

STRANDS OF POWER, TOOLS OF RESISTANCE: BLACK HAIR AND CONSCIOUSNESS
AS CONCEPT AND MEDIUM

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ABSTRACT

Adriana Michelle Burkins: Strands of Power, Tools of Resistance: Black Hair and Consciousness
as Concept and Medium
(Under the direction of Victoria Rovine)

This thesis explores the efficacy of hair as a tool in art to address assertions of femininity, citizenship, consciousness, and identity within the black experience in the United States and in South Africa. I interpret depictions of hair in the art of four contemporary female artists of color: Sonya Clark and Mequitta Ahuja, from the United States, and Tracey Rose and Zanele Muholi, from South Africa. Centering my analysis on shared histories of racism and resistance through self-fashioning, I draw from exhibition catalogues, texts on hair and hair in art, and writings on identity politics to further explore the relationships that have existed between women of color in both nations. Inspired by the development of the natural hair movement among women of color, I argue that Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi demonstrate how references to black hair in art can represent complex visual narratives of the self and the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Speaking to an audience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Sonya Clark began her lecture by discussing the afro and the work required to perfect what she describes as a “gravity defying” hairstyle that ultimately allows her to feel closer to the universe.¹ For Clark, a black American artist, “hair is the essence of identity.”² As she states: “deep within each strand, the vestiges of our roots resound.”³ As an identifiable marker, the hair of people of color has been used to communicate social status and ethnic identity. However, it has also been the focus of a long history of discrimination based on hegemonic standards of beauty as fueled by racism and sexism against bodies of color. Reflecting on the shared histories of segregation in the United States and South Africa, as well as the shared histories of resistance movements, this thesis explores the use of hair in the work of Mequitta Ahuja and Sonya Clark, two black female artists from the United States, and Tracey Rose and Zanele Muholi, two black female artists from South Africa. I argue that Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi demonstrate how the use of and reference to black hair in art can represent complex visual narratives of the self and the community.

¹Sonya Clark, “Sculptural Headdresses,” *Ornament: The Art of Personal Adornment* (1997): 34.

²Ibid, 34.

³Ibid, 34

Clark, Ahuja, Muholi, and Rose, who were born within the span of nine years, grew up during the seventies and eighties, during pivotal periods in the history of people of color in the United States and in South Africa. Clark, a fiber artist known for her hair sculptures and performances pieces, began working in the mid-1990s, while Ahuja, who produces waxy chalk drawings and enamel paintings, began exhibiting work in 2007. Muholi, who is associated with photographs that focus on the documentation and visibility of South Africa's LGBTQI+ communities, began working in the early 2000s, while Rose began exhibiting installation and performance pieces in the late 1990s. While other artists of color have also referenced hair in their work, I am interested in Clark, Ahuja, Muholi, and Rose because, as I will describe in the next chapter, these artists are working around the same time of the resurgence of "natural"⁴ hairstyling among women of color in the early 2000s. Additionally, I focus on these four artists because of the prominence of hair in their work and because of their use of self-portraiture as a subject.

Hair has been used to transmit information about an individual or a community, immediately communicating information such as one's wealth, religion, and ethnic identity. However, during the eras of legalized segregation in the United States and Apartheid in South Africa, physical attributes, such as hair, were used as markers of distinction and oppression. "Jim Crow" laws, enforced from the late 19th century until 1965 following the end of slavery and the era of Reconstruction, enacted policies of systematic and institutional racism against persons of color in the United States. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the

⁴ Natural, referring to the hair of a person of African descent whose hair has not been chemically straightened or processed. Furthermore, I use "black hair" to refer to the hair of persons of African descent as opposed to referring to dark hair.

Black Power Movement of the 1970s, black Americans used nonviolent methods, such as sit-ins and marches, to fight for their freedoms and eventually bring an end to legalized segregation.

Apartheid, a term which itself means “separateness,” was a policy of systematic and institutionalized racial segregation in South Africa, as enacted by white minority rule, from 1948 until 1994. Black South Africans also began using non-violent forms of protest in the 1950s through the establishment of organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the spread of the Black Consciousness Movement, which will be further discussed in chapters one and four. Apartheid legislation was repealed in 1991, thus setting the stage for the democratic presidential election of Nelson Mandela, a black South African, in 1994. Nonetheless, the continued policing and forms of discrimination against black bodies demonstrates the legacies of these detrimental periods in the United States and South Africa. Building on the shared histories between these two nations, this thesis explores the efficacy of black hair as a medium in art to address assertions of femininity, citizenship, consciousness, and identity from within the black experience in the United States and in South Africa.

Methodology

To understand the context of hair politics in the United States and in South Africa, I draw from *Liberated Threads* by Tanisha Ford. Ford investigates how black women in Africa and in the Diaspora used their bodies as sites of resistance, and their hair as assertions of black womanhood in the 1950s to the 1990s. Black Americans and black South Africans were looking to each other for inspiration in search of expressions of “blackness” and “authenticity.” As Ford’s text reveals, these relationships resulted in forms of adaptation and agency that demonstrate the ways in which black women incorporated their experiences and realities into fashion through dress and hair. These nonviolent practices against racism and sexism as enacted

by black American and black South African women served to empower the individual and the community. I continue Ford's analysis of the relationship between hair and black American and black South African women by studying the use of hair as a medium and subject in the art of Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi.

I expand Ford's scope of research, which encompasses hair, fashion, and black feminism, to include an analysis of contemporary South African and African American art, in addition to "New South African Feminism," which will be addressed in chapter three. Ford's text resonates with the artworks presented because the pieces engage with Ford's interest in the notion of the body as a site of memory, one that allows people to revisit past histories to better understand and (re)present the present. I assert that Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi reflect Ford's exploration of diasporic and communal networks through uses of and references to black hair in art. Through a manipulation of the possibilities of style and significance of black hair, these artists use the fiber as a means to mediate their relationships with the histories and experiences that make up their vibrant identities.

The Body and Hair as Art

In "Beauty Rites: Towards an Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," Judith Wilson surveys the use of hair by African American artists. Wilson discusses the development of hair practices among enslaved black Americans, which she argues borrowed from African aesthetic preferences and represented complex forms of adaptation to new circumstances within the United States.⁵ Although Wilson notes that male African American

⁵Judith Wilson, "Beauty Rites: Towards and Anatomy of Culture in African American Women's Art," *International Review of African American Art* 11, no. 3 (1994): 11-55.

artists were the first to address black pride through images featuring hair, she finds that black female artists, such as Adrian Piper and her 1972-75 series *The Mythic Being*, were the first to utilize hair as a means through which to investigate their relationship with their identities as Americans and as women of color.

Turning to Africa, the importance of hair in art is apparent through various art forms. Niangi Batuluksi notes that in classical African figurative sculpture, “coiffures testify to an aesthetic activity integrated in ritual practices, and to the inextricable bonds between art and culture on the one hand, and between art and belief on the other.”⁶ For example, the *sowei* masks of the Sande women’s initiation society, found among ethnic groups such as the Mende in southern Sierra Leone and western Liberia, have represented ideals of feminine beauty through the depiction of significant facial features and the carving of elaborate braided hairstyles.⁷ The *isicholo* presents an example of the conflation of hair and art in South Africa. Worn by married Zulu women during the 20th century, the *isicholo* originated as a conical-shaped hairstyle. As women began to incorporate additional elements into the style, such as pigment, the *isicholo* evolved into elaborately designed hats that could be removed, some of which included the use of hair.⁸

⁶Niangi Bataulukisi, “Hair in African Art and Cultures,” *Hair: in African Art and Culture* (Edited by Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman, The Museum for African Art: New York, 2000), 37.

⁷William Siegman, “Women’s Hair and Sowei Masks in *Southern Sierra Leone and Western Liberia*,” In *Hair in African Art and Culture*, 169-174, Edited by Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman, The Museum for African Art: New York, 2000. 71.

⁸Victoria Rovine, Lecture, “Practices in South Africa,” Art and Fashion: Rome to Timbuktu, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 2018.

Authors such as Annie Coombes, Mgcineni Pro Sobopha, and Emma Bedford analyze incorporations of the body in examples of post-apartheid art in South Africa that revisit, rewrite, and challenge what could not be addressed under Apartheid. In “Re-presenting the Body: In Search of a Postcolonial Moment,” Bedford states, “the body is being reasserted as one of the primary vehicles for the expression of new ideas and concerns [because] this discursive artistic prioritization of the body was curiously absent from earlier South African art as a result of political repression, conservatism and religious mores.”⁹ Sobopha asserts that the body has been used by South African artists to discuss themes of history, race, gender, violence, trauma, sexuality, and memory, and that the body essentially becomes a language, specifically, a “language, form, speech, site, and context” in relation to the various forms of media that artists utilize.¹⁰ Thus, art that focuses on the body, i.e., hair, enables female artists of color to reimagine both history and the present. As such, I seek to expand Tanisha Ford’s analysis of the relationships between black American and South African women through an investigation of the use of hair and the body by female artists of color in both nations.

This thesis begins with a look into the history of hair politics in the United States and South Africa to explore how hair has been used as a key element within complex negotiations of blackness, femininity, gender, and citizenship. The second chapter will focus on the United States and interpret the hair sculptures and performances pieces of Sonya Clark and the paintings and drawings of Mequitta Ahuja. The third chapter will look to South Africa and discuss two

⁹Mgcineni Pro Sobopha, “Re-presenting the Body: In Search of a Postcolonial Moment,” *Visual Century: South African Art in Context*, Vol4 (Edited by Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra, and Mandisi Majavu, Johannesburg: Wits University Press; Oslo: Visual Century Project, 2011), 93.

¹⁰Ibid, 93.

installation pieces by Tracey Rose along with the *Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness* photography series by Zanele Muholi. Borrowing from Annette Blum's analysis of the "'New' South African Feminism,"¹¹ chapter three additionally questions how and if women in South Africa have viewed their experiences as separate from women in the United States, and how this is read through art. The conclusion will consist of a summary that considers all presented artists to address the effectiveness of the various representations of hair as seen in photographs, sculptures, drawings, installations, and paintings. These comparisons will place the artists, artworks, and texts in conversation with one another to reveal common narratives and diverging paths, while also asserting new ways to look at these artists' works and experiences.

¹¹Annette Blum, "Public Memory, Private Truths: Voices of Women and Visual Narrative in Post-Apartheid South Africa," (PhD diss., York University, 2010), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (749218684).

CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS OF THE NATURAL

This chapter surveys the history of hair practices in the United States and in South Africa. First, I discuss the evolution of styling in the United States from the early 1900s to the rise of the afro, and to the beginnings of the “natural hair movement” in the mid-2000s to analyze the ways in which hair has been central to notions of femininity, blackness, and identity. Next, I turn to South Africa and to the effects of Apartheid on the body. I recount the ways in which black South African women borrowed and translated practices from black American women to respond to the realities of life during and after Apartheid. The impetus of this chapter is to create a context for my discussion of the use of hair by Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi as assertions of black womanhood in the United States and in South Africa, particularly in art.

On Hair Politics in the United States

Neal Lester writes about the effects of slavery on hairstyling among enslaved Africans. As head shaving was used as a form of punishment and practices of elaborate hairstyling were suppressed, the use of cropped styles in combination with headwraps and bandanas increased.¹² Lester, along with Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharp, notes that enslaved peoples recognized the better work positions and higher communal standards experienced by persons with lighter skin

¹²Neal Lester, “Hair Today, Yesterday and Beyond: A Personal, Historical and Political Journey,” *Hair Stories* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, 2003), 30-55.

and less kinky hair, and as a result, enslaved peoples often engaged in dangerous hair care methods.¹³

Commercial straightening practices for black women were developed in the early 1900s as Sarah Breedlove, also known as Madam C.J. Walker, marketed a series of hair care products and adapted the straightening iron for textured hair.¹⁴ (Walker, who remains a significant figure in the history of black hair care and entrepreneurship, will be revisited in chapter two as well as in the conclusion.) Although these practices were popular between the 1910s and the 1920s, not all women of color adopted the “Walker method,” and some black leaders criticized what they saw as self-hatred and the erasure of natural features.¹⁵ Malcolm X, who had previously worn the “conk,” a popular black men’s hairstyle from the 1920s to the 1960s that straightened natural hair through the application of dangerous chemicals, vividly described the psychological impact of altering one’s hair:

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when 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’---that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look ‘pretty’ by white standards.¹⁶

¹³Lester notes the use of wheel axle grease to make hair sleeker, straighter, and smoother. Byrd and Tharp find that women would slather their hair with butter, bacon fat, or goose grease, before using a heated butter knife as a crude curling iron. Aside from the use of strings and nylon to achieve loose curls, women would also use lye, mixed with potatoes, an act that could “eat the skin right off a person’s head.” For more see, Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps, *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2001), 17.

¹⁴Kennell Jackson, “What is Really Happening Here? Black Hair Among African-Americans and in American Culture.” *Hair in African Art and Culture* (Edited by Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman. The Museum for African Art: New York, 2000), 184.

¹⁵Ibid, 184.

¹⁶Malcolm X, Alex Haley, and Attallah Shabazz, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964).

While Maxine Craig argues that the conk was popularized by black male entertainers rather than originating from notions of inferiority, the quote from Malcolm X nonetheless demonstrates the effects of hegemonic notions of beauty as experienced by black Americans, and the ways in which hair can serve as an extension of one's self-pride and identity.¹⁷

In the early 1950s, the *au naturel* (shortly cropped afro) style was associated with high-fashion circles among black and white elites.¹⁸ During this period, in which black women were encouraged to wear the *au naturel* style in order to develop healthy hair practices and express solidarity with newly independent African nations, Robin D.G. Kelley notes that the *au naturel* style entered into public consciousness as a fashion statement when black female models in New York and entertainers such as Nina Simone and Odetta adopted the style.¹⁹ As the *au naturel* style remained fashionable for some women during the sixties, Ford also notes that young black women involved in Civil Rights Movement organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), recognized that, when used strategically, their sartorial choices could symbolically incorporate a broader representation of the diversity of the black American experience into the fight for civil rights.²⁰ Tanisha Ford notes that hair styling

¹⁷Maxine Craig, "The Fall of the Conk; or, How to Read a Process," *Fashion Theory* 1, no 4, (1997): 399-420.

¹⁸Robin D.G. Kelley, "Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro," *Fashion Theory* 1, no 4 (1997): 341.

¹⁹Ibid, 341.

²⁰Tanisha Ford notes that the rejection of pressed hair and proper clothing, known as one's "Sunday best attire," for cropped afros and overalls, had such an effect that women such as Joyce Ladner were not featured in coverage of the 1963 March on Washington. For more, see: Ford, Tanisha, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style and The Global Politics of Soul*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

practices provided a form of liberation and sisterhood for young black female college students in the seventies, especially those who attended primarily white institutions in the United States.²¹

As the use of natural styles increased and the afro itself grew bigger for young black college students, the sixties and seventies saw the afro take on another meaning. Following its adoption by black men, the afro became associated with the “death of the ‘Negro’” and the rise of the Black Power Movement, in addition to the “birth of the militant, virulent black man.”²² Kelley notes that during this time, “dozens of books, dissertations and manuals appeared that literally re-wrote the history of the afro--erasing its roots in the ‘*au naturel*’ fashion movement.”²³ As Kelley states, “the power of text, oral narratives, and the power of political movements allowed militants and hairstylists to invest the afro with new political meanings.”²⁴ These texts on the afro were written by black men and by advocates of natural hair. Although they ignored the trendy history of the afro, these publications did discuss the diversity of hair practices by various cultures in Africa due to a “desire to illuminate the black man’s struggle for identity through his hair,” but to also highlight that prior to European colonization and American slavery, straightening practices were non-existent.²⁵ The appeal of natural hair for black men and women during the seventies was the result of an interest in identity politics and health concerns, specifically the damage caused by straighteners and chemicals. This included a symbolic

²¹Ibid, 116.

²²Kelley, “Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro,” 344.

²³Ibid, 344.

²⁴Ibid, 344.

²⁵Ibid, 345.

withdrawal from dominant hair care companies and a recognition of the harmful practices and tools that have contributed to the stigmatization of textured hair.²⁶

As the newfound appreciation for the “natural” resulted in a new market of hair care products, the afro lost its connection to black nationalist politics, its imaginary connection to Africa, and its associations with urban rebellion.²⁷ Instead, it became the style choice of a new form of masculine beauty during the latter half of the seventies. As the ideal of black female beauty shifted to include straight hair and the autonomy to choose straight or natural hair, Ford and Kelley note that women who continued to wear their hair naturally were criticized in public by black women who adhered to straightening practices and by black men who preferred hair that met “feminine standards.”²⁸ While ideal conceptions of black masculinity remained unchallenged despite the fluctuations of style politics, Kelley notes, “for black women, more so than black men, going ‘natural’ was not just a valorization of blackness or Africanness, but a direct rejection of a conception of female beauty that many black men themselves had upheld.”²⁹ For black women, embracing their natural hair was also a rejection of gendered black beauty.

During the seventies, an influx of immigrants from Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Senegal brought diverse braiding styles to the United States, while at the same time, African American stylists and scholars were also traveling, conducting research, and practicing

²⁶ Ibid, 346.

²⁷ Ibid, 347.

²⁸ Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 49.

²⁹ Kelley, “Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro,” 348.

hairstyles influenced by Africa and the diaspora.³⁰ Styling practices for black hair began to incorporate braided hair extensions, colored string, shells, beads, and a variety of braiding styles.³¹ Black feminism in the seventies and eighties incorporated the significance of African ancestry and “naturalness” as emphasized during the Black Power period in combination with a focus on “autonomy, sisterhood, and alternative sexualities.”³² Visual expressions of these aspects of black female identity included the use of closely cropped afros or African braided styles. This explosion of hair styling was occasionally met with conflicts in the workplace, as women were banned from wearing braids and threatened with losing their jobs.³³ Nonetheless, black women again began to embrace their natural hair in the 2000s through the establishment of black-owned hair care businesses. Known as the natural hair movement,³⁴ this period has given black women the tools needed to express themselves through a wide variety of products geared towards the plethora of black hair textures and concerns, as well as through communal blog posts, tutorial videos, and hair care expos.³⁵

³⁰Jackson, “What is *Really* Happening Here?” 181.

³¹Jackson notes that in the 1980s a Harlem-based braiding shop advertised “An African Braid Explosion” featuring a menu of styles such as: corkscrew, flat twist, senegalese, box braids, doobie braids, spaghetti braids, and African-American plaits among others. Ibid, 181.

³²Kelley, “Nap Time: Historicizing the Afro,” 349.

³³Jackson notes that in 1977, cornrows almost resulted in the court-martialing of a U.S. Army woman, and in 1988 a firing resulted in a complaint before the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

³⁴Lynsey Chutel, “South Africa’s embrace of natural hair care illustrates movement’s power,” Quartz Africa, accessed April 7, 2018. <https://qz.com/africa/1239772/south-africas-embrace-of-natural-hair-care-illustrates-the-movements-power/>.

³⁵Ibid.

On Hair Politics in South Africa

For people of color in South Africa, hair was deeply entangled in the ways in which Apartheid classified and controlled the lives of the nation's citizenry. With the establishment of the Apartheid structure in 1948, policies enforced specific forms of systematic and institutional racial segregation that divided the country by race and ensured that citizens experienced different rights and privileges based on their race.³⁶ Discriminatory practices, such as the "pencil test," were used to determine one's race as was required by the Population Registration Act (1950). This act classified South Africans into one of four racial groups ("black," "white" "coloured" or "Indian") based on appearance, ancestry, cultural lifestyle, and socioeconomic status. The pencil test was usually performed on persons with racially ambiguous features: if a pencil were to be inserted into one's hair and the kinkiness held the pencil in place, he or she was labeled "coloured," as straight hair was associated with whiteness.

Writing in 1997 after the end of Apartheid, Zimitri Erasmus notes that black hair, as politicized by class, gender and race, left a "deep mark on conceptions of beauty."³⁷ Recounting the seventeen necessary steps for "good hair," Erasmus notes that for most colored communities, "good hair" meant sleek and straight hair. The processes of washing and "texturising," a euphemism for chemically altering hair, reflected class differences between working-class women and the middle-class women who could afford to style their hair.³⁸ Emphasizing the ways

³⁶Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger, "Early Apartheid Legislation," *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Harlow, England; New York: Longman/Pearson, 2011), 49.

³⁷Zimitri Erasmus, "Oe! My Hare Gaan Huistoe": Hair-Styling as Black Cultural Practice," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, Vol. 32 (1997): 13.

³⁸Ibid, 12.

in which apartheid's reach classified and controlled the body in public, Erasmus further details the derogatory terms for hair that was not "sufficiently sleek" (*korrelkop*, *boesmanskop*, *af-kop*, and *vos-koppie*), and the terms for hair that was "worked" (fluffed, relaxed, *ge-Wella*, permed, braided, woven, twisted, locked, or dreadlocked) as opposed to "natural" hair that was allowed to grow curly.³⁹

Legendary South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba proudly wore an au naturel style as a form of resistance both in her films and in her global travels in the 1950s.⁴⁰ Because Makeba participated in a network of female entertainers, including Nina Simone, who introduced their own style politics and notions of black femininity, the visibility of the cropped afro promoted pride in one's natural appearance.⁴¹ Ford chronicles how black South Africans borrowed from the resistance practices of black Americans, and incorporated style politics into a form of Black Consciousness particular to South Africa that translated pride into fashion.⁴² As such, young black South African women also styled their hair to make personal and political statements.

³⁹Ibid, 12. Erasmus continues to reveal terms for texture in Black hair that included: *kroes* (kinky), *lekker-hare* (nice or sleek hair), and *peper-korrels* (pepper-corns). Moreover, she notes how different classes used different products. For example, middle-class women used *Sheen Strate*, while working-class women used *Medi-Scalp* products.

⁴⁰Known for songs that criticized apartheid, Makeba was denied reentry into South Africa in 1960 and lived in exile for three decades following this restriction. In 1963, the South African government banned her records and revoked her passport. Makeba didn't return to South Africa until 1991. For more see "Miriam Makeba" Britannica, accessed February 28, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Miriam-Makeba>.

⁴¹Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 37.

⁴²Black Consciousness in South Africa glorified Africa's past and African values and emphasized the belief in oneself as an agent of change to improve the life of the individual and the community. Empowered by common struggles and oppressions, South African Black Consciousness challenged the notions of difference as championed by apartheid and colonialism. Through the adoption of slogans such as, "Black is Beautiful," "Black" became a unifying term for the non-White body in South Africa, including those classified as Colored and Indian. For more, see Shannon Hill, *Biko's Ghost: The Iconography of Black Consciousness*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

During the seventies, American afro wigs were imported to South Africa. As a part of the “Afro look,” these wigs allowed black South African women to fashion themselves according to a facet of an American notion of blackness that was influenced by a search for authenticity in Africa.⁴³ As the enlarged afro style became more visible in South Africa during this time, many women used these wigs to assert their sexuality or to experiment with alternate identities.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, many leaders were quick to criticize what they saw as a “cultural and imperial invasion” from the United States that was not “the progeny of a beauty conscious ancestry.”⁴⁵ Articles written in the South African magazine *Drum* condemned the potential ties to American capitalism, in addition to what many saw as an abandonment of the elaborate plaiting styles unique to specific ethnic groups and the closely cropped natural style popularized by Miriam Makeba.⁴⁶ Female members of SASO (the South African Students’ Organization) who were inspired by new conceptions of black consciousness in South Africa, wore their hair cropped and natural as a political statement.⁴⁷ These women rejected the artifice of afro wigs and the associations with superficial fashion trends that the hairpieces could signify.⁴⁸ Ford notes that these complex debates over styling and identity practices have given black women a critical role and lasting impact on the South African beauty industry.⁴⁹ Speaking on the legacy of self-

⁴³Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 184.

⁴⁴Ibid, 177.

⁴⁵Ibid, 177.

⁴⁶Ibid, 179.

⁴⁷Shannen L. Hill notes the importance of “the transgression of expectations” for female African activists who had to “be outrageous to be heard, let alone to be taken seriously.”

⁴⁸Ford, *Liberated Threads*,” 179.

⁴⁹Ibid, 179.

fashioning as resistance and empowerment by black South Africans, Ford states that fashion “enables the wearers, whether consciously or not, to participate in a collective remembering of the era of black freedom and black feminism across the diaspora.”⁵⁰

In a study of hair in Pretoria, South Africa, Mathias Alubafi et al. emphasize the fact that Apartheid devalued and attempted to erase pride in the black African self. For many black South African women, hair could not be a priority, nor did most women have the ability to afford styling.⁵¹ However, in post-apartheid South Africa the recognition, promotion, and presentation of black hair is an aspect of black cultural heritage.⁵² Empowered by the country’s progressive constitution, the post-apartheid era has fostered a confidence in cultural representation. This is not to say that the realities of life in South Africa always match the ideals presented in the constitution; however, the freedom of expression through hair styling is seen as a revival of pride in one’s ancestry and as an act of defense and decolonization.⁵³ The majority of stylists and braiders in South Africa are West African immigrants, with an increasing number of male braiders from Ghana,⁵⁴ but the creativity and skill associated with these stylists allows black

⁵⁰Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 184.

⁵¹Ibid, 6.

⁵²Mathias Fubah Alubafi, Molemo Ramphalile, and Agnes Sejabaledi Rankoana. “The shifting image of black women’s hair in Tshwane (Pretoria), South Africa,” *Cogent Social Sciences* (2018): 8.

⁵³Alubafi, et. al, note that many Black South African mothers make it a point to visit salons with their daughters, to essentially encourage their hair choices despite school policies.

⁵⁴Vivian Besem Ojong’s text analyzes the prevalence of hair braiding by Ghanaian immigrants to South Africa. Specifically, she studies the gender dynamics between the traditional family structure its relation to male and female entrepreneurship. She notes that the entrance of Ghanaian men into the feminized space of hair braiding would not be possible in Ghana. For more, see: “The Economies of Hairdressing and its Implications for Gender Power in Durban, South Africa,” *Journal of Social Development in Africa*, 32, no. 1 (2017): 16.

South African women to constantly reinvent themselves through their hair, as a reflection of their beauty.⁵⁵

In the face of continued bias against black bodies and natural hair within the media and the workplace, the work of Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi is significant. In 2016, in the United States, the Perception Institute paired with Shea Moisture, a black-owned hair and body products company, to conduct the “Good Hair Study.”⁵⁶ With the intention of understanding the connections between bias and textured hair, the study found that women of color suffered more hair-related anxieties than white women, and found that the strongest bias against naturally textured hair came from white women who “rated it as less beautiful,” “less sexy/attractive,” and “less professional than smooth hair.”⁵⁷

In the same year, in 2016, controversy emerged in South Africa when a thirteen-year-old student at a formerly white Pretoria school for girls began to protest the years of bans, detentions, and oppression against unpermed, natural hairstyles.⁵⁸ Though not the only instance of such discrimination, this incident garnered international headlines. Thus, I place the work of Clark, Ahuja, Muholi, and Rose within the context of the continued ways in which women of color use hair as a statement of being, in addition to the celebration of natural hair, and, as emphasized by

⁵⁵Alubafi, et. Al, “The Shifting Image,” 12.

⁵⁶Karen Grigsby Bates, “New Evidence Shows There’s Still Bias Against Black Natural Hair,” North Carolina Public Radio, last modified Feb. 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/02/06/512943035/new-evidence-shows-theres-still-bias-against-Black-natural-hair> .

⁵⁷The study found that Black women spent more on hair care and were almost twice as likely to experience social pressures to straighten their hair as opposed to women of other races.

⁵⁸Greg Nicholson, “South African Students Speak Out Against ‘Aggressive’ ban on Afro Hair,” last modified Aug. 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/31/south-african-students-speak-out-ban-afro-hair-pretoria-school>.

Ford, the legacy of collective remembering and resistance.⁵⁹ The following chapter will analyze the ways in which the aesthetic properties of hair are reframed within the work of Sonya Clark and Mequitta Ahuja.

⁵⁹Lynsey Chutel, "South Africa's Embrace of Natural Hair Care Illustrates the Movement's Power," Quartz Africa. Apr. 7, 2018, <https://qz.com/africa/1239772/south-africas-embrace-of-natural-hair-care-illustrates-the-movements-power/>.

CHAPTER TWO: BLACK HAIR AS CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEDIUM IN THE UNITED STATES

In this chapter, I focus on the work of Sonya Clark and Mequitta Ahuja to study the use of hair in contemporary art by black women in the United States. For each artist, I begin with a broad overview of their background before focusing on specific works within their oeuvre and connecting them to similar artists. The use of hair as medium and concept through Clark's sculptural and performance pieces and Ahuja's two-dimensional drawings and paintings allow both artists to address the significance of hair in addition to demonstrating the ways in which hair is art.

Sonya Clark Part I: Medium and Texture

Clark was born in Washington, D.C. and is of Jamaican, Trinidadian, and Scottish descent. She received degrees from Amherst College in Massachusetts, the School of the Art Institute at Chicago, and Cranbrook Academy of Art of Michigan. Her work has been exhibited globally and in the United States in over 350 galleries and museums. Among Clark's prominent works is her comb portrait of Madam CJ Walker (2008), which will be revisited in the conclusion, and performance pieces that target the history of the Confederate flag. Clark uses a variety of media, such as hair, combs, and cloth, to "acknowledge the head as visual statement of one's various positions that is also worthy of adornment," and to "affirm its importance as the

site of personal empowerment.”⁶⁰ Clark credits her studies as the spark that fueled her interest in the “sociohistorical underpinnings of textiles.”⁶¹ She was also inspired by her grandmother, a professional tailor, who instilled in her an appreciation for craft and the importance of the handmade.⁶²

Clark states that when she allowed her “short, cropped, and natural” hair to grow, it became her medium. Through this use of hair as medium, Clark capitalizes on how hair is understood based on personal experiences, in addition to the ways in which hair texture can be explored through art. *Heritage Pearls* (2010) (Fig. 2.1), which will frequently be discussed in this chapter, features a necklace encased in a box and is an example of Clark’s exploration of personal encounters. One may notice the juxtaposition of a sleek jewelry box with the coarseness of the necklace beads. Instead of gleaming white pearls, the beads feature the artist’s own hair, matted by hand into the shape of spherical forms. Streaks of gold peek out from under the spheres of black hair that reveal a textured and tightly coiled nature. A viewer may be intrigued or disgusted by the sight of hair, out of context, that is not their own. Perhaps the viewer may imagine the feel of the tactile “beads” on his or her fingers. I assert that Clark’s use of hair invites viewers to imagine themselves wearing and interacting with her hair work due to the tactile nature of the medium.

⁶⁰Ashley Kistler, “Authentic Obsessions,” *Sonya Clark Solo Exhibition*, (San Antonio, Texas: Southwest School of Art, 2011), 21.

⁶¹Buszek, Maria Elena, “Labor is My Medium:” Some Perspective(s) on Contemporary Craft,” *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 50, No. ¾. (2011): 70.

⁶²Clark, “Sculptural Headdresses,” 34.

It is significant that Clark utilizes actual African American hair, especially her own, as her work reprises the precedent of 18th and 19th century Western traditions of hair work and jewelry.⁶³ Created using the hair of a deceased person, these forms of jewelry symbolized the dead to ensure that their memory was preserved. In the 19th century, the introduction of complex designs for this jewelry meant that these works were additionally valued for their aesthetic properties and for the craftsmanship required to create them, along with the symbolic incorporation of a person's hair. Despite the notion that widowed men in the 18th century also wore hair jewelry and companies established in the 19th century participated in the production of these pieces, women creating hair jewelry by hand in the feminized space of the home nonetheless maintained the primary role of memorialization through craft.⁶⁴ Although Namita Gupta Wiggers asserts that Clark's work is not sentimental nor is it a part of the *memento mori* tradition, I argue that Clark's work reprises and translates the role of memorialization through craft into the masculinized space of the museum to initiate a bond with viewers.⁶⁵

Sonya Clark Part II: Performances of Identity

Through the creation of wearable items using hair, Clark's work attempts to relate identity with how one adorns their body. One could argue that Clark demonstrates the potential

⁶³At the inception of this trend, hair was used to line the backing of portraits of loved ones, to combine the physical essence of the person with their visual likeness. Widowers often wore watch chains made of their late wives' hair and often, gold or brass clasps bearing the names of deceased loved ones. For more see, Allison Ferris, "Hair and Mourning," *Hair* (Sheboygan, Wisconsin: John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 1993), 4.

⁶⁴Helen Sheumaker, "This Lock You See": Nineteenth-Century Hair Work as the Commodified Self," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* 1, no. 4 (1997): 421-445.

⁶⁵*Memento mori* refers to the use of an object as a visual representation of one's mortality. Instead Wiggers argues that Clark's work operates in multiple public realms, including in the contemporary artspace and global culture space.

of hair as an agent of power that holds meaning as embellished by context. Clark's work is illuminated by Ford's discussion of black women's "style sensibilities" and "respectability politics" during the Civil Rights Movement. Ford highlights how, on one hand, straightened and curled hair carried a sense of pride and identity for black women. The process of getting one's hair pressed became a respite to fight the grueling toll that the non-violent protests and sit-ins of the 1960s enacted on the body.⁶⁶ On the other hand, female members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee⁶⁷ also wore closely cropped afros, for practical means in addition to serving as an expression of solidarity with the experiences of women sharecroppers in the American South and an interest in social class. According to Ford, "SNCC women who consciously chose to wear casual clothing were exposing the problematics of class stereotypes related to dress and the body."⁶⁸

Clark's work seems to also engage with the notion of "respectability politics" through the transformation of black female hair into aesthetically pleasing pieces of jewelry, adornment, and to an extent, protection through knowledge. *Hair Neck Lace* (Fig. 2.2), made of hair and thread, is a long braid of brown hair with five evenly-spaced branches hanging vertically. An image of *Hair Neck Lace* shows a model pinching the ends of the piece and stretching the work across her back as if it were a shawl. The daintiness implied by the "lace" maintains a sense of femininity and beauty, while the branch motif recalls the strength of roots. One could argue that such a piece suggests that knowledge can trickle or grow down the body, almost providing armor for the

⁶⁶Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 72-73.

⁶⁷The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was a major non-violent organization during the Civil Rights Movement.

⁶⁸Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 177.

wearer. *Heritage Pearls* and *Hair Neck Lace* are imbued with the power that Clark seems to recognize in hair. These pieces that allude to jewelry marvel in the texture of hair and reject the sleek and smooth appearance of conventional gems and materials. Through these works, Clark seems to value the tactile nature of unprocessed hair through manipulation, while she also transforms hair into a medium that covers more than just the head. Clark's work is empowered by the notion that one's form of ornamentation is a form of self-presentation and self-expression.

A similar acknowledgement of the importance of the translation of ancestry and history into personal identity is seen in Ford's text, as well as in Clark's *Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy* (2010). As aforementioned, Ford writes of the body as a "site of memory" as dress denotes the ways in which one makes sense of "present realities" and memories. Ford highlights how many college-age women in the seventies in the United States looked to the ways in which their mothers made sense of their experiences and incorporated various practices into their ways of self-fashioning. *Mom's Wisdom or Cotton Candy* features a photo of a large ball of curly white hair, held between two brown-skinned hands. The reference to cotton candy seems to imply that knowledge and heritage can be consumed, similar to the passage of customs through medicine or ritual foods. The title also seems to engage with the continuity of familial customs, practices, and beliefs, as the ball of hair, gray with experience and wisdom, represents the passage of knowledge from one generation to the next, like *Heritage Pearls*.

In Clark's work one can see that the visible expression of identity and ancestry includes the notion of skill through practice and is demonstrated in the ways in which she uses hair to highlight the passage of information. Headpieces such as *Spider* (1998) (Fig. 2.3) and *Onigi:13 Sticks*, evoked the braided styles that Clark's West African neighbors would create on Clark's

hair as a child. Using threads tightly wound into large braids that accentuated sections of the scalp, the wigs emphasize the “radiating energy” of the styles and the intricacies of the braided techniques that passed through the hands of Clark’s neighbors, to her own, and to the media of the headpieces. *The Hair Craft Project* (2014) (Figs. 2.4 & 2.5), is another example of Clark’s conflation and translation of identity through skill and reclamation. During this performance piece, Clark’s own head of hair served as a figuratively blank canvas for twelve female hair braiders, who were also given stretched canvases and thread to further display their technique.

In one photograph of *The Hair Craft Project*, Clark stands against a bright orange background with her back to the camera, while a brown-skinned woman with a blue hair wrap smiles at the camera. Clark’s hair has been elegantly braided, as four two-strand plaits are visible and separated by loops of tightly twisted hair, embellished with beads, that snake up the middle of the back of her head to conjoin with the other loops emanating from the tops of the four two-strand twists and the loops above her ears. In another photograph, the composition is fixed on Clark’s hairstyle, an updo with plaits braided to her head in the shape of a fingerprint. The completed canvases and colorful portraits of the stylists with a shot of each iteration of Clark’s different hairstyles were showcased in galleries in Virginia, Michigan, and Boston. Chaunda King, one of the featured stylists, described how the project caused her to reflect on the cyclical pattern and influence of cultural hairstyling. King states, “Think about all of the different styles that we unleash on client’s hair. None of us have been to Africa, but some of our styles speak volumes, maybe, of our ancestors.”⁶⁹

In 2014, Clark also worked in collaboration with a stylist on a project to reinterpret the

⁶⁹Chaunda King, “Collaborating Hair Artists,” *The Hair Craft Project* (Richmond, Virginia: Sonya Clark, 2015), 41.

hairstyle of an Akan commemorative portrait head from the African collection at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art. Titled *Commemorative Portrait Head*, the sculpture was created as a memorial to a deceased Akan royal family member and was intended to house the spirit of the dead. The ceramic sculpture, which depicts the hairstyle of the deceased, would have been involved in memorial rites and placed on an altar before being moved to a mausoleum. Clark's use of her head as the site of creation and her hair as her medium embodies the sculpture and presents a continuity of customs through the body. Through this direct reinterpretation of a sculptural hairstyle, Clark's work relates to that of Janet Stephens, a hairdresser and "hair-archaeologist"⁷⁰ who has studied and written on Ancient Roman hairstyles as taken from busts, statues and funerary monuments. Though Stephens is not an artist and her intention is not to create works of art, she provides workshops demonstrating the feasibility and process of sculpted Ancient styles to bring them into the 21st century and everyday life. Clark and Stephens shed light on the ways in which hair has been cherished as an art form for centuries, but most importantly, both women highlight the ways in which styling serves to understand and re-present the past.

Sonya Clark part III: Assertions of Femininity and Identity

As the reinterpretation of a pearl necklace, *Heritage Pearls* is an example of Clark's exploration of reclamation of femininity, beauty, and identity through adornment and word play. As an object made of natural hair, *Heritage Pearls* alludes to the complicated relationships that

⁷⁰"Reconstructing Roman Hairstyles with hair archeologist Janet Stephens," The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed Feb 2019, <https://www.unc.edu/event/janet-stephens-workshop/>.

exist between the social practices that give hair value. Relating to the precedent of 19th century hair jewelry, Clark's use of her hair represents her own body. The presence of the words "heritage" and "cultured" on the jewelry box lid of *Heritage Pearls* adds a layer to Clark's work. "Heritage," as defined as something handed down from the past, relates to such as a tradition or legacy, and "culture" refers to the customary beliefs, social forms, practices and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.⁷¹ As a verb, "cultured" refers to the cultivation of living material, such as the cultured pearls that are fostered by an oyster farmer under controlled conditions.⁷² In the context of the hair politics in the female black American experience, one could argue that the word play of "cultured pearls" refers to the ways in which hair has been shaped by black culture and history, as well as by hegemonic notions of beauty. Almost as if to retell a narrative to a viewer, *Heritage Pearls* serves as an implied bond between the artist and viewer that serves as a form of remembrance and power through knowledge.

Through *The Hair Craft Project* and the display of twelve distinctive braided techniques, Clark both prizes the ephemerality of African American hairstyles and solidifies their existence and elegance. The photographs from *The Hair Craft Project* reveal similarities to the work (Fig. 2.6) of Nigerian photographer J.D. Okhai Ojeikere. Ojeikere's black and white images captured the plethora and significance of hair styling and braiding in the lives of Nigerian women in the latter half of the 20th century. Emboldened by the "cultural pride that accompanied Nigerian independence [in 1960]," Ojeikere's photographs praise the beauty behind each hairstyle. Ojeikere feared that an increase in the use of wigs during the fifties threatened traditional

⁷¹"Heritage," Merriam-Webster, Last modified 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heritage>.

⁷²"Culture," Merriam-Webster, Last modified 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture>.

hairdressing.⁷³ Similar to Clark's use of photography in *The Hair Craft Project*, Ojeikere used photography to document forms of cultural history and pride as demonstrated through hair.

When Clark stood against a wall full of Ojeikere's photographs in the fifty-fifth Venice Biennale during the *Hair Craft Project*, her newly plaited hairstyle brought Ojeikere's images and their hairstyle portraits to life. Writing on this impromptu "participation," Brooke Davis Anderson writes:

Upending the curatorial role by deciding to include herself and her collaborators in the largest and oldest international art show in the world and by bringing the art of hairdressing (usually referred to by the mainstream as a 'low art' or 'craft') into one of the most elite art-world projects, the artist slyly answered each and every time when asked if she was a part of the Venice exhibition [or some such], 'Yes, I am in the Biennale, and so are you!'⁷⁴

The *Hair Craft Project* works similarly to *Heritage Pearls* to question notions of class, status and wealth, as it also blurs the boundaries between the global and the local, to expand the reach of Clark's practice. As with much of Clark's work featuring hair, the *Hair Craft Project* and *Heritage Pearls* aim to elevate notions of "craft" and of the feminine to equalize them with the "fine" art of the masculinized and predominantly white museum space and art world.

Through her display of these works of art at global events such as the Venice Biennale, Clark works to validate black hairstyling as an art form. The photographs from the 2014 project

⁷³Regina Woods, "J.D. Okhai Ojeikere: Photographs," by Andre Magnin and *Hair in African Art and Culture*, edited by Roy Seiber and Frank Herreman, *Black Issues Book Review*, 2 no. 6 (November-December, 2000): 46.

⁷⁴Brooke Davis Anderson, "In Venice with Sonya and *The Hair Craft Project*," *The Hair Craft Project*, (Richmond, Virginia: Sonya Clark, 2015), 108.

allowed for around 45,000⁷⁵ visitors to see the work of twelve female entrepreneurs whose goals included the empowerment of women of color and the fostering of healthy hair practices. The places where these healthy natural hair practices typically take place are within a hair salon or the kitchen of a stylist. As Clark commented, “Folks who might not buy an artwork in the traditional sense will spend a lot of money on a hairstyle.”⁷⁶ As such, the *Hair Craft Project* emphasizes the entrepreneurship of twelve women in addition to alluding to the power and visibility of black dollars. It illuminates the ways in which, as Kellie Jones notes, black hair serves as a “tangible crown of African American difference” that “becomes a vehicle for expression and an art form that becomes a method through which we convey our sense of beauty and our creative aspirations.”⁷⁷

Mequitta Ahuja Part 1: Conceptions of Hair as Media

Originally from Michigan, Ahuja is of Indian and African American ancestry. She received degrees from Hampshire College in Massachusetts and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Known primarily for her large paintings that play with text, portraiture, and folklore, Ahuja has exhibited her work globally and around the United States.⁷⁸ Of interest to this analysis is a series of waxy chalk drawings from 2007 to 2009; included in this series is *Tress I* (2008) (Fig. 2.7). Measuring 96 inches by 45 inches, *Tress I* unveils a mass of light and dark gray tones, attached to a brown-skinned head that tilts upwards with its eyes closed and its hair cascading to

⁷⁵Sonya Clark, “Then, Now, and Next: Conversation Between Sonya Clark and Emily Smith,” *The Hair Craft Project*, (Richmond, Virginia: Sonya Clark, 2015), 15.

⁷⁶*Ibid*, 15.

⁷⁷Kellie Jones, “In the Thick of It: David Hammons and Hair Culture in the 1970s,” *Eye Minded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 297-8.

⁷⁸“Mequitta Ahuja,” Mequitta Ahuja, accessed Oct, 2018, <http://www.mequittaahuja.com/biography.html>.

the bottom of the page, resembling a bird's eye view of forest trees or the soft tufts of natural hair. The dismembered head appears to be asleep or in deep thought. Standing in front of *Tress I*, the viewer is confronted with the sheer size of the drawing that magnifies the texture of natural hair through line and tone. Ahuja not only illustrates hair on a flat surface, she also uses hair as an avenue to explore the possibilities of technique and the intricacies of one's subconscious. Moreover, size is one way through which she communicates the visual, invisible, and metaphorical power of hair, especially that of people of color.

Tress I is the first in a series of four drawings using a waxy form of chalk. In *Tress II* (2008), the brown head is slightly tilted to the right as the white gaps of the paper burst through the hair, creating a glowing sensation beneath the tufts. *Tress III* (2008) shows the same head with hair that resembles dense, gray plumes of smoke, or the texture of natural hair that was previously twisted into a braid. *Tress IV* (2009) (Fig. 2.8) shows the brown head tilted upwards at the chin, almost as if it is weighed down by what now are gray and black locs.⁷⁹ *Tress IV* ensnares the eye through these locs that curl and undulate like ropes to extend to the bottom of the page. Ahuja gives her viewers the opportunity to observe at eye level the thinly curved lines, texture and tone of her work, essentially communicating the beauty of black hair through an exploitation of the aesthetic potential of natural textures.

Many of Mequitta Ahuja's paintings and drawings are massive, engulfing the viewer, thus her work is a visual testament to her awareness of the "psychic proportions hair has in the

⁷⁹While the terminology for this style includes: "locks," "dreads," and "dreadlocks," I specifically use the term "locs" to avoid any negative connotations. For more, see Del Sandeen, "'Locs' or 'Locks' in Black Hair," Live About, accessed Mar, 2019, <https://www.liveabout.com/locs-or-locks-400267>.

lives of black people.”⁸⁰ *Tress IV* functions similarly to Cathleen Lewis’s *Extensions (Ethnic Signifiers)* (1996) (Fig. 2.9), a maze-like room, lined from floor to ceiling with synthetic hair wrapped around millinery wire, through which visitors must physically navigate. Created by a female black American artist, the work references the practices of adding synthetic hair to one’s head, in addition to the social constructions and pressures of self-fashioning and adornment.⁸¹ While *Extensions* creates a physical challenge for its viewers unlike Ahuja’s two dimensional depiction of hair, Lewis’s installation and *Tress IV* are similar in the ways in which they utilize the imagery of locs and the metaphorical use of size to refer to experiences in cultural styling and the exploration of a particular type of hair.

During an interview in 2009 with curator Nicole Caruth, Ahuja recounted how her process has progressed over time:

All the color and materials, shiny enamel and sticky oil paint, it can all be, at times, over-stimulating and I find it difficult to harness my own self-control. By limiting my materials and palette, I have opened up other artistic possibilities. Many of the new works could fairly accurately be described as ‘pencil and paper’ and yet I feel the artistic possibilities are inexhaustible.⁸²

Ahuja’s goal seems to be to assert the mystery and the beauty in the tangle, kinks, and texture of hair in her art. Ahuja’s forms are organic and resemble roots in places, or slithering, slender forms such as snakes, entwined ropes, and mazes. The three dimensionality of Ahuja’s two-

⁸⁰Nicole Caruth, “Project Space: Mequitta Ahuja,” ...Might Be Good, accessed Oct 2018, <http://www.fluentcollab.org/mbg/index.php/artistsspace/index/120>.

⁸¹“Cathleen Lewis: Binary Oppositions,” CRG Gallery, accessed March 2019, <http://crggallery.com/exhibitions/cathleen-lewis-binary-oppositions/>.

⁸²Mequitta Ahuja, “Project Space: Mequitta Ahuja,” Interviewed by Nicole Caruth...Might Be Good, accessed Oct 2018, <http://www.fluentcollab.org/mbg/index.php/artistsspace/index/120>.

dimensional works create a sense of volume and body that is strengthened through her interest in experimentation and plays of contrast. Drawings such as *Fount* (2009) (Fig. 2.10) demonstrate the ways in which Ahuja can translate natural hair into explosions of energy and references to art techniques and forms. As a six-paneled piece, *Fount* features two figures who bend at the waist as their hair conjoins in the middle and the smooth waxy medium imitates the softness of inkblots on Japanese silk screen panels.

Many of Ahuja's paintings display a multimedia approach where the treatment of the face differs from the vibrantly tactile rendition of hair. In *Ovulation Chart* (2007), the face is sketched in pencil while the hair, painted with enamel, spreads through the three panels of the work in swirls of dark turquoise, black roots and mysterious oval-shaped forms. Similarly, *Roots* (2008) presents a face sketched in waxy chalk, with enamel-painted hair, that morphs into earth-toned branches that expand around the head. One could also note similarities between Ahuja's work and the collages of Lorna Simpson, another female black American artist. Many of Ahuja's paintings display a multimedia approach that resembles Simpson's collages of *Ebony* magazine models with their hair replaced by colorful wisps and blots of watercolor or newspaper clippings.⁸³ Speaking on the promotion of the beauty of black women and black hair as evident in Simpson's collages, Elizabeth Alexander highlights the enticing mystery of Simpson's watercolors and writes of how Simpson's work transforms hair into galaxies and solar systems.⁸⁴ Simpson's artist statement concerning her collages is a compilation of affirming phrases from the

⁸³A monthly magazine geared towards African Americans.

⁸⁴Elizabeth Alexander, "Of the Black & Boisterous Hair," *Lorna Simpson: Collages* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018).

advertisements that originally accompanied the images of the *Ebony* models. Encouraging black women to “reveal the beauty that [they] conceal,” works such as *Earth & Sky #32* (2016) (Fig. 2.11) replace black hair with images of mineral formations such as stalactites, thus associating hair with nature and strength.⁸⁵ *Earth & Sky #32*, a collage on paper, features a smiling and keeling black woman in a soft green dress, adorned with emerald gems around her neck and waist, that splits into a cape that covers her head.

Earth & Sky #32 resembles an enamel painting on paper, *Crown and Throne* (2007) (Fig. 2.12), where Ahuja’s hair cascades down her back, like a cape, that transforms into the throne on which she sits. Both works feature an elegantly dressed black woman (Ahuja wears a vivid and floral sari) who embraces the hair that has morphed into an element that supports their bodies and that matches the expressions of self-assurance as read on each face. Using hair as a primary medium and influence, Ahuja molds and varies the forms in which her depictions of hair appear and the strength that these vivid iterations demonstrate.

Mequitta Ahuja Part II: Construction of a Black, Feminist Identity

Ahuja, whose work primarily consists of self-portraits in an authoritative female form, credits feminism as the framework through which she learned to understand gender, identity, and race.⁸⁶ Her work attempts to challenge the social constructs that seek to define race and gender, while it nonetheless recognizes the effects of these categories.⁸⁷ As Ahuja explains: “the idea of

⁸⁵Lorna Simpson, “Artist Statement,” *Lorna Simpson: Collages* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018).

⁸⁶Mequitta Ahuja, “Global Feminisms: Mequitta Ahuja,” Lecture, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY, 2007, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/video/videos/global-feminisms-mequitta-ahuja>.

⁸⁷Ibid.

exaggerating [my] hair comes out of the cultural space that hair has in the lives of black people and the way it has embodied our changing ideas of standards of beauty as well as political consciousness.”⁸⁸ Thus, Ahuja’s varied approach to the portrayal of hairstyles associated with women of color relates to the ways in which she conceives of the process of art-making and reinvention. Describing her motivation as an artist Ahuja articulates:

My central intention is to turn the artist’s self-portrait, especially the woman of color’s self-portrait, long circumscribed by identity, into a discourse on picture-making, past and present. By positioning a woman of color as primary picture-maker in whose hands the figurative tradition is refashioned, I knit my contemporary concerns, personal and painterly, into the centuries old conversation of representation.⁸⁹

As Romi Crawford asserts, Ahuja’s paintings “interject aspects of a communal or shared history, personal mythologies, and the social imaginary into the discourse of self-portraiture.”⁹⁰

Ahuja, who identifies as “ethnically mixed, as Indian, as South Asian, as black, [and] as African American,”⁹¹ frequently discusses her interest in Audre Lorde’s concept “biomythography,” as presented in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. As a book that is part “autobiography, poetry, narrative, myth, and revisionist history,” *Zami* introduced Lorde’s feminist-empowered “biomythography” genre that allowed her to mediate the tensions between cherishing the legacy and cultural memories of her Afro-Caribbean history and writing her own

⁸⁸“Tress IV,” Minneapolis Institute of Art, accessed Feb 2019, <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/108869/tress-iv-mequitta-ahuja>.

⁸⁹“Biography,” Mequitta Ahuja, accessed Oct. 2018, <http://www.mequittaahuja.com/biography.html>.

⁹⁰Romi Crawford, “Mequitta Ahuja: Afro-Galaxy,” *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1.

⁹¹“Dream Region” By Mequitta Ahuja (2009),” War Baby/Love Child: Mixed Race Asian American Art, last modified Jan 17, 2013, <http://www.warbabylovechild.com/dream-region-by-mequitta-ahuja/>

subjectivity and self-autonomy.⁹² Ahuja explained the significance of *Zami*, which she first encountered in college, and works by other black female authors:

The story is important because at that point in my life, I literally had so few encounters with other Black people, especially Black men, that I experienced each encounter as very significant...much of my understanding of my own ethnic experiences began with literature, shaped by authors such as Lorde, Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison...It is important to me to link back to that 'parentage' of Black, female, creative production, especially since my work deals with personal agency in the formation of one's identity.⁹³

Inspired by Lorde's belief in a "pliable and open rather than fixed and resolute self," Ahuja's work is the conduit through which she explores and maintains her relationship with each group "on her own terms," despite the lack of black culture during her childhood in a predominantly white community in Connecticut.⁹⁴

Through an adaptation of Lorde's biomythography into what she calls an "auto-mythic" framework, works such as *Dream Region* (2009) (Fig. 2.13) demonstrate Ahuja's attention to line to "maximize the visual and metaphoric potential" of hair in her work.⁹⁵ Measuring 78" x 104," *Dream Region presents* a brown head turned upside down and suspended in space at the neck. The peaceful expression on the figure's face contrasts with the explosion of energy, color and texture that emanates from her head. The hair of the figure begins as small multi-colored circles before becoming large swatches of line and color. Dark gray tendrils resembling the locs

⁹²Anh Hua, "Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Erotic Embodied Memory, and the Affirmation of Difference," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 36, no. 1 (2015): 113-114.

⁹³Mequitta Ahuja, "Project Space: Mequitta Ahuja," Interviewed by Nicole Caruth.

⁹⁴Ibid; Crawford, "Mequitta Ahuja: Afro-Galaxy."

⁹⁵Mequitta Ahuja, "Project Space: Mequitta Ahuja."

from *Tress IV* snake in and out of the explosion and a large gray circle with white streaks resembling graffiti marks the meeting point of the two panels. Ahuja uses hair in images such as *Dream Region* to invoke a “visual stream of consciousness”⁹⁶ that, similar to Sonya Clark’s work, suggests that hair is a source of endless power, possibilities, and knowledge. *Dream Region* (2009) is an example of Ahuja’s positioning of a woman of color as the primary picture-maker, in charge of her own portrait.

Afrogalaxy (2007) (Fig. 2.14) is one of several paintings that blend aspects of Ahuja’s identities, as the figure balances a massive afro while also wearing clothing that relates to the artist’s Indian heritage. The enamel painted diptych features a self-portrait of Ahuja, dressed in an elaborately layered skirt and green embroidered tunic (a salwar kameez or a sari), and a brown shawl.⁹⁷ Ahuja bends at the waist with her arms and head raised. Her hair forms the shape of an afro that engulfs the majority of the two panels; within this hair is a glimpse of a dark, dripping galaxy of white stars and what appears to be a red comet or star streaming from Ahuja’s ears. Is the afro weighing her down or pulling her up like a balloon? Why is her clothing painted in vivid and smooth enamel, while her afro and its energetic dashes of paint drip like wet strands of hair? *Afrogalaxy* is open to the experiences of the viewer’s interpretation of the multiple motifs in her paintings.

In her essay, “Mequitta Ahuja: Identity of the Plural,” Rina Banerjee describes Ahuja’s

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Rina Banerjee, “Mequitta Ahuja: Identity in the Plural,” Mequitta Ahuja, accessed Oct. 2018, http://www.mequittaahuja.com/uploads/5/2/9/4/5294795/mequitta_ahuja_by_rina_banerjee_for_usable_pasts_p.1_and_p.2_3.pdf.

hair work as the “most private of landscapes into which viewers are invited.”⁹⁸ Finding strength in the unfixed nature of Ahuja’s work, Banerjee praises what she calls the work’s creation of a “fabric of global consciousness that speaks to identity in the plural and the complicated flows particular to cross-cultural exchange and global migration, as well as racial and social awareness.”⁹⁹ Ahuja presents an empowered and feminist consciousness of the self through a vivid and explosive transformation of hair, as enhanced by its significance for women (especially women of color).

Conclusion

This chapter examined the work of Sonya Clark and Mequitta Ahuja. While both artists use hair as imagery in their art as a means to unpack and honor their respective backgrounds, Clark’s use of hair focuses on the ways in which hair and hairstyling can be used to emphasize expertise and knowledge, revisit history, and blur the distinctions between “fine art” and “craft.” Ahuja’s work revels in the use of technique, process, and tone to amplify the intricacies and significance of black hair, while her work also uses hair to embody the conceptualization of one’s own identity. The next chapter continues the discussion of apartheid in South Africa and places the legacy and aftermath of this period in conversation with the work of Tracey Rose and Zanele Muholi.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE: BLACK HAIR AS CONSCIOUSNESS AND MEDIUM IN SOUTH AFRICA

This chapter analyzes the work of Zanele Muholi and Tracey Rose while addressing the intersections of media, performance of identity, and feminist criticisms in their work. I will provide a brief overview of South African Apartheid in order to illuminate the oppressions experienced by women classified as black and colored. I will then analyze how the use of hair in two of Tracey Rose's performance pieces, *Span I & Span II* and *Ongetitled*, engages with her experiences as a colored woman and with her negotiations of gender and femininity. I will also explore Zanele Muholi's photography series *Somnyama Ngonyama*, and the ways in which her varied hairstyles within this series communicate the pain of her experiences as a queer black woman in South Africa.

The Threads of the Apartheid State and the Female Body

Although forms of racialized oppression had existed in South Africa for decades, the system of race laws, known as Apartheid, dictated every aspect of public and personal life. Apartheid became a national policy in 1948 and lasted until the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994. Under the Population Registration Act of 1950, South Africans were divided into four racial categories: Black or African, white, colored, or Indian, later categorized as Asian, based on skin color, hair texture, facial features, language, and socioeconomic status. Although a system of pass laws had also existed in South Africa since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the enforcement of policies such as the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Abolition of Passes

and Coordination of Documents Act of 1952 required that black and colored men and women carry passbooks to signal that they were employed, and thus justified in their travels through “white” areas.¹⁰⁰ The failure to carry these documents, which detailed a person’s address, marital status, employment record, list of taxes paid, and rural residential district, could result in a prison sentence.¹⁰¹

The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 was implemented through policies such as the Immorality Acts of the 1950s that restricted marriage and/or sexual relations between whites and non-whites.¹⁰² The Group Areas Act divided the country into geographic regions based on racial occupation and gave the government the power to declare “an area as fit for occupation by one group and forcibly removing existing occupants from any other groups,” or destroying non-white neighborhoods.¹⁰³ Non-whites in South Africa were disempowered and subjected to separate and unequal resources, jobs, public facilities, education. This even extended to the separate use of cemeteries and blood donation.¹⁰⁴ The Bantu Education Act of 1953 advocated for the separation of development and education, removed school subsidies, which place mission schools under government control, and placed an emphasis on the creation of a semi-skilled black labor force.¹⁰⁵ The Extension of University Act also prohibited established

¹⁰⁰Clark, “Early Apartheid Legislation,” 50.

¹⁰¹Ibid, 50.

¹⁰²Ibid, 51.

¹⁰³Ibid, 51

¹⁰⁴David Welsh, *The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (Jonathan Ball Publishers: Johannesburg & Cape Town, 2009), 56.

¹⁰⁵“Extension of University Act No 45 Commences,” *South African History Online*, last modified, 2015 <http://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/extension-university-education-act-no-45-commences>.

universities from accepting students of color without special permission, leading instead to the creation of specific schools for persons classified as African, colored, or Indian.

Furthermore, the non-white South African body was scrutinized as Apartheid reached into the daily and private life. As aforementioned in the introduction, hair was policed and defined through practices that included the “pencil test” that was used to determine one’s race. Following the democratic elections and fall of apartheid, Annette Blum argues that South African women had to fight for “human rights before they could fight for ‘women’s rights’ or ‘feminist issues.’”¹⁰⁶ Organizations such as the African National Congress Women’s League and the Federation of South African Women fought to protect civil rights for all South Africans.¹⁰⁷ Blum emphasizes the important role that women (African, colored, and Indian as well as white) played in the foundation of post-apartheid South Africa, and in part, credits this to the consolidation of one of the most progressive constitutions for human and women’s rights in the world.

In addition to the complexity of competing goals between women’s groups, and the inability of Western forms of feminism to address the concerns of South African women, Blum adds that South African women have also dealt with the ways in which their gendered concerns have been overshadowed by the struggle for political freedom and seen as divisive.¹⁰⁸ In her examination of the establishment of a new South African feminism, Amanda Kemp states:

First our identities as women are shaped by race, class, and gender, and these identities have molded our particular experiences of gender oppression. Second, our struggles as

¹⁰⁶Annette Blum, "Public Memory, Private Truths: Voices of Women and Visual Narrative in Post-Apartheid South Africa," (PhD diss., York University, 2010), ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global (749218684), 40.

¹⁰⁷Ibid, 35.

¹⁰⁸Ibid, 35.

feminists encompass the struggle for national liberation from a brutal white state. Furthermore, the liberation of black people as a whole is a feminist issue. Third, we have to challenge and transform black patriarchies even though black men have been our allies in the fight for national liberation.¹⁰⁹

This post-apartheid form of feminism analyzes black women's experiences of multiple oppressions but also includes the developmental challenges of the post-apartheid nation and the attempts to mediate the diversity of goals within women's activist groups in South Africa. It is within the context of these issues that this chapter will discuss the use of hair by Tracey Rose and Zanele Muholi.

Tracey Rose Part 1: Performances of Identity

Tracey Rose was born in 1974 in Durban, South Africa. She received a B.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. Her work has been shown in South Africa, the United States, and around Europe. Rose is known primarily for her performance, photographic, and video pieces that feature multiple characters meant to blur the boundaries between fixed notions of race, sexuality, and gender. Of interest to this thesis are the performances pieces, *Span I & Span II* and *Ongetiteld*.

Span II (1997) (Fig. 3.1) was displayed at the *Graft* exhibition at the Iziko South African National Gallery in Cape Town as a part of the second Johannesburg Biennale. Rose places herself within a typical museum glass case framed by bronze beams. As the photographs that captured the performance demonstrate, the case was tucked into a tight niche with white walls and molding inside of a large gallery space within a museum. Sitting nude with crossed legs on

¹⁰⁹Amanda Kemp, Madlala Nosiswe, and Elaine Salo, "The Dawn of a New Day: Redefining South African Feminism." *The challenge of local feminisms: women's movements in global perspective* (Ed. Amrita Basu, Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 131-162.

top of an upturned monitor, Rose focuses on the pile of dark brown human hair in her lap as she knots the strands in between her fingers. The monitor plays a close-up of Rose's nude torso and hands, and a larger pile of curly dark hair lies at her feet. Photographs of the installation show museum-goers standing around the work, some bending close to the glass to understand what is happening. In every photograph of the performance, Rose sits unphased, concentrated on the task at hand, as the manipulation of her own hair provides a respite and space to reflect. Rose notes that the work speaks generally to "the emotional and physical domination of women by men in addition to her own personal concerns."¹¹⁰ *Span II*, was accompanied by *Span I* (Fig. 3.2) (1997) which will be discussed in this chapter within the overall focus on *Span II*. In this piece, a formerly imprisoned black South African man in an orange jumpsuit sits on a stool and writes Rose's memories on a white wall.

Ongetiteld (Fig. 3.3) is a video in which Rose stands nude in a bathroom and shaves off the hair from her body. Running on a loop, the video captures Rose beginning with the hair on her head before moving on to the rest of her body. Like *Span II*, Rose again ignores the viewer, who this time is replaced by a surveillance camera that is placed in a high corner of the bathroom. Lee-At Meyerov notes that the video's loop toys with the conception of time, and that the only indication of the sequence is the growing pile of hair on the floor.¹¹¹ *Ongetiteld* was featured in the *Purity and Danger* exhibition held at the Gertrude Posel Gallery in Johannesburg in 1996, where nine South African artists used the body as a way to engage in what was

¹¹⁰Tracey Rose, "Interview with Tracey Rose," Interviewed by Rory Bester, *Democracy's Image* (Lundstrom and Pierre, eds., 1990-93).

¹¹¹Lee-At Meyerov, "The Use of Hair as a Manifestation of Cultural and Gender Identity in the Works of Tracey Rose," (Master's thesis., University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2006), <http://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/handle/10539/4743>. 31.

considered taboo.¹¹² Within the following sections I utilize Rose's experiences during apartheid and the ways in which colored identity is viewed today to analyze the significance of Rose's performances.

Rose's work draws inspiration from the complexities of her own family history and the workings of classificatory systems under apartheid, which intimately affected the family unit and the individual. Apartheid defined black and white as primary markers of identity and essentialized blackness and whiteness into homogenous categories.¹¹³ Any other group or individual who could not be easily classified as black or white due to an interracial relationship or racial indeterminacy was seen as a threat to the "purity" these defined categories.¹¹⁴ This indeterminacy meant that the colored body was "not only not white, but less than white; not only black, but better than black."¹¹⁵ As a visible marker of one's ancestry, hair participated in the humiliation, pain, and subjugation of the colored body.

Due to her German and Khoisan ancestry, Rose was considered colored. Thus, her work deals with her memories of how her hair and body played a substantial role in her childhood.¹¹⁶

Rose states:

Hair is significant in colored communities. It marks you in certain ways, towards blackness or whiteness. On the one hand, it's about the 'privilege' of having straight hair

¹¹²Steven C. Dublin, "A Visceral Reaction," *Spearheading Debate: Culture Wars & Uneasy Truces* (Jacana Media, 2012), 45.

¹¹³Meyerov, "The Use of Hair as a Manifestation," 31.

¹¹⁴*Ibid*, 31.

¹¹⁵Zimitri Erasmus, *Coloured by History, Shaped by Place: New Perspectives on Coloured Identities in Cape Town* (Cape Town: Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001), 13.

¹¹⁶Sue Williamson, "Tracey Rose," *Art Throb*, last modified Mar 2001, <http://artthrob.co.za/01mar/artbio.html>.

as opposed to *kroes* [kinky or frizzy] hair, but on the other hand, having straight hair meant you were often insulted for thinking you were white, for pretending to be white.¹¹⁷

Consequently, *Span II* and *Ongetiteld* confront the ways in which hair was used to divide and alienate. Elaborating on *Span II*, Rose explains:

With my naked body on the TV I wanted to negate the passivity of the action of the reclining nude. In doing the piece, I had to confront what I wasn't supposed to do with my body. The work is a cleansing act, a coming out. The knotting not only invokes the rosary beads of my childhood, but also the working with one's hands, and the meaning of this handiwork as form of empowerment.¹¹⁸

Part of the power of *Span II* resides in the process of knotting that seems to allow Rose to mentally transcend the glass case and disregard the viewers who soon realize that they are in fact being ignored. Rose's shaved body appears to give her a sense of liberation, as the removal of her hair allows her to manipulate and come to terms with her memories and her relationship with the hair that broadcast her "otherness." Moreover, the process of knotting keeps Rose busy as she essentially creates a textile piece using hair within the larger scope of her performance.

During the development of the Black Consciousness Movement in the mid-1960s in South Africa, persons of color were encouraged to see themselves as agents of change with the ability to improve their own lives, in addition to the well-being of the community.¹¹⁹ Under this ideology, the term black was utilized to represent and empower the non-white body. This meant that the term also incorporated those classified as Indian and colored.¹²⁰ In her analysis of the need for a reconceptualization of colored identity, Zimitri Erasmus notes:

¹¹⁷Rose, "Tracey Rose."

¹¹⁸ Williamson, "Tracey Rose."

¹¹⁹Hill, "Shaping Modern Black Culture," 4.

¹²⁰Alubafi, et. Al, "The shifting image," 3.

The re-imagining of colored identity most importantly necessitates a rejection of the derogatory notion of coloredness, as being a product of ‘miscegenation’ and ‘race mixture,’ as the implicit connotations of ‘impurity,’ ‘illegitimacy,’ and ‘immorality,’ have only contributed to the ongoing marginalization of the colored people.¹²¹

Erasmus argues for a positive conception of colored identity that is analyzed and constructed through an engagement with one’s diverse ancestry as opposed to the racist connotations of Apartheid segregation. A post-apartheid study on colored identity conducted in 2011 by Janette Yarwood reiterates that this categorization and form of identification continues to be contested space.¹²² In her case study, she notes how some South Africans have attempted to problematize, reinvent or reject the term to identify instead with notions of “blackness” that are based on feelings of rootlessness and oppression.¹²³ In doing so, these attempts demonstrate the ways in which peoples categorized as colored are bypassing South African terminology and misconceptions to reinforce that the colored experience was still “plagued by inequities” during Apartheid.¹²⁴ One way that colored South African youth are finding ways to express their conceptions of their diverse ancestries and identities is by borrowing from articulations of “blackness” by black American culture, particularly through the adoption of locs and natural hairstyles and the celebration of hair. Perhaps as Rose revisits her memories, she also uses hair to weave together a vision of what the conception of mixed-race identities could mean in post-apartheid South Africa.

¹²¹Meyerov, “The Use of Hair as a Manifestation,” 43.

¹²²Janette Yarwood, “With Mixed Feelings: Negotiating Coloured Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” (PhD. diss., The City University of New York, 2011), 225.

¹²³Ibid, 225.

¹²⁴Ibid, 226.

Tracey Rose Part II: Hair Removal as Reclamation

Rose says *Ongetiteld* is about “de-masculating and de-feminising my body, shaving off the masculine and feminine hair. This kind of de-sexualisation carries with it a certain kind of violence. The piece is about making myself unattractive and unappealing.”¹²⁵ Through this piece, Rose renders hair useless as the signifier that has defined and constricted bodies of color, especially for women. Tanisha Ford notes that during anti-apartheid struggles, women carried the burden of uplifting races of color, and that the female South African body and head became the “surfaces upon which African notions of beauty, pride, health, and prosperity were projected.”¹²⁶ However, Rose’s removal of her hair is an act against the history of these gendered expectations, and a reclamation of the female body for the self.

Consequently, it is notable that Rose’s use of hair explores both the power of the fiber in addition to its banality. In her installation and performance piece, *The Kiss*, Rose sits nude, balanced in the lap of a nude black man, who is also her American art dealer. In photographs of the work, the two figures do not kiss, rather, they smile into one another’s faces. Their statuesque pose resembles Auguste Rodin’s *The Kiss*, albeit less sensual and intense than the 1901-4 sculpture of the two lovers by the French sculptor. Ashraf Jamal asserts that “the iconic or representational quality of the work dissolves...[and] through the obvious [Rose] has managed to point a way forward.”¹²⁷ Rose’s *The Kiss* suggests a future for South Africa forged in tolerance,

¹²⁵Williamson, “Tracey Rose.”

¹²⁶Ford, *Liberated Threads*, 175.

¹²⁷Ashraf Jamal, “The Bearable Lightness of Tracey Rose’s *The Kiss*,” “The Bearable Lightness of Tracey Rose’s ‘The Kiss,’” In *A Decade of Democracy 1994-2004: From the Permanent Collection of Iziko, South African National Gallery*, edited by Emma Bedford (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2004), 108.

whereby through a direct confrontation with an interracial “couple” in an intimate act, Rose negates the shock of the couple and dismisses a binary reading about race and gender. Although hair is not a critical component to *The Kiss*, its message is nonetheless relevant to *Span II* and *Ongetiteld*. These works attempt to nullify the specificity with which race can be essentialized, reminding us that hair and the body are natural entities, instead of tools of discrimination.

In *Span I*, the ex-prisoner writes on a wall what Rose couldn’t express as a child such as: her sensitivities to skin, hair, and eye color that affected how she responded to her family and friends (Fig. 3.4). Analyzing the concept of the quotidian in Rose’s work, Annie Coombes highlights how this confession and “stream of consciousness” provides a form of healing and reflection. Rose emphasizes that “the wall’s a purge and a perversion of the idea of a lack of penance, where I become vindicated through the act of employing an ex-prisoner to ‘perform’ my confession.” By focusing on the “daily life,” both iterations of *Span* function to fill in the gaps left by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s “presentation of broad narratives” for which the colored experience was not a “staple.”¹²⁸ Coombes notes that while Rose is one of the many artists in post-apartheid South Africa to revisit unhealed experiences, she is one of the few to actively question her complicity in Apartheid.¹²⁹ Rose’s work seems to capitalize on the power of her nude body to assert a significant statement against hegemonic impositions of categories of sexuality, identity, or race. As Rose manipulates her media of choice in the face of the viewer,

¹²⁸Seen as necessary for the transition to a free democracy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by the Government of National Unity. Through a series of public hearings and the establishment of three committees (the Amnesty Committee, Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee, and the Human Rights Violations Committee), the TRC was meant to investigate the violence and human rights abuses that occurred during apartheid. See: “Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission, last modified 2018, www.justice.gov.za/trc/.

¹²⁹Annie Coombes, *History After Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Duke University Press, 2003), 254.

and by extension, in the face of South Africa's history of discrimination, the control that she enacts on her hair is symbolic of the control that she regains over her present and future.

Zanele Muholi Part 1: Performance of identity

Zanele Muholi was born in 1972 in Umlazi, South Africa. In 2003, she completed an Advanced Photography course at the Market Photo Workshop in Newtown, Johannesburg, and received an M.F.A. in Documentary Media from the Ryerson University in Toronto. Muholi, who is black and identifies as lesbian, calls herself a “visual activist.” In describing her role she states: “I’ve made it my duty to produce content that spoke to me, that had to do with our own lives because I’m one of us--not one of them.”¹³⁰ Muholi emphasizes that her work focuses on bringing visibility, justice and tolerance for the black LGBTQI+ community in South Africa, which has been plagued by numerous hate crimes and “corrective rapes” committed against women, despite South Africa’s Constitution which guarantees a freedom of gender and sexuality.¹³¹ Through photography series such as *Faces and Phases* (2006-) and *Only Half the Picture* (2003-04), Muholi “offers a glimpse into the varied experiences, rituals, joys, and hardships of her subjects.”¹³² This portion of chapter three will analyze Muholi’s newest series of 365 images, *Somnyama Ngonyama* (Hail the Dark Lioness) (2015-), in which Muholi turned the lens on herself daily.¹³³

¹³⁰Zanele Muholi, "Hail! The Dark Lioness: Zanele Muholi," Interviewed by Ellen Agnew, *Art Africa*, no. 10 (2017): 56.

¹³¹*Ibid*, 56.

¹³²"Zanele Muholi," Guggenheim, accessed Feb 2019, <http://exhibitions.guggenheim.org/storylines/zanele-muholi?index=0>.

¹³³Zanele Muholi, "Zanele Muholi," Stevenson, accessed Feb 2019, <https://stevenson.info/exhibition/1440>.

Taking the form of full body and three-quarter portrait compositions, *Somnyama Ngonyama* presents Muholi engaging with various props, environments, and backgrounds. Each photograph in *Somnyama Ngonyama* references a particular person or event, as identified by the first portion of the titles, while the second portion of each title marks the location where the image was photographed during Muholi's travels. *Somnyama Ngonyama* is a very personal series, as it deals with Muholi's own experiences and what "irritates her about race and racism."¹³⁴ I argue that *Somnyama Ngonyama* goes further than serving as a visual diary in that it also addresses the ways in which the racism is still experienced by persons of color around the world.¹³⁵ In this series, Muholi objectifies her body and turns her hair into a conversation contextualized by the significance of certain objects.

Apartheid forced black South Africans over the age of sixteen to carry reference books, also known as "passbooks" or *dompas*.¹³⁶ These passbooks, which included a person's photograph for quick identification, used the strong flash of the Polaroid ID-2 camera to effectively capture dark skin.¹³⁷ Muholi, who is known for her manipulation of contrast, deconstructs and reframes this history to enhance her performance by emphasizing the dark tones of her skin and the vivid highlights and textures of the props she uses.

Muholi's experimentation with hair is significant because her portraits demonstrate the ways in which she makes sense of reactions to her blackness abroad and to her observations of

¹³⁴Muholi, "Zanele Muholi," 58.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

¹³⁶M. Neelika Jayawardane, "Heeding the Dark Lioness's Call," *Somnyama Ngonyama* (Aperture, 2018), 170-171.

¹³⁷*Ibid.*, 170-171.

the experiences of black women in South Africa. Speaking on a conflict in Pretoria in 2016 where students were reprimanded due to their Afro hairstyles, Muholi asks, “As a student, how are you expected to concentrate if your educator tells you that your natural hair is ‘untidy?’ You see this person on a daily basis, in a space where you are supposed to be receiving an education.”¹³⁸ Muholi acknowledges the hair politics within her work that relate to the ways in which black hairstyles can warrant unwanted attention and highlight one’s feelings of “otherness.” Muholi states:

I used materials that spoke to my presumed cultural identity as an African, while referencing a particular historical mode of representation. All of this stereotyping inspires a deep-seated hatred of the Black body, from head to toe: facial features, eyes, lips, everything. It could either be wild, as in uncultured, savage, or how your hair is defined as ‘nappy,’ ‘dirty’ --- all those things.¹³⁹

MaID X (Fig. 3.5) (2015) features Muholi assertively staring into the lens with a necklace of porcupine quills around her neck and a crown of quills encircling a bun of hair. Essentially warning, “Don’t touch my hair,” the sharp adornments in the photograph function to maintain a sense of privacy against invasions of personal space.¹⁴⁰

Zanele Muholi Part II: Feminism Through Media

This section will demonstrate how Muholi’s use of charged objects as adornment for her head serves to complete her self-portrait and performance. The messages encoded into Muholi’s hair allow her to embody the realities of post-apartheid South Africa and revisit the narratives of

¹³⁸Zanele Muholi, “Archive of the Self: Renee Mussai in Conversation with Zanele Muholi,” Interviewed by Renee Mussai. *Somnyama Ngonyama* (Aperture, 2018), 178.

¹³⁹*Ibid*, 178.

¹⁴⁰Mussai, “Archive of the Self,” 181.

a specific person or place. In *Bester I, Mayotte* (2015) (Fig. 3.6) Zanele Muholi stands against a blurred background as she faces the camera head on with a furrowed brow. The richness of her dark skin, purposely emphasized, contrasts against the shimmering eye-shadow on her eyelids and the white pigment painted around her lips. Her hair has been pulled into a bun while tan or white clothespins form rows of circles around her head, sticking out at various angles, almost resembling a crown. Clamped on her ears are two clothespins and a third clothespin cinches the woven shawl that sits around her shoulders. The iconography of clothespins suggests a reference to cleaning and manual labor, but within the history and present of South Africa, clothespins also reference the decades of domestic work performed by women of color. As one of the largest sources of employment for black women, domestic labor has been the most sustained avenue for black women's participation (around one million) in South Africa's economy.¹⁴¹

Despite legislation to provide minimum wage for domestic workers, a study from 2006 called the industry the "last bastion of apartheid," one that leaves many women overworked, underpaid and vulnerable to exploitation.¹⁴² Muholi is no stranger to this history as her mother, Bester Ziqubu Muholi, the namesake of the aforementioned photograph, worked as a domestic worker for four decades until her retirement.¹⁴³ Muholi speaks of the pain of her mother's work that, as was often the case with most workers, pulled her away from her own family. Muholi recalled her desires, like many other black South African children, of wishing to be adopted by

¹⁴¹Gabeba Baderoon, "Ghost in the House: Women, Race and Domesticity in South Africa," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, 1, no. 2 (September 2014): 177.

¹⁴²Jennifer Fish, *Domestic Democracy: At Home in South Africa* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 81. 178.

¹⁴³Baderoon, "Ghost in the House," 182.

her mother's boss in the hopes of better opportunities in life.¹⁴⁴ However, such desires only added to the fractured relationship between mothers of color and their actual families.

In *Bester I*, Muholi doesn't simply gaze at the camera; rather, she confronts the lens with a pained expression of sorrow or anger as emphasized by her furrowed brow. In addition to pain, one could argue that this image speaks to confinement. It appears that Muholi has tried to dress elegantly, as she wears a shawl, "jewelry," and has appeared to tastefully style her hair. However, the materials used to adorn her ears and construct her hair are the tools that recall bondage and the imbalanced relationships of apartheid. One could argue that *Bester I* alludes to the desire to imagine a better life or a more positive perception of the self despite one's reality that deems her life as subservient to others.

Another photograph entitled *Bester V, Mayotte* (Fig. 3.7) (2015) engages with this familial history. Here, Muholi poses against a stark black background. Posed in the nude in a three-quarter portrait with a face free of makeup, Muholi wears what appears to be circular scouring pads arranged in a circle around her head. Referred to as balls of *skuurpot*, Jackie Mondi notes how for many black South African women, these balls evoke memories of restrictions and pain, both physical and mental.¹⁴⁵ The pads form the shape of a crown as if again, to suggest a woman reclaiming her identity and beauty despite the actuality of her situation. The metallic material of the balls become the focal point as Muholi's skin blends into the background. *Ntozakhe II* (2016) (Fig. 3.8) presents a contrast between the statuesque and darkened figure of Muholi and the light grey background. Muholi, who looks away from the

¹⁴⁴Ibid, 185.

¹⁴⁵Jackie Mondi, "Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama*," *Somnyama Ngonyama*. (Aperture, 2018), 27.

camera, wears a satin cloth around her shoulders and crown of black hair doughnuts that form an afro or a halo on her head. Modeled in part after the Statue of Liberty, *Ntozakhe* represents the visual translation of an assertive idea of pride in femininity and blackness.¹⁴⁶ On one hand, the suggestion of an afro or halo as displayed on Muholi's head in *Ntozakhe* resonates with Alubafi et al.'s argument that hair is one way in which contemporary South African women are reinventing and reclaiming their identities. On the other hand, *Ntozakhe* joins the *Bester* series in questioning the reality of what "freedom" means for women of color in South Africa.

Muholi's focus on domestic workers relates to Alexandra Dodd's observation that black South African artists have the ability to inject a sense of freedom and liberation into their work by stepping into the shoes of their forebears.¹⁴⁷ Through the *Somnyama Ngonyama* series, Muholi reimagines the dreams and identities of her female ancestors and other women engaged in domestic work. Nonetheless, one could question how much gratification and autonomy for black women can be derived from the utilization of charged objects such as cleaning tools, now used for personal adornment. Writing on post-apartheid work that plays with sartorial excess through multimedia, Mary Corrigan argues that as the illusion of change is added to the illusion of democracy, the demand for social mobility often finds an avenue through fashion and that which cannot be attained.¹⁴⁸ Similar to how Corrigan reads examples of post-apartheid art as warnings against unrealistic associations between freedom and equality, one could argue that

¹⁴⁶Mondi, "Zanele Muholi's *Somnyama Ngonyama*," 27.

¹⁴⁷Alexandra Dodd, "Dressed to Thrill: The Victorian Postmodern and Counter-Archival Imaginings in the Work of Mary Sibande," *Critical Arts* 24, no. 3 (December 2010): 472.

¹⁴⁸Mary Corrigan, "Sartorial Excess in Mary Sibande's *Sophie*," *Critical Arts* 29, no. 2 (2015): 162.

Muholi's use of "extravagant" hair adornments and portraits also questions the realities of a democratic South Africa and what a liberation of the self can mean.

In *Nolwazi II, Nuoro, Italy* (2015) (Fig. 3.9) Muholi stands in front of a shimmering black tarp, riddled with folds. She herself stands in the nude as she looks over her right shoulder, arresting the viewer with an indignant stare. Again, she wears a furrowed brow and has applied a tint to her lips to make them stand out against the darkness of her skin. Her long dreadlocks have been twisted again into an updo hairstyle that is punctuated with dozens of markers with white caps. Muholi appears insecure and vulnerable, almost looking to the viewer for answers. The image appears to present a reference to the pencil test, although this time, the writing implements are *markers*, around which Muholi's locs, a signifier of her "blackness," have a firm grip. M. Neelika Jayawardane elaborates on Muholi's performance and the ways in which stereotypical notions of "blackness" are imposed on Black and African bodies and psyches. Does the shiny material of the background imply a mirror? Do the markers represent a desire among people of color to change their skin tone? Perhaps it could be argued that Muholi implicates any person who has considered or desired to change the color of their skin or the texture of their hair for whatever reason.

Muholi's photographs allow a multiplicity of readings that "remind us that blackness does not exist only in opposition to whiteness."¹⁴⁹ Instead, Muholi's photographs emphasize texture and the richness of dark melanin, while also exploring notions of "blackness" through the lived experience. *Somnyama Ngonyama* represents Muholi's ability to transform her body into an example of communicative imagery by pulling from the history of the aesthetic and specific

¹⁴⁹Agnew, "Hail! The Dark Lioness," 64.

use of hair styling as a tool of communicating one's membership, beliefs, status, etc. It is through the conflation of hair and prop and an emphasis on the head that Muholi brings about visibility and vulnerability to a personal yet relatable black experience, that also serves as site of performance for a retelling of both South Africa's history and present.

Conclusion

This chapter examined two performance pieces by Tracey Rose and specific photographs from the *Somnyama Ngonyama* series by Zanele Muholi. I analyzed the ways in which both artists have incorporated hair into their engagement with their experiences during and after apartheid: for one as a catharsis, and for the other as an embodiment of the past. Both artists reference and reinterpret the forms in which apartheid ensured that they, as black female South Africans, experienced life differently. Through a manipulation of obvious "markers" of physiognomy such as hair, Rose and Muholi reclaim their identities, while they also use hair as a tool to implicate South Africa's racist past and reflect its conflicted present. The final chapter will revisit the work of Sonya Clark and Mequitta Ahuja to place the two American artists in conversation with Rose and Muholi to establish links and compare the media presented by each artist.

CONCLUSION: TYING UP LOOSE ENDS

This thesis has been interested in the relationships between contemporary art and the use of fashion, the body, and hair styling as tools within the politics of resistance by female artists of color. The introduction analyzed how the effects of racist and segregationist policies in the United States and South Africa led to the formation of non-violent practices that included the use of hair as a statement of being. The first body chapter chronicled the development of these practices of self-fashioning against the backdrop of discrimination in the United States and in South Africa. The second chapter addressed two American artists, and surveyed the hair sculptures and performative works of Sonya Clark, and the large-scale drawings and mixed media paintings of Mequitta Ahuja. The third chapter turned to the installation and video work of Tracey Rose and the photography of Zanele Muholi, both from South Africa. This conclusion will revisit the artists presented and review specific works. It will then analyze the development of the black hair care market in the early twentieth century, and the ways in which this legacy continues to contribute to the exploration of a racial and social consciousness in art through hair.

Although the women included in this thesis are not the only contemporary black female artists to have used hair in art, the work of these artists presents four cases of the use of black hair as a concept and medium to address the complexity and vibrancy of both a personal and communal identity. These artists draw from the plethora of meanings that are associated with hair, to demonstrate the variety of statements that can be communicated through hair as understood and explained through context. These artists illustrate how hair can be used in

conjunction with other media and processes that expand upon what hair can resemble, signify, and perform. The power of hair comes from the lived experience, and as a result, hair work capitalizes on our relationships with the body to create a response in the viewer.

In Clark's work, hair functions as a response to and continuation of the use of hair as an element of expression and as an art form by black women in the United States and in Africa. Similar to the ways in which Tanisha Ford analyzes the diasporic practices of self-fashioning that emerged from developments of black consciousness as specific to the United States and South Africa, pieces such as *The Hair Craft Project* and *Spider* by Clark engage in the continued use of specific styles as a reference to relationship building. Moreover, Clark's *Heritage Pearls* (Fig. 2.1) references the style politics that, on one hand fused femininity with elegance and adornment, and on the other, expressed solidarity as an embodiment of unity. Works such as *Heritage Pearls* pride the aesthetic properties of hair and hair in art and demonstrate a way in which Clark seems to emphasize the importance of knowing one's lineage and family narrative, in addition to the forces that shape our histories, especially the histories of people of color.

Ahuja's work presents hair as a canvas and as an art form whose possibilities can be expanded and explored through color, size, process, and texture. Ahuja's work does not show an overarching focus on specific hairstyles, as it instead employs the imagery of organic and lively forms to allude to the head as the site of one's energy. Ahuja turns hair into a metaphor, influenced by its associations and enhanced by the ways that one can embellish and develop a two-dimensional surface. As seen in *Dream Region* (Fig. 2.2), Ahuja communicates her subject's ability to construct her own narrative through the application of explosive graffiti-like lines and patterns. Scale functions in Ahuja's works as a way to visually describe the importance of hair in communities of color, in addition to the ways in which hair can serve as an expression of the self.

In the context of the history and aftermath of Apartheid in South Africa and the ways in which personal agency was determined by the value of physical characteristics, the use of hair by Rose and Muholi not only speaks to their own experiences, but also to the experiences of women whose features resembled theirs. Rose's work functions to essentially strip hair of its significance and ability to act as a marker. In both *Span II* (Fig. 3.3) and *Ongetiteld* (Fig. 3.4), hair is shorn and discarded to then form a pile on the ground. Cast away, almost like the non-white body in South Africa, hair is now the rejected remnant of the body and a rejection of the ways in which physical features were employed as tools to esteem whiteness and racial division. As one could argue that the hair in Rose's work symbolizes the black body and community, Rose's actions within *Span II* and *Ongetiteld* function as a form of catharsis to argue for the banality of hair as a natural fiber, in addition to exhibiting one woman's process of dealing with her painful history in order to imagine a tolerable future for women of color.

Muholi reflects on the ways in which the legacy of segregation still pervades the development of post-apartheid South Africa. Through photographs such as the *Bester* series, Muholi expands upon what can constitute hair, as her photographs employ specific objects to draw a reaction from and connect with her viewers. The use of clothespins in *Bester I* (Fig. 3.5) and cleaning tools, such as *skurppots*, in *Bester V* (Fig. 3.6) reference the artist's own mother and Muholi's painful experiences under apartheid as the child of a domestic worker. As domestic labor continues to be the most sustained avenue for black women's participation in South Africa's economy, one that has resulted in the exploitation and devaluation of black women, such symbols of this remnant of apartheid carry significance for many more women than just the

artist.¹⁵⁰ On one hand, Muholi's portrait props present a false form of ornament that appear to question the realities of freedom for black South African women, and on the other hand, the props also serve to protect the black female body, as is the case with the porcupine quills in *MaID X* (Fig. 3.5).

To conclude, I would now like to turn to an installation from 2010 by another black South African female artist: Mary Sibande. While Sibande's work does not feature a wide interest in the use of hair, one of her installation pieces, titled *Conversation with Madam CJ Walker* (2009) (Fig. 4.1), ties together the overarching themes of this thesis, including the use of hair and allusions to a shared consciousness between women of color in South Africa and in the United States. The installation features an iconic portrait of Sarah Breedlove, also known as Madam CJ Walker (Fig. 4.2). As noted earlier, Walker was a black woman who was considered the wealthiest self-made woman in America at the time of her death in 1919. She revolutionized hair care for women of color by adapting the straightening iron for textured hair and by developing a line of homemade products, known as the "Walker System."¹⁵¹ In Sibande's installation, Walker's image has been framed and embroidered onto a canvas using dark strands of hair with long fringes that cascade from below Walker's right shoulder and breast. An ebony-colored plaster cast of a woman named Sophie, dressed in a billowing blue dress, white apron and white headscarf (as an exaggerated form of a South African domestic worker's uniform), pulls at the two monstrous ropes of splitting hair that are attached to the fringes of the portrait.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰Baderoon, "Ghost in the House," 177.

¹⁵¹This system included the combination of scalp preparation, the application of lotions and creams, and the use of iron combs. For more, see "Madam C.J. Walker," History, last modified 2019, <https://www.history.com/topics/Black-history/madame-c-j-walker>.

¹⁵²Also referred to as a *doek* in Afrikaans.

A year earlier in 2008, Sonya Clark created an installation titled *Madam CJ Walker* (Fig. 4.3) which resembles a large textile weaving. This portrait of Walker has been pieced together using 3,840 black fine toothed and de-toothed pocket combs.¹⁵³ As a possible expression of irony from Clark, such fine-toothed combs would either break against or damage most curly natural hair textures.

Sonya Clark and Mary Sibande both find inspiration in Madam CJ Walker and use their work as a means to express their relationships with Walker's legacy. Similar to Muholi's photographs, Sibande's *Conversation with Madam CJ Walker* represents the women working as part of South Africa's domestic labor force. Sibande's mother was able to break the cycle among the women in their family to become a hairstylist.¹⁵⁴ A reading of Sibande's work could suggest that hair is the conduit that allows Sophie to establish a legacy through hairstyling and entrepreneurship. Speaking on her choice to depict Walker's image using combs Clark remarks, "as disposable objects, [combs] parallel the low social status of African-American women born in the late 1800s. But together, the thousands of combs become a monumental tapestry, signifying Walker's magnitude and success despite her humble beginnings."¹⁵⁵ Thus, the art of Clark and Sibande reveals in the ways in which hair is a potent and multi-faceted medium, one that has provided an avenue for black entrepreneurship, womanhood, and empowerment.

¹⁵³Sonya Clark, "Madam C.J. Walker Lives on at the Blanton," Interviewed by Veronica Roberts, Blanton Museum of Art, last modified July 2016, <https://blantonmuseum.org/2016/07/madam-c-j-walker-lives-on-at-the-blanton-2/>.

¹⁵⁴Corrigall, "Sartorial Excess," 162.

¹⁵⁵Clark, "Madam C.J. Walker Lives." As a part of Clark's 2019 exhibition *Sonya Clark—Hair/Goods: An Homage to Madam CJ Walker* at the Goya Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland, the artist spoke along with Walker's great-great-granddaughter and biographer, A'Lelia Bundles, and two hairstylists from the *Hair Craft Project*. For more, visit: "Sonya Clark—Hair/Goods: An Homage to Madam CJ Walker," Bmoreart, accessed April 2019, <http://www.bmoreart.com/events/sonya-clark-hair-goods-an-homage-to-madame-cj-walker>.

Walker asserted that her hair care methods were not meant to merely straighten black hair in order to match European standards of beauty; rather, her mission was to help African Americans take greater pride in their personal appearance by giving hair proper attention.¹⁵⁶ Walker recognized hair as a form of economic independence, and as a result, she consequently opened training programs, based in the “Walker System,” that were taught by her network of licensed sales agents around the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean.¹⁵⁷ Sibande’s and Clark’s installations comment on the legacy of Walker’s impact on hair practices, and the ways in which black women in the United States and in South Africa have utilized hair as a form of liberation and empowerment. In addition to Sibande, the work of Clark, Ahuja, Rose, and Muholi demonstrate how hair can be used as a concept and medium that goes further than just a resistance against binaries of “blackness” versus “whiteness.” The artists and artworks presented in this thesis expand upon the ways in which depictions of and references to black hair in art can create vibrant and complex visual narratives of consciousness that represent the self and the community.

¹⁵⁶Wilson, “Beauty Rites,” 15.

¹⁵⁷Debra Michals, “Madam C.J. Walker,” Women’s History, accessed April 2019, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/madam-cj-walker>.

FIGURES



Fig. 2.1 Sonya Clark, *Heritage Pearls*, 2010, human hair, found box, silver



Fig. 2.2 Sonya Clark, *Hair Neck Lace*, 2002, human hair



Fig. 2.3 Sonya Clark, *Spider*, 1998, cloth and thread



Fig. 2.4 Sonya Clark, *Hair Craft Project*, 2014



Fig. 2.5 Sonya Clark, *Hair Craft Project*, 2014



Fig. 2.6. Photographs from J.D. Okhai Ojeikere



Fig. 2.7. Mequitta Ahuja, *Tress I*, 2008, waxy chalk

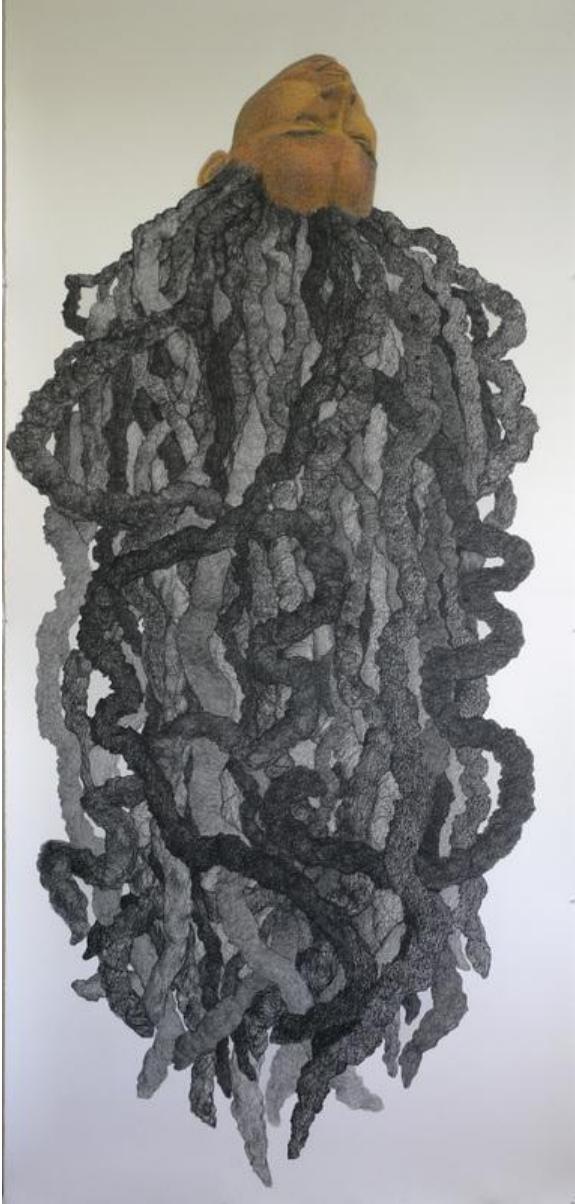


Fig. 2.8. Mequitta Ahuja, *Tress IV*, 2009, waxy chalk



Fig. 2.9. Cathleen Lewis, *Extensions (Ethnic Signifiers)*, 1996, millinery wire, synthetic hair



Fig. 2.10. Mequitta Ahuja, *Fount*, 2009, waxy chalk on paper



Fig. 2.11. Lorna Simpson, *Earth and Sky #32*, 2016, collage and ink on paper,



Fig. 2.12. Mequitta Ahuja, *Crown and Throne*, 2007, enamel on paper



Fig. 2.13. Mequitta Ahuja, *Dream Region*, 2009, enamel on paper



Fig. 2.14. Mequitta Ahuja, *Afrogalaxy*, 2007, enamel on paper



Fig. 3.1 Tracey Rose, *Span II*, 1997, installation view

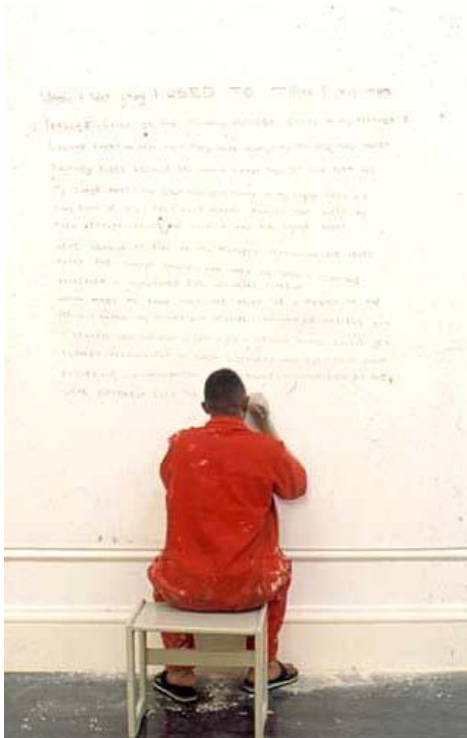


Fig. 3.2. Tracey Rose, *Span I*, 1997, installation view

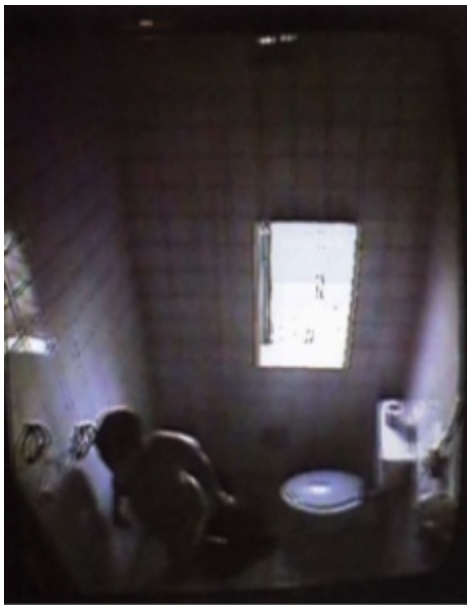


Fig. 3.3. Tracey Rose, *Ongetiteld (Untitled)*, 1998, video still

MADE ME THINK THAT SHE
I HATED MY MOTHER NOT BECAUSE
SHE HAD LIGHT EYES
MOST TRANSLUCENT IN THEIR LIGHT
VISIBLE... LIGHT TRANSPARENT MURKY
DIFFERENT EYES FOR A COLOR
I REMEMBER ONCE SEEING A ONE
THAT HE WAS CALLED BY
VERY BLACK WITH MY MOTHERS
HE WAS VERY HARD I REMEMBER TH
K HE WOULDN'T BE SO EVIL I F
RIGHT THAT CAUSE THEM ALL CA

Fig. 3.4 Tracey Rose, detail of wall inscription from *Span I*, 1997



Fig. 3.5. Zanele Muholi, *MaID X*, Durban, 2015

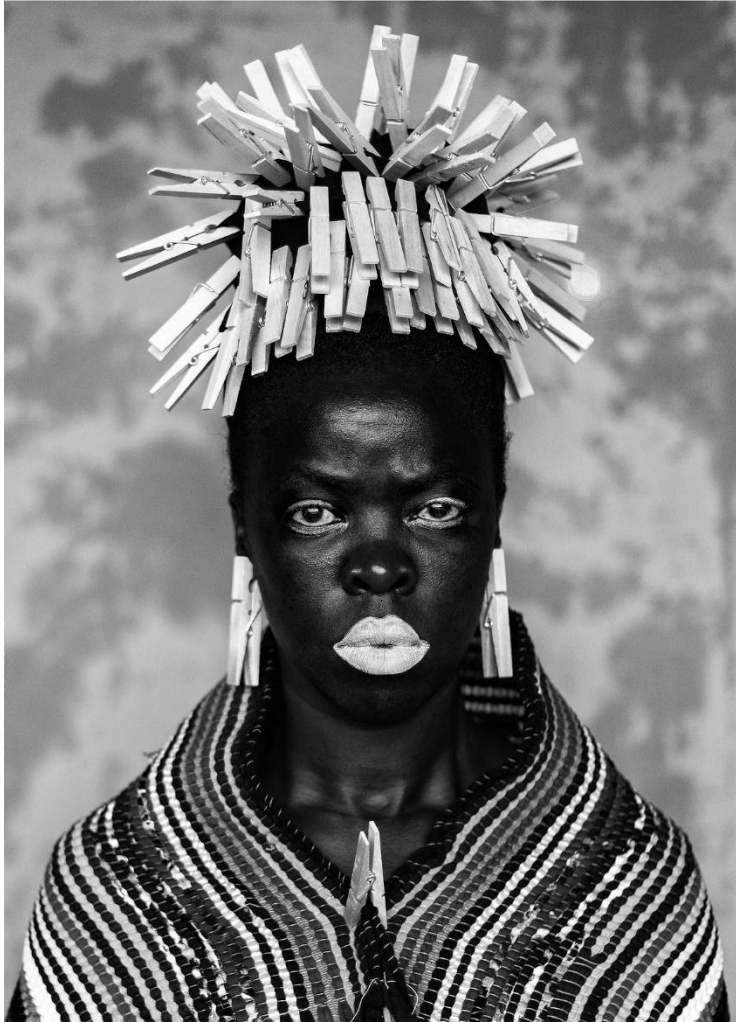


Fig. 3.6. Zanele Muholi, *Bester I*, Mayotte, 2015



Fig. 3.7. Zanele Muholi, *Bester V*, Mayotte, 2015



Fig. 3.8. Zanele Muholi, *Ntozakhe II*, Parktown, 2016



Fig. 3.9. Zanele Muholi, *Nolwazi II*, Nuoro, Italy, 2015



Fig. 4.1, Mary Sibande, *(Conversation with) Madam CJ Walker*, 2009, synthetic hair on canvas, mixed media installation



Fig. 4.2, Madam CJ Walker, 1903

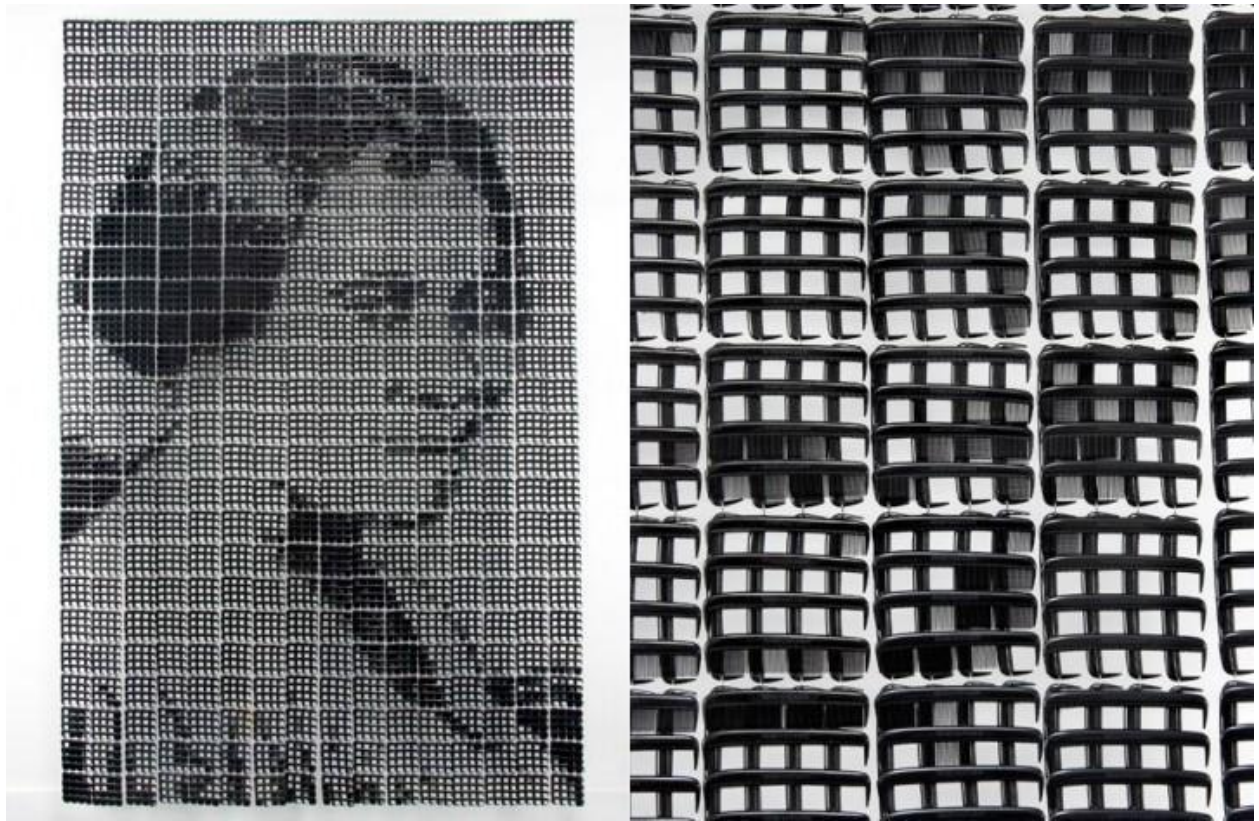


Fig. 4.3, Sonya Clark, Madam C.J. Walker, 2008, combs

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