arises later in history as well.

Mid-20th Century Hair Care

However, the average Black person was subjected to a beauty ideal “advertising throughout the first half of the century, as well as popular culture figures and images, did not offer an alternative Black beauty ideal (Byrd, 2001). This lack of imagery of natural hair contributed to the lack thereof. Traditional hairstyles or were ridiculed in popular culture. Braids, plaits, or loose kinky hair was a comic relief, especially personified in the *Our Gang* character, Buckwheat. Even Maya Angelou described dreaming of waking up from “Black ugly dream” as a child. She long to be crowned with long blonde hair instead of the “kinky mass that mama wouldn’t let me straighten” (Byrd, 2001, p.42). By 1947, *Ebony* magazine reported that Black women had average of two falsies, or hairpieces, a year from imported human hair (2001, p.45).

Lustrasilk introduced the Lustrasilk Permanent in 1947. Its advertisement shows a Black woman dancing, working, and playing with perfectly straight hair (Byrd, 2001, p.46). A 1947 advertisement of Snow White Hair Beautifier tells men not to be a “wire-haired willie” (2001, p.47) that no one loves. It also has a before and after of a man after using the product (2001, p.47). This advertisement seems laughably politically incorrect to modern readers. Particularly, that the product is named Snow White, a biting insult when looking through the lens of the Black Power movement. It is putting whiteness on a pedestal. This appeals to a man appeal to women and his ability to find love. If Snow White is good, then Onyx Black is bad. If wire-haired is bad, then straight is good.

In an examination of an advertisement from Ebony magazine, it expresses that straight hair is the preferred texture. It shows the profile of a light-skinned woman with straight, glossy hair that has been curled at the end in a traditional 50's style. She is facing away from the viewer and has arched eyebrows, long eyelashes; and wears lipstick and jewelry and a contented expression. Underneath her chin is a box of Shampoo Straight. The advertisement promised to create straight hair that lasts 3-6 months. The advertisers always claim that washing with this shampoo will wash out the curl. Furthermore, a patron's hair would "grow in straight. Wet hair, brush hair . . . no matter what, HAIR REMAINS STRAIGHT!" ("Amazing!," 1950, p.54). Ironically, Shampoo Straight says that hair will be "natural-looking" (1950, p.54). Most interesting is the claim that hair will "GROW IN STRAIGHT" ("1950, p.54) with continued use.

Obviously, this advertisement is targeted towards African American consumers. Not only is it placed in a Black publication, but it alludes to common characteristics about kinky hair. Unpermed kinky hair that has been straightened can revert back to its original texture if get wet or is exposed to humidity. Shampoo Straight entices potential customers with the promise of permanently creating straight hair, even new growth.

A wig ad of the same year does not make the same claims, but its imagery is very similar (Figure 2.1). Again, a lighter skinned woman is shown in profile, facing away from the view. Her eyebrows are arched and lips are rouged, yet there is no jewelry. The ad title reads "All-Over" hair Glamour, Covers Whole Head" ("All Over", 1950, p.52). Like the previous ad, the main feature is straight, dark, glossy hair that is neatly curled under at the end. This advertisement claims that this wig will ad a desirable length and "helps invite romance and love!"



Figure 2.1. Hair advertisement from *Ebony* magazine.

Coupled with these ads is the previously mentioned practice of skin bleaching. The advertisement is $\frac{3}{4}$ of a page. Half of the advertisement is a light skinned woman gazing at the viewer with a coy smile. She is holding white flowers that touch the side of her face. This image is adorned with the words, “Complexion by Nadinola, fresh as a flower and petal smooth.” Nadinola Bleaching Cream has two products, one for oily skin and the other for dry skin. Underneath the title is two paragraphs about the claims of the product. It tells the reader, “Don’t give in to dark, dull skin! A lighter, brighter complexion can help you become so much lovelier and so much more desirable!” (“Complexion by Nadinola,” 1950, p.14).

Skin bleaching is now perceived as politically incorrect and even backwards in the African American community. It seems that being dark skinned no longer carries such strong implications. Some even carry their dark skinned as a mark of ethnic pride. However, hair alteration has held fast.

1960's Hair Care

In *Ebony* magazine advertisements, hair straightening and skin bleaching ads can even be found during the 1960's. The Perma Strate cream hair straightener advertisement targets both men and women (Figure 2.2). It claims, "Your hair will not revert, and can be easily dress, combed, or styled in any modern manner desired" ("Men Women," 1963, p.178). It also promises to have hair appear as if it were "naturally straight" (1963, p.178) for at least 3 months. This advertisement appeals to the notion that straightened hair has a modernizing effect.



Figure 2.2. Hair advertisement from *Ebony* magazine.

In 1968, Nu Nile offers a skin bleaching creams that "tones the shades of your skin for fairer, clearer, natural-looking loveliness" ("Your Invitation," 1968, p.60). A light-skinned woman with short, straightened hair smiles at viewer behind an enlarged jar of the bleaching cream.

However, within the same year, another *Ebony* ad reads, “The natural look is here . . .” (“The Natural”, 1968, p.113) for the Duke Natural Set. It is a full pages ad with a darker skinned man and woman on each side – both sporting naturally textured Afros, and both looking directly at the viewer and smiling. For the woman, the ad reads, “Beautiful, proud, unmistakably you. No wonder more and more women are wearing the Natural.” The product promises to add a “sheen and luster” to the hair and make it manageable enough so that a comb “fairly glides through your hair” (1968, p.113).

This cultural shift in *Ebony*’s ads represents what Byrd describes as 1960’s phenomenon, when “Black hair underwent its biggest change since Africans arrived in America” (Byrd, 2001, p.51). There were radical cultural, social racial upheavals during that decade. The tensions of the Civil Rights Movement boiled over to other regions of the United States. Young students were eager to push for more civil liberties and freedom. They were also willing to push back against society that had suppressed their culture for so long. In 1962, Harold Cruse prophetically stated that African Americans “. . . will undoubtedly make a lot of noise in militant demonstrations, cultivate beards and sport their hair in various degrees of *la mode au naturel*” (Byrd, 2001, p.49).

A “new way of defining beauty” (Byrd, 2001, p.52) became the basis for an African American cultural revolution. The “Black is beautiful” phrase arose as a statement of pride instead of using “Black” as an insult. Afrocentric dress and the Afro hairstyle defined the person that held these new ideologies (2001, p.53). *All About the Natural* was a popular how-to book at the time by Lois Liberty Jones. The natural hairstyle, the Afro, greatly increased in popularity (2001, p.54).

The Afro hairstyle itself became an identifier and a pride of being Black (Byrd, 2001, p.56). The Afro pick had been developed and then Afro Sheen can they were keeping up the trend (2001, p.69). It even crossed borders used by Afro-Brazilians in the Brazilian Black Pride Movement (Sieber, 2000, p.179). “Now that Black was beautiful, straightening one’s hair in the image of White beauty was seen as blasphemy” (Byrd, 2001, p.58). Whiteness had been removed from its pedestal of superiority and replaced by its on archetype that resembled African American women with their natural hair texture.

The 1960’s cultural changes were very personal because it was about appearance (Douglas, 1998). So one’s very appearance was a political statement. Rooks asserts that “Black pride” conversations called for “production of imagery that would combat the damaging representations in popular culture” (as cited in Tate, 2009, p.36). Again, image was the problem and image was seen as a viable solution. African Americans sought to create imagery that would reflect the new aesthetic they were developing.

However, wearing the Afro and natural styles were not without its challenges. Generational perceptions of Afro were different. Older generations did not relate to it. One parent remarked, “if [her daughter] was going to let her hair go natural I would have to go back to the jungle” (Byrd, 2001, p.61). One woman cut her straightened hair and felt like a newborn. She knew her decision would affect her family, so she left a note at home telling her family what she’d done. When she’d returned, her mother and neighbors greeted her with tears, saying she had “lost her beauty,” changed all their years of hard work, and that this act would be detrimental to her life (Douglas, 1998). This incident proves that African American hair carries social and moral implications than just being a hairstyle. All of their hard work were the hours that were spent grooming and caring for

her tresses to give it shine a length. Obviously a well-groomed daughter represented an attentive mother. Conversely, a ill-groomed daughter was a reflection of a negligent mother. The detriment is that people would negatively judge her because of her hair. She would be whispered about, lose her status in the community, and possibly be denied a well-paying job and other opportunities.

Whereas the Afro was the masters [degree], locks are PhD. Locs required no combing at all. Dreadlocks were attributed to Ethiopian warriors, and later appropriated by Rastafarians. The hairstyle went against the rules of how to groom hair like whites. It was a “symbol of resistance” to European aesthetics.

For one woman, “all hell broke loose” with her mother when she first grew locks. Her mother wasn’t, “accustomed to seeing hair like that,” and wondered why her daughter must be like Africans (Douglas, 1998).

Another Afro impediment was the question of femininity. One woman received mean looks, and was called Florida Evans, a matronly figure of the popular *Good Times* sitcom (Douglas, 1998). I experienced something similar when I accompanied a female acquainted on a walk in New Orleans. She wore her hair shaved very close to her scalp, a TWA, which was unusual for high school girls in the mid-1990’s. While we were waiting at a crosswalk, a male passerby told her she needed a wig.

“When the first women, motivated by racial pride, started wearing natural hairstyles, they felt opposing tugs between feminine ideals and racial pride” (Craig, 2002, p.122). They had to reject the commonly held aesthetic that long, flowing hair makes a woman desirable. In 1970, a poster that showed an image of Angela Davis was a “symbol of defiance.” It also showed femininity (Tate, 2009, p.125). *Good Times’* Thelma

character was a sex symbol and Pam Grier in blaxploitation pop (Byrd, 2001, p.67). Again, we see the power of the image in shaping the women's beauty aesthetic.

1970's Hair Care

By 1967 Washington Post featured an article, "The Afro Doing a Graceful Fadeout". People were older and had to get jobs, and relaxer sales were rising (Byrd, 2001, p.70). In March 1971, one-year-old *Essence* magazine showed its first straight-haired woman (2001, p.63). By mid-70's, the Afro had "achieved its goal." It had become a hairstyle (2001, p.66). It was no longer a personification of a radical political statement. The Afro moved from the fringe to the mainstream.

So it seems that the African Americans had achieved some level of success, with doors being opened. Was literally wearing Blackness on our heads so necessary? Did Black women choose to assimilate more hair straightening as a tame return to normalcy after militancy? What ended the halcyon days of the 1970's for natural hair? A large factor was capitalism.

There was a capitalist backlash against the 1960's changes. The Afro had offered an advantage to Black companies of hair care and new products. Then a counter-statement arose in both white and Black magazines. They had to compete with this new, natural beauty aesthetic. The Black beauty industry was a billion dollar industry. More importantly, this counter-statement appeared in television, advertising. Then the "full weight of their fortune" (Douglas, 1998) was applied to the counter-statement. As a result, the new Black aesthetic; the Afro, disappeared from television. Ten years after its debut the Afro had vanished. And women have remained on "frontline of a construction

of beauty” (Douglas, 1998). Thus, the Black aesthetic was confronted with the American dollar, a powerful adversary.

Additionally, the Black Power movement was largely that of a younger generation. Had African Americans made their identity statement like a rebellious teenager, and decided to literally straighten up, and resemble the mainstream? The fruits of the Civil Rights Movement and militancy gave way to middle class opportunities.

Present Day Hair Care

The two historical periods of post-emancipation and the Black power movement can be seen as two extremes of a pendulum swing. The former was about conforming; the latter was about distinction. Should the present age be a balance of the two?

Looking at the present time, many African American women still have their natural hair texture altered. Negative perceptions, ignorance of natural hair care and grooming, and the prevalence of straightened hair aesthetic still abound. One new appearance in the *Ebony* magazine ads is the appearance of relaxers specially created for and marketed to pre-adolescent girls. One product is Dark & Lovely’s Beautiful Beginnings Children’s No-Lye Relaxer. It promotes itself as the “gentlest” (“Beautiful Beginnings, 1997, p.118) and being made with Comfort Plus, a mysterious safeguard ingredient that “helps prevent scalp irritation and damage” (1997, p.118). Undoubtedly, the advertisement is attempting to address any reservation that parents would have about giving their daughters chemical burns. Beautiful Beginnings will make hair “softer, silkier, and more manageable” (1997, p.118). The product box shows a young girl with straightened, shining hair and a smile.

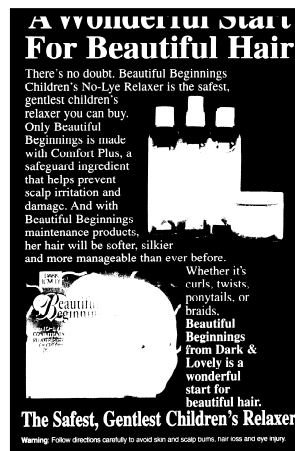


Figure 2.3. Hair advertisement from *Ebony* magazine.

Another newer occurrence is the integration of the word “natural” in products that promote chemical processes. One advertisement reads “TCB is Now TCB Naturals, with 100% Natural Extracts” (“TCB,” 1996, p.118). TCB boasts of a new line of products, which include “special botanicals like joboba oil” and “chamomile” (1996, p.118). Furthermore, “There’s even a superior No-Lye Relaxer, formulated with moisturizing olive oil . . .” (1996, p.118)

This current zeitgeist is the reason that more natural hair imagery is necessary, especially for young African American women. Much of natural imagery that Black women could take pride in was arrested in the 1970’s. Valcin (1999) asserts that there is not a place in society for African American women because there is “nothing that looks like us or reflects us.” Black women have to make our own space (1999). There are a growing number of African American women, particularly in online communities that are interested in solving our hair problem by accepting their natural texture. One website, Black Girl with Long Hair, was created to promote nature beauty. A recurring blog

feature is “Now and Then,” which shows photos of women before and after they stopped altering her hair texture (Noelliste, 2011). Chenzira (1985) suggests that African American women should look at their natural tresses and embrace the “full beauty of its own rebelliousness,” and presents a montage of women with natural hair (1985). She understands the power of positive imagery to promote natural beauty.

My thesis proposes to add to this Black hair movement that glorifies African American natural hair texture. My art will help fill in the gap of positive imagery of natural Black hair. Like the artist Faith Ringgold, who used different media to explore the politics of beauty and Afrocentric beauty (Byrd, 2001, p.53). Even Shepherd Fairey has created powerful imagery that recaptures the enchantment of Angela Davis and her Afro. I want the curiosity about the African American hair problem to be ignited when viewing my art. I connect Mucha’s style and nationalist pride, and I have integrated it with my Black Nationalist pride to present a Black beauty aesthetic.

Upon examination of how the American aesthetic has affected the African American aesthetic, I can safely conclude that the melting pot is an erroneous model. Instead of a homogenized goo, American assimilation should be a salad, allowing each ingredient to retain its own integrity. The ideal of the African American community is that natural kinky hair is the norm. It would be celebrated instead of maligned, and preferred as a suitable choice.

DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

1. Afro – hairstyle of kinky hair that is usually large and masses around the wearer’s head like a halo.
2. Big chop (BC) – the act of cutting off chemically straightened hair.
3. Cornrows – braided style of hair being closely braided to the scalp from the hairline to the nape in neat row.
4. Creamy crack – popular euphemism for perm/relaxers.
5. Dreadlocks – hairstyle in which hair has been twisted/braided and allowed to tangle and mat to form rope-like hair.
6. Extensions – synthetic/human hair that has been added to a braid.
7. Hair grease – often applied to straightened hair to add gloss or shine.
8. Go back – kinky hair reverting to its natural texture after it has been straightened.
9. Hot comb – metal comb that can be heated on a stovetop or with an electric cord. It is slowly combed through kinky hair to straighten it.
10. Nappy, kinky, coily – tightly coiled hair.
11. Natural hair – usually referred to hair that has not been chemically straightened.
12. New growth – un straightened hair that grows from the scalp.
13. Perm/relaxer – chemical creams applied to the hair strands to permanently straighten it.
14. Press – the act of getting hair straightened with a pressing comb.
15. Press & curl – style of having hair “pressed” or straightened with a hot comb and then curled.
16. Relaxed – hair that has been chemically straightened.

17. TWA – “teeny weeny Afro” closely cropped Afro commonly worn by African American men, but the term is usually applied to women.
18. Twistout – hairstyle of wearing kinky hair loose after its been braided.
19. Weave – synthetic/human hair that has been attached to actual hair by glue or braiding.

Limitations and Delimitations

I have limited my study to just seven works of art because of time limitations. I have also limited the historic scope of my study to African American women. Much more could be examined about how various ethnic groups’ aesthetic has been negatively changed in the face of assimilation.

CHAPTER 3:
DEVELOPMENT, INTERPRETATION AND REFLECTION OF WORKS

Creation of Art Work

For my exhibition, I created seven artworks using primarily pen and ink. Three of the works are pictured with below.



Figure 3.1 Hargro, Brina. Natural Poster. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”



Figure 3.2. Hargro, Brina. Shea Butter Poster. 2010 . Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”



Figure 3.3. Hargro, Brina. Love Thy Hair Poster. 2010. Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”

Reflection on the Process

At the beginning of each artwork, I approached it with idea that I was creating propaganda. I wanted to create an image that would reel in the viewer and entice them to listen to the artwork. They would read its text and immediately know what each artwork is attempting to sell the view. I wanted to convey beauty with color and unity, style with Mucha’s ornamentation, and symbolism.

I completed Natural Poster (Figure 3.1) first, then Shea Butter Poster (Figure 3.2), and later added Love Thy Hair Poster (Figure 3.3). All posters were created with Prismacolor or Sharpie markers, using the former predominately. My process was to create small mock up in my sketchbook of each work using pencil and experimenting with layering colors and the layout (Figures 3.4, 3.5, 3.6).



Figure 3.4. Hargro, Brina. Natural Poster sketch. 2010. Pen and ink on paper. 11x14.”



Figure 3.5. Hargro, Brina. Shea Butter Poster sketch. 2010. Pen and ink on paper.

11x14.”



Figure 3.6. Hargro, Brina. Love Thy Hair Poster sketch. 2010. Pen and ink on paper.

11x14.”

With each poster, markers have been layered much like watercolor paint since markers share the same translucency. On the figure’s skin, I used a neutral beige marker to create an under-painting. Next, one layer of the main skin color was added and emphasized with oranges or yellows to add skin tone variance. More of the main skin color was added to bring out shadows. Finally, a darker color is used to communicate deep shadows on the facial features. Adding this darker color also emphasizes the white

and highlights. The steps that follow the under-painting were used in a flexible manner. I may have skipped ahead or re-created a step in the process.

For my design, I extracted some main points from Mucha's style. The human figure was the focal point of the piece. I limited my color palette in the background to keep the emphasis on the main figure. Finally, each poster features a border and some time or ornamental pattern.

Each poster also has symbolism that communicates the same concept as the text. Natural Poster has three distinct symbols: the Black-eyed pea, braided hair, and the rainbow. The first two symbols are references to Black culture. The Black-eyed pea is common in both African and African American cuisine, as is braiding is a common hairstyle. Both symbols are connected with the main figure, as she is holding a basket of Black-eyed peas and wearing braided hair. The Black-eyed pea leaves and flower are used as a motif within the border. The pea, plant, and rainbow all speak to the text of being natural. Being natural is often perceived as being healthy and good. Therefore, this woman, especially her hair, is just as natural and just as good as an edible bean and a rainbow.

Shea Butter Poster uses the natural gourd and *karite* tree from which shea butter is extracted; just as Natural Poster represents the plant of the Black-eyed pea. The gourd is shown in the border and slightly abstracted to show its natural shape. The oval shape is combined with geometric patterns to represent traditional African cloth patterns. Similarly, the *karite* tree is found in Africa. Shea butter, like cocoa butter, can be used right from the tree, unprocessed, to moisturize both skin and hair. Like Natural Poster, Shea Butter Poster makes a connection between being natural and good. An angelic halo

was added to the shea butter product and her hair to connect the two objects. The main figure's halo features the pan-African colors of green, gold, and yellow to emphasize her own ethnic pride that is centered on her hair texture.

Finally, Love Thy Hair Poster integrates more of my personal style with that of Mucha's. Mucha's border, main figure, and ornamentation are combined with my layering of patterns. This poster is the least harmonious of the three. The patterning of the hair and the stained glass motif is the most problematic area of this painting. Love Thy Hair Poster" has the strongest message. The main figure looks directly at the viewer with the command of the slogan. The poster's message is echoed in the position of the hands making a heart. I added the stained glass, halo, and white robe to point to a religious solemnity to the piece. It says that loving one's self is an honorific of God as well as oneself.

However, the message of Love Thy Hair Poster is a touch heavy handed, and I felt its message is too easy for the viewer to grasp in this poster. I would have liked to see more playfulness with the symbolism with this work. Natural Poster and Shea Butter Poster are not without their faults. Their style is very simplified, but I feel that I was able to achieve a level of sophistication with art markers.

CHAPTER 4:

IMPLEMENTATION OF EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Impact on Teaching and Students

Creating my body of work and my thesis has revealed that I am a postmodern art teacher. My work is a “social practice” that I use it bring the focus on marginalized aesthetic of African American women’s natural hair (Pearse, 1992, p.8). I feel that art and images can change perspectives, and it can be as a vehicle for change.

In my classroom, I can connect my art with assignments that use postmodernism’s subversives to communicate a message. After familiarizing my students with commonly accepted masterpieces, I can lead them in a discussion about why these are considered masterpieces. We can examine the social class, ethnicity, and/or culture of the artist, patron, viewer, and subject. Then, students can examine how these social constructs impact how the piece is viewed. Therefore, my students can enter art criticism and aesthetics with a more critical eye. Furthermore, they will have the ability to make connections with both history and sociology when they examine artwork.

Creating this body of work also required research into African American history and sociology. Bringing the role of the artist as a researcher into the classroom is another result of this thesis. Throughout history, artists have been careful observers and investigators in order to create art that communicates effectively. Students can also learn to integrate this skill into the art making process.

As an educator, I can guide students to create their own literature review as part of their assignments. Conveying to students that artists are also researchers is an important

outcome of my research. Artists do not create art in a vacuum. We are all influenced by our personal lives and/or larger society. Specifically, if my class were studying linocuts, I would allow them to discover the personal and historical contexts of artists like Kollowitz, Catlett, and Hokusai. Next, students would find which personal and/or historical events influenced their art production. They can also reflect on how their research deepened their appreciation of their artist's work.

Additionally, my thesis has provided the opportunity to practice the concept of a/r/tography – being an artist, researcher and teacher simultaneously. A/r/tographers approach the artmaking as an interdisciplinary process that adds meaning to artwork (Irwin, 2005). My research and artmaking has demonstrated that a/r/tography add s depth to artwork. Similarly, my students also benefit from investing research into their process.

With art production, my students will choose a social issue that they are passionate about, such as political activism or stopping hunger; and create a statement about it within another artist's work. For example, they must use Grant Wood's style to make a statement about hunger or Michelangelo's composition to promote political activism.

The driving principle is that altering an artwork is a means to understand it. A student assigned to Wood's style will have to deconstruct it into its most essential elements in order to insert their own style without losing the assignment's objective. Similarly, the student would be compelled deconstruct their own art to distinguish their own style. A student that is able to analyze both Wood's art and their work, and

synthesize a new product by combining the two would successfully complete the assignment.

Impacts on Art Education Research

My thesis validates the ongoing examination postmodernism and critical theory in the art education. Art education research is very comprehensive and progressive – examining many approaches and perspectives. However, art education in the classroom is far less inviting for both teachers and students to look at art more critically.

Ideally, my research would be used in the classroom setting to examine the combination of problem solving and art making. Teachers can inspire students to create imagery to improve themselves and their community at large. The connection of art education with critical thinking and history only validates the need for art education in the K-12 public school setting.

CHAPTER 5:

CONCLUSION

Thesis Overview

My thesis identifies the problem of African American women conforming to a beauty aesthetic that does not affirm them. It examines the historical roots of this problem, the imagery that has bolstered it, and the effort to reverse it by encouraging African American women to embrace their natural beauty. Finally, my art is an extension of the current trend to encourage African American women to embrace their unique aesthetic. My art show positive imagery of African American women with natural hair to convince the viewer of this natural hair aesthetic.

Research Question Response

Society has influenced African American women's perception of their natural hair by implying or declaring that it is unattractive and unsophisticated. Slavery, emancipation, and civil rights struggles, and late-20th century prosperity have left their own mark on natural hair care. Mostly, it was ignored save for the civil rights era in the popular advertisements based on the zeitgeist of the African American community.

Advertisements and popular media left a gaping dearth of images of women with natural hair that Black women wanted to emulate. However, during the civil rights era, the Afro was a popular symbol of cultural pride and political empowerment.

In creating positive imagery of natural hair, I want to viewer grasp and appreciate its aesthetic. The viewer should examine the texture and shape of natural hair and accept

within the context of a harmonious artwork. The viewer will view the art and see natural, kinky hair as something acceptable, sophisticated, and dignified.

My art will have an impact on teaching by showing that art making can be a dynamic force in communicating a clear perspective and a call to action for social change. Educators and students can critically examine their world and create art as a response.

Topics for Further Study

My thesis can be used to examine other troubling aesthetic practices; such as eye surgeries that are common in Asian countries in order to appear less Asian, and American plastic surgeries, excessive sun tanning, or skin bleaching. On a smaller scale, the artist can examine himself or herself and use art to critically examine their own personal aesthetic practices and beliefs.

Secondly, using art as a social vehicle can lead to a connection between art and service learning. How can art education connect with organizations that create or sell art for a social cause? For example, an organization that creates hospital art may be able to partner with a local school to meet their objectives. The hospital art organization receives art from students while the students learn which colors and compositions would be appropriate for a hospital.

Furthermore, does adding a social cause to art impact the process of art making? Are artists more or less conscious of the viewer's critique? Are they more motivated compared to making art for a class assignment or competition?

Finally, additional research can also examine how art for a cause impacts the viewer. Are they more or less positively inclined towards an issue after viewing images

about that issue? This research questions could lead into how stereotyping and propaganda has shaped people's views of themselves, others, and the world.

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