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# Cabelo Crespo: A Struggle for Inclusion in Brazilian Society

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*SIT Study Abroad*

**Cabelo Crespo**:

A Struggle for Inclusion in Brazilian Society

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Muito Obrigada

**Mulher Altaneira**

**Sônia Maria**

*"Tenho a negritude incrustada n'alma*

*Ouço a voz d'África nos alcalantos, nas histórias,*

*Contadas e cantadas por meus ancestrais*

*Possuo o requebro, os encantos, a faceirice...*

*Possuo a sensualidade da mulher verdadeira.*

*Sensual, não animal, como lembra o rótulo "mulata"*

*Sou fêmea sensual, companheira, parideira…*

*De "mula" não tenho nada, tenho intelecto.*

*E, no meu viver, traço meu perfil de altaneira.*

*Temos tantos exemplos na História!*

*Mulheres inteligentes, guerreiras, sensíveis, belas…*

*Nesse espaço rendo o meu tributo a todas elas…"*

*Para Minha Mãe*

***Towering Woman***

            ***Sônia Maria***

*"I have blackness embedded in my soul.*

*I hear the voice of Africa in lullabies, the stories*

*Told and sung by my ancestors*

*I have the quaver, the charms, the coquetry…*

*I have the sensuality of the real woman.*

*Sensual, not animal, as noted by the label "mulatto"*

*I am a sensuous female, mate, brood…*

*Of "mule" I have nothing, I have intellect,*

***And in my living, I trace my towering profile.***

***We have so many examples in history!***

***Intelligent women, warriors, sensitive, beautiful…***

***In this space, I surrender my tributes to all of them…"***

 

                  **For my Mother**

## Abstract

Present-day Brazilian society presents a disproportionate number of economic, social and political challenges for Black women. The phenomenon of this structural inequality has causes that are rooted deep in the history of Brazil, and is built upon the foundation lain by slavery, resulting in the economic prosperity of the elite that was built upon the foundation of the labor provided by people of color. The effects of colonization and the profitable slave trade that ensued continue to contribute still, to the plight of people of color in general, though the focus of this project will be on the effects these historic institutions continue to have on Black women in Salvador, Bahia, in specific. The context of the various struggles of these women is often characterized by the intersectionality of their varying oppressions, which are largely propagated through systems of structural and cultural violence. These different types of violence promote sentiments of inferiority among Black people; they strip an entire race of black people of pride in their culture, their identities and their physical aesthetics.

By studying closely the stories and political struggles of three women in Salvador, Bahia, in addition to actively participating as a visiting member of Salvadorian society, I will analyze the ways in which hair helps to foster and promote a sense of pride in Black identity while combatting the rejection and oppression of Black people, aesthetic and culture in Brazilian society.

The conclusion of my study shows, amongst my subjects, a strong and resilient connection between the choice to embrace, rather than to alter their "cabelo crespo" and their conscious battle against the multiple oppressions constructed within Brazilian society. I have learned that the process of identity construction is a complex ideal that cannot be limited, simply to natural hair, but in the same way, it must be noted that for some self-identified Black women, embracing their natural "cabelo crespo" was, indeed, a major part of that process of identity construction. In the study of these three, self-identified Black women, hair is a part of identity that is deeper than fashion, but rather, is worn as a banner of their negritude.

The key words associated with this study include: Cabelo Crespo, Natural Hair, Preconceito, Structural Violence, Cultural Violence, Black Aesthetic and Sustainability.

## Introduction

      This project was undertaken to illuminate the issue of the rejection and oppression of Black people, aesthetic and culture by analyzing the connection between natural hair and the fight for social inclusion in Salvador. This research also examines the views and sentiments of black women regarding their natural hair and the ways it which it may contribute to the formation of their identity. In my quest for answers about the identity of other black women, I also found clarity about my own identity and its connection to the hair that grows naturally from my own head. In this monograph, I aim to analyze the ways in which hair fosters and promotes a sense of pride in self-constructed identity among three self-identified Black women in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. In that, I will also discuss the ways in which "cabelo crespo" combats the rejection of the black aesthetic and culture in Brazilian society.

      Some key terms used in this work include: cabelo crespo, which is commonly used in the Portuguese language to mean "nappy hair", can also mean curly hair; Natural Hair is a term used to reference the naturally kinky, coily "cabelo crespo" that is largely a characteristic of the aesthetic of people of African descent; "Aesthetic" refers to any physical characteristic that is more commonly associated with people of color, but with a positive connotation, especially those physical characteristics that have historically carried a negative connotation i.e.: a broader nose, full lips, curvier body shape, kinky hair etc.; lastly, in this work, the term Sustainability references those solutions to societal issues that create and promote lasting change and can be replicated to produce similar results elsewhere.

      This research relates to sustainability because it seeks to contribute to an understanding of the multiplicity of mechanisms used in societies where white cultural and aesthetic supremacy has attempted to undermine and destroy the culture of non-white peoples. By shining a light on an issue such as this, that is commonly overlooked and disregarded, it allows people the opportunity to alter

their views on what they believe Black people should be and should look like. This research presents a challenge to the rest of the world to reevaluate beauty standards and their origins in order to create a more inclusive ideal of beauty that includes a Black aesthetic. The development of this research contributes to a sustainable solution to the issue of the rejection of Black culture by way of something as seemingly irrelevant as natural hair. When the world can understand how historical context carries over into present day social issues, and work to comprehend the fact that Black people belong in society as much as any other group of people, we will obtain a lasting change that will benefit everyone: the oppressor and the oppressed.

**Black Enough: An Examination of the Motivations Behind this Study**


Almost a year ago, when presented with the challenge of formulating a research project over a topic of my choosing, I already knew that my final project would fall along the lines of what it has grown to become today. My motivations to undertake this study about black women, their natural hair and their identities began with my own journey in the construction of my identity. It was during the middle school years that children at my school became painstakingly aware of race and somehow, as a result of someone else's observations, in a predominantly black school, I found myself categorized as white. I had never once considered, critically, my identity. I knew that I was black. My mother was black. My father was black. All three of my siblings were black and, therefore, I was black. But for the students who had never seen my father, and had only always seen my lighter skin and relaxed, straightened hair (which was not uncommon at my school), they began to question my identity as a black woman. Sometimes I received comments about being of mixed race (which, at my school, was about the equivalent of being white) and other times, students with whom I shared the same race, would completely denounce me as a person of color and regard me as white. All of this is not to say that there is anything wrong with being white or being of European descent, but it is more so to illuminate what motivated me to examine my own identity and, in turn, take up an interest in the identities of other black women. Being isolated by children who, in my opinion, looked like me because, in their opinions, I didn't look like them, was a very complex phenomenon that I couldn't have explained at that age, even if I wanted to. After doing everything in my power to "prove" my blackness, in a way, I gave up. I began to realize that it was not my responsibility to prove anything to anyone, nor was it my concern what anyone else thought in regards to my blackness.


The beginning of my high school years was a new beginning for me. Though I attended the same school, I found that I, myself, was different. In my

freshman year I found my self-confidence. Sophomore year of high school, I decided to do something revolutionary… something unheard of in the area. Sophomore year of high school, I chose to revert back to my natural hair. (Many people use the expression "going natural", but if natural hair is the hair that you were born with, you are technically reverting back to that natural state.) Though I initially endured a lot of adverse reactions, I stood strong by my decision and the reasons I had made it. My decision to embrace my natural hair was, for me, the first step in embracing the identity that I had begun to construct. I was a black woman and that I knew for certain. Before I had even read any theories or works of authors such as Patricia Hill- Collins or Michel Agier, I knew that I was no longer comfortable with altering a part of me that I feltwas a characteristic of my identity as a black woman. I was tired of spending money to get my hair chemically altered (relaxed) to be straight. I was physically fed up with feeling nauseated from the smell of the chemicals being applied to my head. I was tired of my scalp being sore from chemical burns on the places where the chemicals were allowed to sit for a few minutes too long and I was completely fed up with the damage that all of this was causing to my physical and psychological well being. I had begun to ask myself one critical question: What was wrong with the hair that grew naturally from my head?

I am grateful that I found the courage and the strength to make that first step. In embracing my natural curls and kinks, my own "cabelo crespo", I made progress in constructing and embracing my own identity. In that, I saw that I also extended that opportunity to other women who, subconsciously, longed for the space to embrace their natural aesthetic, women whom I did not even know were watching. After my decision to abandon the practice of chemically altering my hair, other women at my school came out of the woodwork, finding the courage to make that same decision, students and teachers alike.

These experiences have prompted me to take interest in the matters that will be discussed in this work. Having lived through this difficult and, often, painful

process of self-identification, I knew that there must be other black women who had their own stories to tell. Surely, there are other women who have had the same experiences, similar experiences, or even completely different experiences to share.

**Methodology: How This Research Was Structured**

My research was undertaken in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil during the month of November in the year 2014. Being present during the month of November, I feel, added an additional aspect of significance to the research because November is observed as "Novembro Negro" (Black November) in Brazil, during which, the Day of Black Consciousness is celebrated (November 20th) in remembrance of the death of the black hero Zumbi of Palmares in 1695. As a significant point of information Zumbi was recognized as the leader of the Quilombo peoples, a community of fugitive slaves, Natives and poor whites that were expelled from their farms during Portuguese colonial rule. In 1675, Portuguese soldiers attacked the Quilombo community, and it was during this time that Zumbi stood out as a strong and courageous warrior. When the governor of the province of Pernambuco approached the community's then leader Ganga Zumba to try to reach an agreement, Zumbi rejected it being that it would grant freedom to everyone but the fugitive slaves. It was in 1680 that Zumbi became the official leader of the Quilombos. Under his leadership, the community obtained several victories against the Portuguese. While the Quilombos also fought for "freedom of worship, religion and practices of African culture", Zumbi is regarded as a symbol of resistance and the fight against slavery. (Cardwell & Fausto, 2004). In commemoration of this history, and in celebration of negritude, there were many cultural events occurring across the city of Salvador nearly everyday of the month.

This study was supported through the Odara Institute of the Black Woman, which became my host institution and support system during my time in Salvador. This particular organization was the ideal base for my research because of location (Salvador, Bahia) and because of the resources that it offered. The wealth of information that I had access to as a result of having studied under the tutelage of the Odara Institute can be portrayed through the organization's Mission Statement which reads,

"Aimed at overcoming on a personal and collective level, the discrimination and prejudice and seek alternatives that provide the sociopolitical and economic inclusion of black women and their families in society." (Nascimento)

I chose to conduct formal interviews with three self-identified Black women whom I had hand selected based upon informal criteria. I also aimed to conduct this study through a lens of Black Feminist Epistemology as explained by Patricia Hill- Collins in her work "**Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.**" Black feminist epistemology says that knowledge can only be constructed upon lived experiences and through dialog with the subjects at hand because knowledge is built around the ethics of caring and requires personal accountability. (Collins, 2000)

For this reason, my "convivencia" (coexistence) in the community that I was visiting was a large factor for me. Though one of my goals was to conduct sufficient research to complete this study, my mindset was one of relationship building and mutual respect. In that, I chose the women I interviewed after having had different conversations and/or experiences with them. Choosing only three was extremely difficult based upon the fact that I came into contact with a plethora of amazing women who each had their own stories to share. Ultimately, I chose a 27-year-old woman who was a professor of History at a local university, a woman of 33 years who was a journalist at a local organization and a woman of 26 years who was a student and the Assistant Financial Administrator at Odara..

My choice to interview only self-identified Black women stemmed from my own personal experiences (as stated above) and also allowed me to narrow my scope of research enough to be concise and specific. I also hand-chose my participants because I wanted to ensure that I was able to include a diverse pool of views, opinions and stories.

The questions that I had prepared for my subjects prior to my arrival in Salvador are not the questions that I, ultimately, used in my research. Upon my arrival and interaction with the women that I came in contact with, I felt as though the methodology and questions that I had initially intended to use were not as conducive to the research as the ones that I used in reality. I initially planned to interview three subjects in three separate sessions, but I had planned that without assessing the situation that I would be going into. The women that I chose were students, parents, spouses and workers and, overall, what I wanted out of my participants paled in comparison to their other obligations and responsibilities. Instead of expecting these women to adjust their lives for mine, I simply adjusted my research to better accommodate their schedules. I, instead, interviewed the three women once, recording their stories and trying to comprehend what they said as they spoke. Two interviews were formal/ semi-structured and one interview was informal/ unstructured. The two, formal/ semi-structured interviews consisted of five introductory questions about who they were and three basic questions about their opinions about the relation between hair, identity and social inclusion for black women in Brazil. The informal/ unstructured interview consisted of 3 very broad questions regarding her opinions on hair and identity. These questions and their responses were each recorded electronically, which allowed me to effectively transcribe them into written responses. The use of an electronic recorder was also helpful in extracting direct quotes and ensuring that everything the subject said was understood.

In the field of study, I assumed the role of the Observer as a Participant for 90% of the time and the role of the Participant as an Observer for only 10% of the time. I felt like this was the best method of observation because of the culture of the area that I was living and working in. The culture in Brazil, from what I have personally experienced, is very warm and inviting. The people are generally very generous and fun loving and had I assumed too much of a role as an observer, it would have been seen as cold or rude. I also felt as though this was the best method for me personally because I was excited to participate in different events and activities in a new place. As the Observer as a Participant, I would attend different events and actively participate while I was there, being sure to make observations and take mental notes. Later, I set time aside to journal and note happenings, people, details, feelings and anything else of relevance. On the contrary, in the 10% of the time I acted as the Participant as an Observer, I would sit quietly by, taking notes of my surroundings as I observed different details. An example of a time where Participant as Observer was the more appropriate choice, is when I sat in on a meeting at the Odara Institute of the Black Woman. These meetings had nothing to do with my presence and were an excellent opportunity to absorb the knowledge of the other women in the room. It also presented me with additional time to train my ear to recognize important Portuguese terms that would be used during my interviews.

**<u>Literature Review</u>**

To more effectively develop this study, I constructed a foundation upon the work of many well-versed authors and philosophers to gain knowledge about the complex issues and to reinforce the arguments presented in this analysis. The overall focus of the literary works associated with this research can be divided into three succinct themes: Identity, Intersectionality and Culture. Each of the literary works used for reference can be associated with one or more of these themes and can be used to further analyze the issue of the rejection of the Black aesthetic in Brazil.

I.   **Identity**

Identity is one of the major motivations I had for engaging in this study and is, consequently, one of the major themes of this project. History reflects that colonization and slavery in Brazil lasted almost 400 years, from 1530 when the first colony was established in Brazil until 1888 when slavery was abolished. During this nearly 400 year time period, people of color were exploited, forced to live and work under subhuman conditions, and stripped of their cultures, pride, religions, traditions, identities and, often, their will to live. In place of their own beliefs, colonization instilled and indoctrinated the belief that Black people, their physical stature, aesthetics, their culture and the religions, practices and traditions that accompanied it, that their very existence, was inferior to that of the Eurocentric way. It was within this 360-year timeframe that people of color largely learned to embrace the idea that their natural physical appearance was, somehow, inherently wrong or bad. Within this system of belief was the rejection of the naturally kinky, curly, coiled and/or nappy aesthetic of black hair. Present-day, this way of thinking, the rejection of the natural state of anything associated with black people, is still largely prominent in Brazilian society. It is in this context that we begin our examination of the concept of Identity.

In the book Black Brazil, Thereza Santos discusses characteristics of and issues within The Black Movement in Brazil and the role that identity plays within that context in an excerpt entitled "**The Black Movement: Without Identity There Is No Consciousness or Struggle."** In one section, Santos argues that, "The destruction of identity generates subordination and reinforces the idea of the black as a negative type who is ethnically and culturally inferior." This argument directly corresponds to the history of Brazil and also reflects the reality of modern day views of black people. In the context of the Black woman specifically, Santos , discusses the ways which, "in the struggle for resistance, black women's participation has been relegated to that of servant." She goes on to explain that this thought is a result of the machista ideology that has historically permeated the Black Movement. Another important point that Santos stresses is the "process of alienation" that Black women endure as a result of the manifest preference that black men have for white women. Here, Thereza Santos does not argue that all men have an innate love for white women, but rather brings to the forefront the "super-valorization of white aesthetic values" that undoubtedly stems from the historical rejection of black aesthetics that is still perpetuated even today. In "**Racism, Culture and Black Identity in Brazil",** Michel Agier also discusses the issue of black identity, aimimg, mainly, to "consider simultaneously, the racial, social and cultural dimensions of the construction of a black identity in Bahia." Agier suggests that current Bahian racism is " made up of a "complex system of domination", pointing out that the first constitution drafted in 1824 stated that " liberty is an inalienable right of man", yet 48% of the population was still enslaved at that time. Instances such as these raise questions of citizenship for Blacks. Where, before, Blacks were regarded as slaves, presently, they are, simply, "excluded" in Brazilian society. Michel Agier refers to the racism of Brazil as a "diffused and unconfessed form of integration and domination." Between the arguments of these two authors, we can deduce a few things about the daily struggles of the modern-day black woman in her attempt to construct and own her own unique identity in Brazil: For one, she is struggling against a belief that has been passed down from the colonial era that

regards black as "ethnically and culturally inferior" coupled with the "super-valorization of white aesthetic values" by other members of the black community. Additionally, we see the exclusion that was blatantly present in Brazilian society even from the creation of the first constitution has traversed centuries and now presents itself in a more subtle form of racism: forced integration.

II.   **Intersectionality**

In order to effectively comprehend the issues at hand, one must consider and fully understand the concept of Intersectionality.  Patricia Hill-Collins discusses this in detail in her work "**Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment. "**The section entitled Intersecting Oppressions raises a number of compelling and thought-provoking arguments regarding the complexity of sustainable social change, examined, largely, through the lens of the experiences of black women. The term 'Intersectionality' is used to describe the intersecting oppressions that many people face. And while the concept of Intersectionality is not designed to privilege the experiences of black women, it is most commonly used to characterize the intersecting oppressions of Black women, reason being that to be both black and a woman is to be positioned at a very interesting point where the phenomenally oppressive systems of race and gender intersect. This theme is particularly important in my research because, as we will see reflected in one of my interviews, sometimes the fight for inclusion in Brazilian society is more complex than what it appears to be at face value. While my focus was the ways that natural hair and identity work together, one subject highlighted the importance of taking into account the other aspects of identity that Black women use to construct their identity that may, simultaneously, contribute to their oppression.

III.   **Culture**

The third theme that this study is built upon is the idea of Culture. Referencing

the historical foundation of the need for this study, we have acknowledged the fact that slavery and colonization bereaved Black people of different aspects of their culture including, but certainly not limited to, religions/ beliefs, practices, and traditions. While slavery conspicuously stripped black people of these cultural values, in a post-colonial era, we see a subtler stripping of culture in the form of structural and cultural violence. Robert Gilman defines structural violence as the "physical and psychological harm that results from exploitive and unjust social, political and economic systems." (Gilman, 1983) Consequently, cultural violence is defined, in an article entitled "Cultural Violence" by Johan Galtung, as "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence… that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence." (Galtung, 1990) So it is through these two definitions that we see that the rejection of the Black culture that we see today is perpetuated through more refined and structured methods. Johan Galtung also makes a very interesting and thought provoking argument when he says that, "Cultural violence makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right - or at least not wrong." This argument can be understood by examining how structural violence and cultural violence work together. Because structural violence functions on exploitative social, economic and political systems, it becomes the norm. Therefore, anything that fails to conform to that normality is automatically seen as a threat. Let's examine this phenomenon in the context of racial profiling in the United States (racial profiling being defined here as the perceived tendencies of a specific racial group to commit certain legal offenses.) Say, for example, a member of a neighborhood watch organization (Subject A), while on duty, takes notice of a black male dressed in a hoody and loose-fitting pants (Subject B) walking through the neighborhood. Because of recent break-ins in this community, Subject A is led to believe that Subject B does not belong in this particular neighborhood, Subject A takes it upon himself to exit his vehicle and approach the Subject B. In this situation, the confrontation turns violent (for unknown reasons) and Subject A shoots Subject B, resulting in Subject B's death. When American citizens are presented with this situation and are asked if Subject A was justified in shooting and killing Subject B, we will find that some

will claim that there was obviously nothing justifiable about the actions that Subject A took in this particular situation. Others will whole-heartedly agree that Subject A was justified in doing so. The reasons why can be explained in terms of structural and cultural violence. In this scenario, racial profiling is the example of cultural violence. The actual physical act of shooting Subject B is an example of direct violence. The structural violence becomes a factor the moment Subject A believed that he was justified in pursuing Subject B. So, according to Galtung's argument, cultural violence "legitimizes" structural violence. Because it is believed that people who look like Subject B break into homes (Racial Profiling-Cultural Violence), Subject A's actions are legitimized, even if it resulted in the untimely death of Subject B (Structural Violence). All that being said, many people will find no fault in Subject A's course of action.

In this same work, Galtung also discusses the theory that he refers to as the "Violence of Alientation." He explains that in this kind of violence is characterized by a two-step process. The subject (or group, as is argued in this analysis) is first desocialized away their own culture, then goes through a period of being resocialized into another culture. Historically, the tactics used in colonization and slavery in Brazil can be categorized as a flagrant example of this Violence of Alienation.  Let us elaborate more on this claim and cross-examine how these practices are still implemented in modern day Brazil, in a more illusive manner. While, during the colonial period in Brazil, many forms violence were imposed on slaves, one of the less talked about methods was the shaving of their heads. For many African ethnicities, this corresponded to a mutilation as their hair was regarded as a mark of identity and dignity. Given the regard that the enslaved people placed with their hair, the psychological affects of this practice made it easier to try to resocialize the enslaved into the culture of the colonizer. Modern day, this practice takes on a bit of a different form. Though there is no physical forced shaving of the head, the social rejection of natural hair is the modern day form of this atrocity. As detailed in one interview, when you apply for certain jobs in Brazil, there is an understanding about what kind of aesthetic is accepted in that environment. Any environment that demands the straightening or chemical

altering of the natural hair is a present day comparison of the practice of the forced shaving of the heads of Black people. As Nilma Lino Gomes explains in her work **"Body and Hair as Symbols of Identity"** That social significance of the hair of the negro has traversed time, acquired new profiles and continues, with much force, among blacks today." (Gomes, 2002)

## Analysis of the Interviews

The following section is an analysis of the interviews that were conducted with my three subjects. Each subject self –identifies as a Black woman and are each a social activist in her own right. The analysis of these three interviews presented four themes for discussion: Black Consciousness, the Process of Self-Identification, Rejection of the Black Aesthetic and A Black Image Versus A Black Identity.

## Black Consciousness

The first major theme that was apparent across the board during the facilitation of this research was the idea of Black consciousness. Aside from being Black women, it is what all of the subjects in this study had in common. When I refer to "Black consciousness" I am referring to knowledge of the social constructs, political structures and economic strategies that have, historically had an adverse effect on the Black community. These can include, but are certainly not limited to: race, gender, cultural violence, structural violence, etc. To sum up Black consciousness in a word: Awareness.

From what I studied in the interviews I conducted, there seems to be a significant relationship between these women's consciousness and their tendency to embrace their own and others' "cabelo crespo". In an interview with Maira, a journalist at a local political organization, she explained that, in her consciousness, she feels that when she sees another woman with "Black" hair, there is an unspoken expectation of a deeper knowledge, whereas, when she sees a woman with straightened hair, there is a different kind of understanding. Maira feels that there is a sense of empowerment in Black women choosing to embrace their natural hair, whether they are dying it or shaving it off.

That particular comment struck me because of its historical significance. In her article "Body and Hair as Symbols of Black Identity", Nilma Gomes talks about the significance of shaving the heads of slaves, which was a

common practice during the colonial age. The forced shaving was seen as a mutilation by many African ethnicities; it was used as an additional way to break the spirits of the enslaved people. Present-day, it is almost as though Black women have reclaimed that power through control of their hair. Not only have they found the audacity to wear their natural "cabelo crespo", some make the conscious decision to shave it all off, which can be incredibly empowering.

The consciousness that these women shared, for some, played a role in their self-identification process. It is my understanding, from what I have deduced from the interviews, that this is seldom a process that is undertaken alone. In becoming conscious, these women rely on the support and assistance from their network of like-minded Black women who play unique roles in the construction of identity. In the following section, we will examine the ways in which these women constructed their identities and, consequently, embraced their natural hair.

**The Self-Identification Process**

Ericka is the Assistant Financial Administrator at the Odara Institute of the Black Woman. In our interview, she tells me that she has been with them for five years now, and she speaks very highly of the team of women that she works with. When I asked Erika about her personal experiences about her natural hair in Salvador, she told me that problems, for her, actually begin at home. In her household, there is, (using what she told me) what I can only describe as, a comparison between Erika and her sister whose curly hair has more of a smooth texture.

Erika's grandmother, who raised her, at one point, would not leave the house with her when she wore her "cabelo crespo", telling her, "go fix that hair" because it was "ugly". Problems with her natural hair extended even as far as friends and boyfriends. Out of curiosity, I asked her where she found the support to embrace her natural hair and her response was that the women of Odara played a major

role in her entire identification process. According to Erika, at Odara, they begin with a gender identity formation and, afterwards, work on a pattern of positive sentiments about who you identify to be.

"From the moment I entered Odara, that really took me. I accepted Black. I accepted my curly hair. Also you have a network of Black women from Bahia who inform you about it (natural hair) and increase your self-esteem. If you bother with the few who don't think that you should wear your hair that way, you still have a lot of Black women with tough hair who love you and who give you strength to wear your hair that way."

Maira also speaks on the significance of the self-identification process in her interview. She refers to the social phenomenon as a "reframing" of the Black identity, which, in recent years, has improved sentiments surrounding natural hair among Black peoples. Prior to this recent turn of events, it was common to see black people engaging in the process of "whitening" in an attempt to deny their roots. This correlates directly to what Antonio Pitanga writes in his literary work entitled, "Where Are the Blacks?" in which he argues that the historical rejection of Black culture and beauty has led to wide-spread practices of skin-bleaching and womb-washing (the practice of purposely reproducing with a man of light or white skin in order to produce fairer-skinned children) in the overarching attempt to rid oneself of the mark of negritude.

**Rejection of the Black Aesthetic**

From the accounts of these women, we see that, over time, an acceptance of a Black aesthetic has become more popular within the Black community for differing reasons. Given the strong, historical rejection of a Black aesthetic nation-wide, has there been a shift in the remainder of Brazilian society that would allow for inclusion of this particular aesthetic, present-day? This study suggests that there has not.

In Erika's interview, she discloses that, from her point of view, social inclusion for the Black woman is still a large struggle when taking into consideration something like natural hair. She talks about her personal experiences in school and in the work force saying,

"Some companies require a pattern, a pattern of beauty. And there, it is determined from the moment you arrive. There, they have a work warning that speaks on good appearance. Good appearance here in Salvador is to have smooth and well-brushed hair. You don't get an interview with "black" hair and you don't get treated well. College even has the same problems. The presentation of the teamwork requires a certain standard that you want to have to do the presentation. It is tidy hair, make-up and all of that. Then, the problem of inclusion is where you try to take your natural hair. Certain areas don't accept it."

This statement allows us to see how problematic social inclusion still is for the Black woman. This expected beauty pattern that Erika speaks on, the one that requires "tidy", "smooth" and "well-brushed" hair, is simply a modern-day reinforcement of Euro-centric beauty standards. All of this can be related back to Michel Agier's argument presented in the article "Racism, Culture and Black Identity in Brazil" in which, he says that the racism of Brazil is a, "diffused and unconfessed form of integration and domination." In this context, a black woman is faced with the ultimatum to either alter her natural aesthetic to comply with exclusive beauty standards and business practices or face the potential economic hardship of unemployment; both of which being unfair and socially unjust.

## Black: Image Vs. Identity

Another theme that presented itself during my research in the field was the idea of a distinction between, simply, having a Black image and having a Black identity. Inajara, a professor of History at a local University explained this phenomenon in terms of her own personal experiences. She mentioned that, in Brazil, people go through a "Differentiated Process" between being a Black woman and having a Black aesthetic.

"It is one thing to be Black and to have a Black image in the respects of hair, features, traits, eyes, mouth. But it's another thing to not have skin so black, because it takes away from a Black image."

In her personal story, Inajara explains to me that though she identifies to be a Black woman, it is difficult because often, others do not recognize her to be a Black woman. She refers to her lighter complexion as the "weight of having light skin." That said, she began to talk about how she wears her hair a "banner" that reinforces her identity as a black woman: a theme that also came up in another interview that I later conducted with Maira, a journalist at a local political organization in Salvador. During Maira's interview, she also made the claim that it is your hair that signifies your race.

"Your hair signifies your race. It is the curly hair that says that you are a Black woman."

It is within the context of these two observations that we can see the level of value that is placed on the natural hair for these two women. But, for others, this is not the case. Erika explains to me, in her interview that, natural hair, cabelo crespo, is not the be- all and end-all of Black identity. In her words,

"Sometimes, the girl smoothing her hair every 8 days identifies to be black better than the person wearing a "Black power" afro because of the trendiness that people associate with "black", curly hair in fashion."

So while it appears that natural hair among these three women play a role in their consciousness and their identities, this is not the case for everyone. It seemed to be unanimous among the three subjects in this study that, sometimes, women don't understand the politics that, they feel, are associated with the natural hair. Some women see the wearing of natural hair, simply as a mode of fashion. According to Maira, natural hair becomes deeper than just fashion when you take into consideration the fact that some people have gone their entire lives hearing that "cabelo crespo é cabelo ruím"; that nappy hair is bad hair.

In a moment of personal reflection during our interview, Inajara also touches on the concept of Black aesthetic as a fashion trend. She had recently cut her hair and she sold it to someone who wanted to buy it. She referred to this as an issue of "prostitution" from the point of view of selling "our Black beauty, our Black aesthetic" for the sake of fashion and it having nothing to do with our identities.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, the narratives of these three Black women in Bahia allowed me a glance at a snapshot in their lives and the reality of natural hair and self-identification in their corner of Brazil. Some of the assumptions that I had coming, such as how I thought Black women in Salvador formed their identity, proved to be wrong. Because of my situation, and the ways in which I went about constructing my own identity, I assumed that the Black women of Brazil would go through the same (or very similar) process. The conclusions of this study provided me with unexpected outcomes and, also, answers to the questions I set out to answer as outlined in my abstract and problem statement.

Firstly, I set out to "analyze the ways in which hair helps to foster and promote a sense of pride in Black identity while combatting the rejection and oppression of Black people, aesthetic and culture in Brazilian society." This was made apparent in my interviews with each of the three women that I studied. Each of these social activists carried within them a pride in who they were as Black women, unapologetically displaying their natural hair and encouraging others to do the same in the fight for the space to exist and flourish in an oppressive society.

Next, I sought to analyze, "how they perceive their struggles with the aesthetic of hair and how this struggle has influenced their self identification and commitment to social, political and cultural activism." This aspect was made clear through testimonies like the one that Erika provided me regarding her journey of self-identification and self-love that included a process of learning to love her natural hair despite the negativity that she received for it. Having struggled through that herself, she has become a part of a team of women committed to empowering other women in the fight for social, political and economic rights.

I aimed to discover detail "how the positive revival of a cultural aesthetic such as hair can be a powerful tool in the reconstruction of the positive self and group identity necessary to mobilize a population in securing other important political and economic rights." The answer to this question lies within Maira's

statement about how she senses the empowerment of a Black woman embracing her natural hair whether she be dyeing it or shaving it off. As detailed in the analysis of my interviews, the practice of the cutting off of the hair has traversed centuries and taken on a new form of empowerment for Black women. Where once they were forced to have their head shaved, they have empowered themselves to take control of their natural hair and, in shaving it, have made a powerful declaration that they are in control of their own bodies.

Lastly, this study sought to contribute to an understanding of the multiplicity of mechanisms used in societies where white cultural and aesthetic supremacy has attempted to undermine and destroy the culture of non-white peoples. The majority of this objective was covered in the Literature Review Portion of this monograph where I referenced the work of many well-versed authors and philosophers to explain the ways in which the historical and current state of Brazilian society excludes and rejects anything that does not fit within the confines of the inherently racist structure it is built on.

To conclude, I have learned that the process of identity construction is a complex ideal that cannot be limited, simply to natural hair. In the same way, it must be noted that for some self-identified Black women, embracing their natural "cabelo crespo" was, indeed, a major part of that process of identity construction. In the study of these three, self-identified Black women, because they are conscious and aware, for them, hair is a part of identity that is deeper than fashion, but rather, is worn as a banner of their negritude.

## Limitations of the Study

    The limitations of this study can be understood by examining the methodology in which I used to complete it. By choosing to only study and record the opinions of Black women, I have gathered information sufficient for only one half of a major story pertaining to race and identity issues in Brazil. Oppression of Black people do not only effect Black women, but because of the limitations and need for this research to be concise, the stories of men were purposely not included.

    Another limitation of this study to be taken into account is the fact that it aims to analyze an issue that is claimed to be present in all of Brazil, but, because of time constraints and the nature of the study abroad program with which this work is tied to, the research associated with the study is restricted to the particular city of Salvador.

    Lastly, it should be understood that the stories, quotes and opinions of the women portrayed in this study are only a small insight into a much larger issue within Brazilian society. Their stories, by no means, reflect the sentiments of every self-identified Black woman in Brazil. In that, the opinions of any self-identified Black women not included in this research, in no way, discredits the opinions and stories reflected in this work. Overall, this work is a very limited analysis of one aspect of a larger system of structural racism and structural and cultural violence.

## Recommendations For Further Study

There is a multitude of ways that one could go about continuing further study on this subject. As a start, one could examine the ways in which black men are affected by the social rejection of a black aesthetic and black hair and how it impacts the construction of their identity. As another suggestion, one could study the roles that socioeconomic status, education level, or any of the other numerous factors, play in the construction of identity. One could expand upon this specific study by conducting research in a different part of Brazil, being that this research was only limited to Salvador; I am confident that the change in environment would produce a diverse set of stories and sentiments.

There are multiple ways that this study could be expanded upon. I simply recommend that whatsoever one chooses to examine, it is done in a manner that is concise because Brazil is a vast country that holds new surprises at every turn. It is very easy to become enthralled by all of the magic of this beautiful place.

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**Appendix**

1. Could you have done this project in the USA? What data or sources were unique to the culture in which you did the project?

   **Yes, this project could have been completed in the United States. I actually intend to use this as a case study for a larger research project that I will be conducting. The subjects that I interviewed are unique to this study.**

2. Did the process of doing the ISP modify your learning style? How was this different from your previous style and approaches to learning?

   **Yes, completing this project required an extensive level of self-discipline that I did not even know that I was capable of. It required me to journal regularly and train my brain to remember large amounts of information at any given time. This is different from my normal learning style because I normally take notes as I go along, which is not always possible in field research.**

3. What criteria did you use to evaluate your data for inclusion in the final monograph? Or how did you decide to exclude certain data?

   **I made decisions on what data to include based upon my outline of the data received. Things that were of relevance to the outline stayed (whether or not I personally agreed with what the subject said.) It was my aim to not exclude any key aspects of what any given subject said, while still ensuring that the monograph would flow well from beginning to end**.

4. What were the principal problems you encountered while doing the ISP? Were you able to resolve these and how?

   **The biggest problem that I ran into while conducting research for this project was remembering to get the consent forms signed. Because I recorded everything electronically, sometimes it would**

**slip my mind so I just got verbal consent and asked them to sign the forms at a later date**.