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<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-j7ya-j195>

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NATURAL HAIR STYLING: A SYMBOL AND FUNCTION
OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S SELF-CREATION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the American Studies Program
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

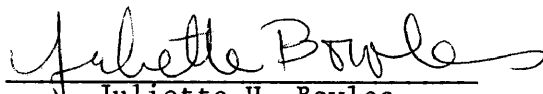
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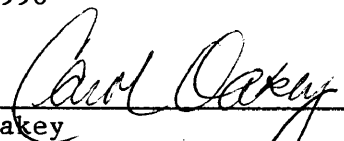
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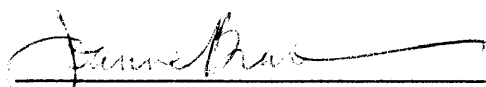
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts


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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	iv
CHAPTER I. DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM.....	2
CHAPTER II. WE WEAR THE MASK.....	18
CHAPTER III. TALKING HEADS: HAIR STYLES AS PUBLIC SYMBOLS.....	52
CHAPTER IV. CONDITIONS: HAIR AND HOLISM.....	73
CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	108

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The writer wishes to thank Professor Carol Oakey for her sensitive supervision of this work, for her helpful recommendations and encouragement. Special thanks are also extended to Professors Joanne Braxton and Theodore Reinhart for their careful reading of the manuscript and their helpful recommendations.

ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this study is to examine the symbolic and functional values of natural hair styling in the experience of kinky-haired African-American women. An additional objective is to provide a historical and social context for understanding the significance of hair in the African-American feminine persona.

The methodology used for this study was two-fold: (1) African-American women were interviewed to obtain information on the technique of styling kinky hair in its natural state and on the personal meaning and social consequences of wearing natural styles; and (2) a theory on the relation of hair to whole being was developed and used to interpret the function of natural hair in the experience of African-American women.

The results of the study suggest that African-American women's natural hair styles are self-reflecting, self-affirming manifestations of consciousness; that self-reflection is essential to the whole being of black women; and that black women's evolution of natural hair styles is a significant factor in the development of well-functioning human relations in the United States.

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CHAPTER I

DEFINITION OF THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Intensive tensions accompany the care, styling and image of the hair of African-American women and girls. We were taught to regard our hair as generically inferior--"bad," and to assume that it needs to be "done" (chemically or thermally straightened) in order to be styled in a presentable way. This attitude comes from an idea that is ingrained in our minds from a very early age--that kinky hair textures and deep brown skin tones are not as pretty as straight or wavy textures of hair and lighter skin tones. Black girls do not learn to appreciate the physical features that we inherit from our West African ancestors. And while some of the truth emerges as we grow into middle and old age (dark skin is durable!), the perception of the hair "problem" persists.

Out of a lower per capita income than whites, black Americans spend three times more per capita than whites on "cosmetics and toiletries"¹ (a market category which includes hair care products), and additional money is spent on hair dressing services. However, these

¹"The Business of Beauty," Black Enterprise, March 1989, 51.

considerable expenditures of money and time on efforts to alter the structure of our tightly curled hair do not produce completely satisfactory results. The tension between the natural hair growing at the roots and the restructured "relaxed" hair shaft damages the hair and adds another dimension of anxiety to the concern that black women bear about the condition of our hair. Chemical relaxers strip the surface of the hair, causing the weakened shaft to easily split or break; hot comb straightening can burn the hair, giving it a frazzled look; both processes can harm the scalp.

Because hair straightening processes cannot achieve the look desired by some black women, they resort to "hair weaves," a process by which a mass of straight or wavy hair is attached to one's own hair. The use of elaborate hair weaves was conspicuous among black female entertainers during the 1980s, a trend which produced tensions among the "weave"-wearers and other women who regard the look as specious.

The convention of the vast majority of African-American women to conceal the natural character of the hair has resulted in the institutionalization of a false identity for black women. And with the false identity established as our common standard, we forgot how we really look.

A personal case in point: When I was 23, a male friend, who liked the new "Afro" style worn by black women, insisted that my hair was kinky in its natural condition. I was not sure. Never experiencing my hair in its natural condition, I only knew it as a blurred image glimpsed through a beautician's mirror. The just washed natural mass would be straightened with a hot comb or "relaxed" with chemicals.

Between visits to the beauty parlor, the hair would "go back" to a bushy, semi-straight state which I unwittingly came to regard as the "real" texture of my hair. But my friend was right. With his encouragement, I discovered the genuine texture of my hair and, wearing natural styles, learned how I really look.

Framing the face and covering much of the head, the hair is the most conspicuous part of a woman's persona: it mediates the presentation of the self to the world. In the black feminine persona, straightened hair styles are affectations--affects of racial and gender oppression, affects of restricted self-definition.

Over the past 20 years, social scientists, educators, politicians and others have grappled with the issue of the disintegration of the black family and other problems disproportionately affecting black America. Advancing explanations, they often cite factors such as inadequate educational and employment opportunities for black people. In addition to these areas of major consideration, there is a question related to the psycho-social condition of blacks which is seldom raised: Has a negative perception by blacks and whites of the Africoid character of black people's physical features influenced the psychological and social functioning of African-Americans? Analysis of the African-American hair straightening convention raises such questions.

A probing discussion of the social implications of hair straightening among blacks was reported to the historian Theodore Rosak who noted it in a study on the right of all individuals to self-

discovery. During a rap session held in the 1960s, a group of students planning a demonstration took up the question of hair straightening:

Some members of the group are wearing their hair straight; others are wearing their hair natural. Between them, an argument breaks out and within minutes it grows painfully heated--precisely because it is so sharply focused on a personal taste that is in practice here and now...or rather on a taste some have adopted and believe to be personal. The exchange soon broadens to cover sexual preferences generally. Do blacks really think "black is beautiful"? Do they honestly experience themselves that way? Is the love they profess--men for women, women for men--as real as they like to believe? Is their image of beauty their own or the imprint of white media and white advertising? Why (at least in the early stages of Black Power) did so many black male leaders take up with white women? Is Black Power simply the black version of male chauvinism? Will its result be a new put-down for the black woman? Have any those present overcome the "shade prejudice" within their own community of friends and lovers? How many of white society's standards have gotten inside their heads, inside their sexual responses?²

A deeper internal tension exists between the African feminine "animus" or "mythoform" and the illusionary Caucasian-oriented persona that conceals it. Identified by C. G. Jung as the masculine impulse that grows out of the feminine psyche, the "animus" has a more general, gender-neutral usage as a referent to the individual's inner personality. The "mythoform" is a designation given by R. P. Armstrong to a pattern in the psyche which performs some of the functions assigned to the "animus" and which, moreover, possesses forms and processes that are particular to specific cultures.³ (For a complete definition, see "Definition of Terms" section of this Introduction.)

²Theodore Rozak, Person/Planet (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978) 17.

³Robert Plant Armstrong, Wellspring: on the Myth and Source of Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975) 95.

Because of the complementary relation between human beings and the cultures which they create, one may speculate that, in the experience of culturally homologous West African peoples, the mythoform which gives rise to polyrhythms in musical expression and polymorphous (as opposed to strictly measured) forms in dance and visual arts has a counterpart in the polymorphously spiralling pattern of kinky hair. Simply put, the "African animus/Caucasian persona conflict" may be described as "feeling one way and looking another."

Other tensions result from a difference in conceptions about the motive and functioning of natural black feminine hairstyles. Some Americans, black and white, interpret a black woman's choice of a natural hair style as a sign of political militance reminiscent of the "Black Power" days of the 1960s. Black feminine natural styles are also regarded as unsuitable in the professional persona, as eccentric and unkempt. "Natural look" advocates, however, believe that the hair straightening convention detracts from black women's attractiveness by diminishing the vitality of the hair, forming a frame which is inconsistent with Africoid facial features, and rendering us uniform and artificial in appearance.

The psychological motives of the black hair straightening convention are complex. While we claim pride in our racial identity, most African-Americans, nevertheless, view straightened hair as "nicer" in the feminine persona--smoother, neater, easier to style. Within this contradiction lies another tension: rejecting the fuzzy or "kinky" character of our hair, we reject a fundamental part of ourselves and close a channel in our psyches that leads to further

self-discovery. As black women succumb to the hair straightening imperative, the process becomes a suggestion of inadequacy, a suggestion that the magical qualities of loveliness and allure lie, not within ourselves, but in the products and systems of chemistry and technology. In many ways to our advantage, African-Americans are a very adaptable people but we should not feel compelled to follow a convention which denies the truth of our physical being. That is not adaption; it is a lie.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to examine issues within the following three areas:

- (1) How did African-American women come to reject the kinky texture of their hair? (Chapter 2, "We Wear The Mask")
- (2) How do black women's hair styles function as public symbols in modern society? (Chapter 3, "Talking Heads, Hair as Public Symbols")
- (3) How does a black woman's self-perception and life change as she affirms the texture of her hair? How do black women's natural hair styles function as personal symbols? How does this experience relate to the phenomenon of holism? (Chapter 4, "Conditions: Hair and Holism")

METHODOLOGY

In my research for this thesis, I drew from printed sources in several areas including African art history, American history, American literature and folklore, social and humanistic anthropology, and social and Jungian psychology.

Fieldwork also was conducted to elicit data from black women who wear natural hair on the symbolic and pragmatic functions of natural hair styles. Interviews with a core group of 12 respondents were

conducted orally and recorded on audio-tape during 1987-1988 in Richmond, Virginia. Informal conversations were held with a number of other natural-haired women in Richmond. Another set of questions was designed to ascertain hair-related perceptions of black women who straighten their hair and was administered in May 1989 by a black male teacher to 15 straightened-haired black female employees of the Richmond Public Schools.

The concepts of the "persona," the "animus," and the mythoform" are useful in developing an understanding of the motivations of the ways in which African-American women style their hair. Discussing the concept of the "persona" in the Theory of Psychoanalysis, Carl G. Jung noted that through socialization, a persona "appears that is heavily structured by the values, ideals, and meanings of the collective consciousness--in short, by the morality of the conventional social world."⁴ A premise of this thesis is that black women are socialized in ways which encourage the formation of personas which are inconsistent with our physical features and cultural heritage.

Jung used the term "animus" as a symbol of an inner image or spirit contained in women's personality that is influenced by a collective masculine image and conversely, the "anima," as the spirit in males that is influenced by a feminine principle. (In recent years, feminist scholars have questioned Jung's assignment of gender designations to psychological processes.) In this study, however, a

⁴Theory of Psychoanalysis, quoted in Peter Homans, Jung in Context: Modernity and the Making of a Psychology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 100.

gender-neutral connotation of the term "animus" is used to refer to gender-neutral patterns in the human psyche which may respond to influences of gender. In the general usage of the "anima/animus" concept, Jung explained that "just as the persona structures adaptation to outer, social reality, so the anima structures adaptation to inner psychological reality."⁵

This study is based on the assumptions that the roots of African-American women's experience of themselves as racial and feminine beings are not entirely conscious--that some of this racial and gender sensibility grows out of internal experience which is influenced by "animas," and that human personality and human culture are by-products of the structures of the physical body as well as the processes of the mind and society. The animus is conceived as neutral agency within the individual which may be influenced by such factors as gender and genetic make-up as it emerges through consciousness to be expressed externally. For example, among African-American women, there is a marked tendency towards strong, deep singing voices and automatically syncopated singing styles. Distinctive vocal traits arise from a combination of social, cultural, psychological and physical influences.

The specific premises of this thesis are: (1) Physical features such as voice quality, skin color, hair texture and anatomical structure have role in the formation of personality; (2) there are patterns in the psyche which are influenced by collective cultural experience; and (3) that the external persona of the individual may

⁵Carl G. Jung, Psychological Types, Vol. 6 in The Collected Works, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953) 472.

either resonate with the inner patterns or automatically reflect the conventions of the external world. The extent to which inner processes influence the development of the persona varies according to each individual's experience in responding to combinations of inner and external influences.

Refining concepts of Jungian psychology, "humanistic anthropologists" such as Robert Plant Armstrong have increased our understanding of the relation of internal processes to the creation of material forms which have symbolic meaning. Armstrong's concept of the "mythoform" and the "cultural metaphoric base" bears a correspondence to the respective Jungian concepts of the "myth"/"archetype" and the "collective unconscious." However, Armstrong disagrees with Jung's characterization of myths and archetypes as having specific content in the psyche,⁶ and also takes issue with Jung's concentration on the verbal aspect of myth.⁷ Armstrong's view is that the "myth" or "mythoform" is the structure of the psyche.⁸ While Jungian terms on the psychological dimensions of culture are more familiar in current scholarly and popular usage, related concepts and terms in humanistic anthropology are more precise and, finding support in the recent findings of other disciplines, may eventually supplant some of the Jungian terminology.

Armstrong defines the mythoform as a "cultural principle which is without specific content but which has a particularity of form and

⁶Armstrong, Wellspring, 103.

⁷Ibid., 102.

⁸Ibid

process."⁹ In this study of black feminine hair forms, the term "animus" is used to refer to that aspect of the mythoform which assumes particularity form and process or function. This animate aspect of the mythoform is conceived to be shaped by conditions in the body and psyche as it rises from the ground of being to be expressed through consciousness.

Armstrong's discussion of the "mythoform" is presented in Wellspring (1975), a study which applies an analysis of mythoforms to the interpretation of works ("affecting presences") created in the traditional Yoruba culture of Nigeria. In the following excerpt from this seminal work, Armstrong describes his conception of the mythoform:

To explain this principle I postulate the existence of a cultural myth which is without specific content but which has a particularity of form and process.

I suggest that we learn this myth with awareness aptitude and hungry avidity in our earliest life and that it patterns all subsequent encounters into experience. Further, this myth is only grossly amenable to conceptualization, lying anterior to the processes of reason. I postulate that one cannot study this myth solely through language, as some of us have been wont to do, because it is not more inherent in language than it is in religion, that it is as fundamental to social organization as it is to vision, and that is to be seen best in all of culture. The primordial condition of this myth is anterior to feeling as it is to concept, though it must enact itself in these domains. It is ground--preconcept, prefeeling, prebelief--ground pure and simple. It exists as a deep reality which, of itself, lies forever hidden, and its sole "language" is the totality of our experience... This deep cultural myth I postulate I shall call the mythoform... Only the mythoform can satisfactorily answer those questions about culture which have for so long bedeviled us--how to account for the concordance of the arts, the symmetry of change, the rationale of syncretization, the selectivity of acculturation... the homogeny of culture.¹⁰

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Armstrong states further states that the "affect" of the mythoform is to manifest and celebrate its otherwise hidden, inaccessible presence,¹¹ and he notes that mythoforms vary from culture to culture:

The mythoform informs all the people of a culture do and are.... The mythoforms of more than one culture, obviously, may opt for the same disciplines; but this does not mean that such cultures will necessarily have common social or affecting forms...Cultures that have apparently similar social and affecting forms need not share the same mythoform.¹²

The mythoform is shaped in consciousness by spatial and temporal patterns in culture which human beings begin to perceive in infancy.¹³ Armstrong relates this conception of the mythoform to a view shared by all anthropologists: that human activity is patterned and that these patterns coalesce to form cultures.

An area of inquiry for this thesis centers on the contributions of mythoforms to the development of physical personas. A study of theories of symbolism in hair forms helped to put the question into perspective.

Theories on the symbolic meaning of hair forms have been evolving for a number of years. In the essay, "Magical Hair" (1958), Edmund Leach compared the theories of ethnographer G. A. Wilken and psychoanalyst Charles Berg to probe the question of whether hair forms

¹¹Ibid., 12.

¹²Ibid., 141.

¹³Ibid., 95.

are determined by an individual's conscious responses to repressed or acknowledged sexuality.¹⁴ Wilken proposed that the hair stands for the personality of the individual on whose head it grows in a paper published in 1886.¹⁵ Making a more specific assessment based in psychoanalytic theory, Berg in a 1951 work, contended that in most societies, hair dressing is a symbol of the genital organs and, thus, that hair cutting and shaving can be understood as symbolic castration.¹⁶

In the essay "Social Hair" (1969), C. R. Hallpike took issue with psychosexual analyses of the meaning of hair dressing by pointing out why theories on the sexually-oriented meanings of hair can not be empirically shown to be true or false. It would be "surprising," he said, if all the symbolic uses of hair could be reduced to the single origin of sexuality.¹⁷ Instead, Hallpike proposed an approach that would analyze the relations of hair forms to the social context in which they are found; this mode of analysis would be two-fold. The investigator would:

ask the natives what each symbol means (without necessarily eliciting a satisfactory answer) and make a list of the occurrences of each symbol in its ritual context. When he has collected sufficient data of this type he will try to discern the

¹⁴ Edmund Leach, "Magical Hair," in Myth and Cosmos, ed. by John Middleton (Garden City: Natural History Press, 1967), 77-108.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

¹⁶ Ibid., 81.

¹⁷ C. R. Hallpike, "Social Hair" in Man, N.S., Vol. 4, No. 2, 1969, 256-264.

structure of the symbolism and its relation to the people's cosmology, social organization and values.¹⁸

Continuing the discussion of the significance of hair in Symbols: Public and Private (1973), Raymond Firth said that its significance "often seems to lie not in its narrowly sexual reference but, as earlier anthropologists indicated, in its usefulness as a manipulable representation of the entire person."¹⁹ On black women's hair styles, he pointed out that the Afro of the 1960s was a statement of black pride and noted that the style, while passing out of fashion, "has been important in helping to free black women from the problems of dealing with kinky hair in straight-haired society, and stimulate them (black women) to adopt a wider variety of bold hairstyles."²⁰

Gananath Obeyeskere follows Hallpike's recommended twofold approach in Medusa's Hair (1982), a study of the symbolism of matted hair in the experience of Sri Lankan religious ecstasies.²¹ Obeyeskere characterizes as "personal symbols," the functions described by his matted-haired subjects, and designates as "public symbols," the values and functions that operate between the subject's hair form and others. Symbolism in hair forms, thus, can function simultaneously on both personal and public levels. However, according to Armstrong's

¹⁸Ibid., 263.

¹⁹Raymond Firth, Symbols: Public and Private (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) 273.

²⁰Ibid., 273.

²¹Gananath Obeyeskere, Medusa's Hair: An Essay on Personal Symbols and Religious Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

analysis, if the hair form is also an "affecting presence" (created from the mythoform), it is no longer simply a symbol: one thing representing or suggesting something else, it is the thing itself--it is consciousness articulated through form; whereas, "a symbol has no necessary physical conformity to what it conveys."²²

HYPOTHESIS

Concurring with the general premise of Wilken and Firth, (i.e., that the hair is a general representation of the entire person), the hypotheses of this study are (1) that the natural hair forms of African-American women are expressive, material forms of consciousness, and conversely, (2) that the hair straightening convention functions as a suppression of vital aspects of self, and (3) that this practice of suppression among African-American women has repercussions in our communities and in society at large. The thesis is based on the proposition that the unity and strength of the whole community and society increase as each of the component human selves manifests and fulfills his or her own unique potential.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In the context of this study, these terms will convey the following meanings:

Africoid -- possessing physical characteristics common to the indigenous peoples of central west Africa. This term is used, instead of the more familiar "Negroid," to describe the distinctive character of the features of African-Americans.

²²Armstrong, Wellspring, 23.

Animus -- used in the gender-neutral sense as defined by Carl G. Jung: "The inner personality is the manner of one's behavior towards the inner psychic processes; it is the inner attitude, the character, that is turned towards the unconscious. I term the outer attitude, or outer character, the persona, the inner attitude I term the anima or soul."²³

Kinky -- this term referring to the intricate texture of Africoid hair has assumed some pejorative meaning but is used here as a value-neutral description.

Mythoform -- a cultural principle which is without specific content but which has a particularity of form and process. The mythoform varies from culture to culture and operates "behind each possibility of man's relationship with the world, refracting through each sense and each faculty into terms appropriate to them."²⁴

Persona -- the "mask" or image that one adopts to mediate between the inner self and the outer world. Material elements of the feminine persona include hairstyle, make-up, dress and accessories; of these, only the hair originates in the self.

Hair Forms

Afro -- "Afro-Cuban" was a term given by northeastern blacks in the early to mid-sixties to describe certain Caribbean-inspired music and dress styles. When some black males started to let their hair grow longer in the mid-sixties, the look was called "the Afro," probably

²³Carl G. Jung, Psychological Types (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926) 593.

²⁴Armstrong, Wellspring, 96.

both as an abbreviated form of "Afro-Cuban" and as reflection of stirrings of interest by black Americans in African culture. Today, the term is generally used to describe close or medium length natural hair cuts worn by black women and girls.

Cornrows -- within the African-American community, the hair of young girls traditionally has been braided into "cornrowed" styles. The braider uses a technique of weaving three sections of hair into a row. The row is created through the continuous motion of the braiders' hands down or across the head; additional strands are picked up as the hands move along each row. These braided styles resembling patterns formed by growing crops were created by black women to provide easy, effective maintenance and styling for little girl's hair. In the 1970s, some adult black women in urban areas began to wear cornrowed hair styles created by African-American women. The style also provided a way of managing growing, tightly-coiled or "kinky" hair. In cornrowing, a thick amorphous mass of hair is reduced to compact, geometrically-arranged units of braids.

Locks -- if the tightly-coiled pattern of kinky hair is not altered by any straightening means, including combing, it will form dense locks. These locks, not the individual hairs, are groomed--washed, conditioned, patted and shaped into a sculptural mass, or allowed to be freely animate. (Sometimes called "dreadlocks.")

Loose plaits -- single free-hanging braided hair (as distinguished from the connecting braids of cornrowing which adhere to the scalp). Loose plaits can originate in cornrows or hang loose from the scalp.

CHAPTER 2

WE WEAR THE MASK

While black women have rejected much of the behavior of our subjugated past--self-effacing behavior in the presence of whites, fear of expressing ourselves directly, and cloth-wrapped heads--we retain a counterpart of this self-effacement and fear in the prevailing, "oppressed"¹ (i.e., straightened) ways in which we wear our hair. This chapter examines the history of the physical and psychological subjugation of African-American women and its impact on our present-day personas. We begin with a survey of the African past to gain a perspective on the natural hair culture developed by women in traditional African societies.

The structure of the hair of Africans and African-descended people is characterized by an intense curl pattern which is called "kinky" or "nappy." Pleased by the bristling, intricate texture of their hair, women in traditional West African cultures approached the natural mass of hair as a sculptural medium; the resultant styling, in addition to

¹Alice Walker, "Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain," Ms., June 1988, 52.

organizing the hair into an aesthetic pattern, contained philosophical and social meanings.

Artifacts dating back to the beginning of recorded history in Africa show that black women have consistently used braiding techniques to groom, style and maintain their tightly spiralling or "kinky" hair. Artifacts from Napata in ancient Nubia depict women wearing hairstyles formed from thick, nappy braids. An illustration on an utensil made the 8th to 7th century B.C. shows a young woman with a sculptural hairstyle: thick cornrowed braids are pulled back into a "ponytail" of loose braids which are molded into the shape of a rounded fan.² A similar style (cornrowed braids pulled into ponytails which fall to the shoulder) is worn by women depicted on a relief from a Napatan temple of the sixth century B.C.³ Through braiding, a bulky, amorphous mass of hair is made compact and ordered.

While the peoples of Egypt and Asia Minor began intermarrying in Egypt during the period of the early dynasties, the influence of the indigenous blacks and the infusions of the black people from the lower kingdom and other southern regions was reflected for many centuries in Egyptian hair and headdress design. During the early dynasties, men and women wore their natural (kinky, curly, wavy or straight) hair in thick braids and locks. Associating body hair with dirt, later nobility initiated the practice of shaving the head and wearing wigs. The conventional wig styles depicted on Egyptian artifacts appear to be

²Photograph of drawing on ointment spoon in Africa in Antiquity V. 2 by Steffan Wenig (New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1978), 178.

³Photograph of relief on temple in Ibid., 58.

modelled in the form of thick "cornrowed" braids and "locks," the long, matted spirals that kinky hair forms as it freely grows out. Among the treasures in the tomb of Tutanhamun is one representation of King Tut with short kinky hair: small dots of tightly-curved hair are painted on the head of a bust of the infant sun god.⁴

[In classical Greece and Rome, artists admirably portrayed the "kinky" texture of African people's hair in portraits of blacks on pendants, earrings, necklaces and coins. Africans attracted artists in the European classical world over a longer period than other foreign groups because the African physical type appealed to the artists.⁵ Some cropped ("short Afro") styles are represented in these works.⁶ Most depict a style consisting of even rows of short, woolly twists or spirals which appear to be clipped, well-groomed examples of the type of hair style that today, commonly, is called "dreadlocks."⁷]

[In traditional West African cultures, the exceptional plasticity of "kinky" hair was appreciated for its sculptural qualities and hair styling was a form of personal decorative art. By separating the hair into even parts and braiding it, African women created designs through the pattern of dark, grainy hair against clean, smooth scalp. Simple braided styles were the predominant form, however, in some societies,

reminds me of

⁴K. S. Gilbert, ed., Treasurers of Tutanhamun (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976), plate 1.

⁵Frank Snowden, Blacks in Antiquity (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1970) 181.

⁶Ibid., fig. 55.

⁷Ibid., figs. 29, 3, 54, 60, 61, 62.

more elaborate styles were created by mixing plastic media such as raffia with the hair and shaping the mass into intricate forms.

Braided styles could signify marital, social, age and gender status, as well as, symbolically express specific inspirational or enlightening messages. On symbolism in traditional West African hair styling, art historian Rosalind Jeffries says that women were motivated by social ideals and inspired by forms in nature such as the sankofa bird.⁸ Head pointing one way, body pointing the other, the sankofa bird is represented by a swastika type design in braided hair styles. A maxim, derived from this bird who seems to be always looking backwards, is also expressed as the meaning of the swastika-patterned hairstyle. The maxim is "turn back and get your history."⁹

The malleable, coarsely-textured nap of the hair was exaggerated by traditional West African carvers and sculptors in representations of the heads of human and mythical figures. Rendered in wood, metals, ivory, stone, clay, and plant fibers, this sculpture was a form of double art (i.e., designs created in hairstyles on sculpted figures) which possessed multiple meanings. The hairstyle on a wooden figure representing an Ashanti queen mother, for example, is a symbolization of the importance of the official matriarchal position and is also an expression of beauty through the symmetrical forms created by braided

⁸Rosalind Jeffries, "Black Hair Sculpture: An Art Historian's View" (Paper presented at the symposium "Contemporary Black American Braids: The Question of Aesthetics and Performance," National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C., Nov. 1982).

⁹Ibid.

hair.¹⁰ The queen mother's hair is styled in sets of large, thick braids: a row of two braids extends from the top of the head, front to back; perpendicular to this set are rows of thick braids extending along each side of the head.

The early European explorers to West Africa were impressed by the coastal people's artistic hair forms. In 1455, the Portuguese explorer Cado Mosto noted the sculptural qualities of the Senegalese people's hairstyles: "(Both) sexes...wear their hair into beautiful tresses, which they tie in various knots, though it be very short."¹¹ Other explorers to West Africa described the people's pleasure in braiding and twisting the hair, adorning it with beautiful objects, and creating a great diversity of styles:

(The hair is) platted or twisted, and adorn'd with some few trinkets of gold, coral, or glass¹²

(Some wear a) coif, standing up five or six inches above their head, which they think a fine fashion¹³

They are very proud of their Hair; some wear it in Tufts and bunches, and others cut it in Crosses quite over their Heads...Others will let their Hair hang down on each side of their

¹⁰ Photograph of wooden figure in Sculpture of Black Africa (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, 1968) 58.

¹¹ Quoted in J. H. Moore, A New and Complete Collection of Voyages and Travels (London: 1785), Vol. 1, p. 434 cited in Roy Sieber, African Textiles and Decorative Arts (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972) 74.

¹² John Barbot, A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea (London: 1732), 35, cited by Sieber, African Textiles, 94.

¹³ Ibid.

Heads, plaited... on which they string Coral, and for want of it, pipe beads...¹⁴

In traditional West African cultures, feminine hair care and styling was communal practice which strengthened bonds between women and enhanced the quality of community life. The practice remains relatively unchanged in some areas, including among the Mende women of southern and eastern Sierra Leone.] In an extensive study of Mende women's institutions and culture, Sylvia Ardyn Boone points out that, in addition to creating neat and pleasing styles, the braiding practice is motivated by love. To ensure the success of a hairstyle, the working space must be "cleared of animosities and be full of good will and harmony:"¹⁵

[Offering to plait another woman's hair is a way of asking her to become your friend. A beautiful, distinctive style is considered a gift of love...that it is one woman saying to another: "I like you. I appreciate you. I have thought about you enough to image a style that will suit and enhance your features. I am not jealous of you. I want you to look beautiful so that you will attract love, admiration, and all the good that these bring. I am willing to stand or bend for several hours, working on your hair, expecting no remuneration. My sacrifice proves that I want only the best for you."¹⁶]

Resettled as slaves in North America, African women did not have the tranquility or luxurious license to leisurely gather and

¹⁴ Francis Moore, Travels into the Inland Parts of Africa... (London: Edward Cave, 1738), 75 cited in Sieber, African Textiles, 94, 107.

¹⁵ Sylvia Ardyn Boone, Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 189.

¹⁶ Ibid.

painstakingly beautify one another. Laboring for the master from sun-up to sun-down and maintaining the slave community from sun-down to sleep, the women resorted to simple, expedient means of maintaining their hair and usually covered their heads with a kerchief or cloth.

PROBLEM OF KINKS IN A STRAIGHT-HAIRED SOCIETY

The tensions pervading the image and care of black women's kinky hair in American society has its roots in the society's disparagement of the African physical type. While reports of the initial European explorers' contacts with Africans do not reveal this prejudice, an openness to African physical and cultural difference was not generally transplanted to the North American colonies.

Ideas and images of "higher and lower races" began to proliferate in American public opinion in the 1790s when a spate of treatises on physical variations among the races began appearing in England and America. In one such work, Dr. Charles White of the British Royal Academy, based a thesis on the overall superiority of white people on his study of anatomical differences among the races. Of the world's women, he declaimed, Europe's were certainly the most beautiful and desirable:

In what other quarter of the globe shall we find the blush that overspreads the soft features of the beautiful women of Europe, that emblem of modesty, of delicate feelings and of sense? Where that nice expression of the amiable and softer passions in the countenance; and that general elegance of features and complexion (sic)? Where, except of the bosom of the European woman, two such plump and snowy white hemispheres, tipped with vermillion?¹⁷

¹⁷ Charles White, Regular Gradation, 134-35, cited in Wintrop Jordan, White over Black: American Attitudes towards the Negro, 1550-1812 (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History, 1968) 502.

While holding "all men are created equal," Thomas Jefferson and other American philosophers of democracy nevertheless were persuaded to accept the notion of "higher and lower races." Persisting into the 19th century, the notion was not seriously challenged by white abolitionist writers who, rather, objected to slavery on moral grounds. In producing one of the most memorable characters in American literature, the guilelessly wily "pickaninny," "Topsy," Stowe expresses the 'higher/lower race' idea when the master's daughter, "little Eva" meets "Topsy":

There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the African, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice.¹⁸

The concept of higher and lower races was used by pro-slavery writers; some of them citing Charles Darwin's "survival of the fittest" thesis (On the Origin of Species, 1859) to support their theories on the unequal development of the races and, thus, the legitimacy of slavery. As the image of the African physical character depreciated in the public view, and the complex conception of African hair culture slipped from black women's minds (although elements of the memory remained), black women came to dislike and reject the kinky texture of their hair.

¹⁸ Harriet Beecher Stow, Uncle Tom's Cabin or Life Among the Lowly (Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1852), v. 2, 43.

The head covering, an integral part of a slave woman's persona, became a principal symbol of respectability in some areas. In coastal South Carolina, the white turban signified the status of the trusted, chief house servant -- the "mammy."¹⁹ The brilliant whiteness of the mammy's turban was official balm in the plantation manor, obliterating the tensions that accompanied a kinky-haired black woman's entrance into the formal company of the whites. In some areas, head coverings were symbols of married status.²⁰ Compared with the house servants, the field workers exercised more options in the appearance of the head and were able to work without covering their hair. In photographs and illustrations, black women at work in the fields generally appear with their hair covered by simple kerchiefs. Slave women devised sleek, graceful ways of wrapping the cloths. Usually a small piece of cloth was pulled to the back of the head and tied with the ends tucked neatly inside to form a snug cap. In addition to factors of utility such as keeping dirt and crop debris out of hair, other motives influenced the slave woman's hair concealment practice. Women in agrarian West African cultures did not wear their hair tightly bound while working in hot weather. The significance of the head covering in the slave women's persona was pointed out by a former slave who recalled: "Just before dese here speculators would get to a town or plantation...dey stop the crowds...and make de womens wrap up dey heads with some nice

¹⁹Eugene D. Genovese, Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (New York: Random House, 1976) 559.

²⁰Ibid.

red cloth so dey all look in good shape to de man what dey gwine try to do business with."²¹

HAIR, GEOGRAPHY, COMMUNITY

Some of the communal aspects of traditional African hair care continued in slavery although much of the artistry and symbolism was lost. In addition to the rigors and deprivations of enslavement, factors in the slave women's loss of African hair culture traditions included a lack of access to streams and rivers. Their ancestors had settled near natural water sources in West Africa and water had become an important symbolic and functional element in women's hair care and beauty.

In recognition of the affinity between spirits of women and water, Sylvia Boone entitled her exploration of Mende feminine ideals of beauty, Radiance From The Waters.²² Beauty ideals passed down through generations of Mende women through Sande, a women's society which includes among its functions the training of girls to find fulfillment in their roles as women. In Sande culture, symbolic acts of immersion in water are part of a rite to initiate girls into the status of adult women:

The highest lesson in beauty is the final ritual bath when the girl washes off her body the clay dust of her seclusion and ordeal and then massages herself all over with perfumed oils. The bath is performed in common with her sodality sisters and the senior

²¹Norman Yetman, ed., Life Under the Peculiar Institution (New York: Holt Rhinehart and Winston, 1970) 78.

²²Boone, Radiance.

women of Sande; from the waters like Sowo,* like Tingoi,** she arises in full glory finally transformed into a beautiful nyaha.*** Later, for the rest of her life, she will perform the same ritual personally, daily going to the stream after the day's labors to wash away the traces of toil, to put on herself neku, freshness, cleanliness, to make herself anew in the image of haenjo.****²³

[As part of the Sande woman's function and symbolization of

freshness and cleanliness in community life, an important criterion in the beauty of a woman is that her hair be clean and well-plaited.

Bathing and braiding are interrelated functions of women's personal and communal lives.]

There was also a dynamic exchange between women's acts of grace and natural phenomena such as rivers which were said to contain the spirits of water goddesses. Water and sun figured in Phillis Wheatley's only distinct memory of her life in an undetermined area of West Africa. Enslaved and brought to Boston in 1761 when she was about 7, the new world's first published black woman poet's only recollection of Africa was that every morning her mother would "pour out water before the rising sun."²⁴ The vital water and sun-filled memories of

* Sowo: the Sande Society mask, a dancing spirit, Ibid., 251.

** Tingoi: a river spirit who appears as a dazzlingly beautiful woman, Ibid., 251.

*** Nyaha: a woman, wife, female who has been initiated into the Sande Society, Ibid., 250.

**** Haenjo: the attempt of every girl to fashion herself into loveliness, Ibid., 137.

²³Ibid., 251.

²⁴G. Herbert Renfro, Life and Works of Phillis Wheatley (Washington: Robert L. Pendleton, 1916) 10.

ancestors dimmed as the Africans adapted to enslavement in situations that did not provide good access to flowing waters. In recalling hair care practices on a Georgia plantation, a former slave described a confined, insect-infested situation:

On Sundays, the old folks (adults) stayed home and looked one another's heads over for nits and lice. Whenever they found anything, they mashed it twixt they finger and thumb and went ahead searching. Then the womans wrapped each other's hair the way it was to stay fixed 'til the next Sunday.²⁵

The 'wrappings' referred to the practice of encircling sections of hair with thread or string. To wrap the hair, a woman would part the hair in blocks. Then she gathered, according to the thickness of the hair, a few strands or many, and secured the section of hair by tying a piece of thread or string around it at the scalp. The string was wrapped around the strands and tied at the end. The wrapped lengths of hair were either connected together with string or hung loose like braids. This technique kept the hair in place and smooth.

Slave women's braided and wrapped hair forms were typically simple, functioning for purposes of utility rather than fashion and style. Blacks living on the islands off the coasts of South Carolina and Georgia, however, retained comparatively more complex African behavior than did slaves living inland and some of this retention was reflected in the hair culture of the coastal and sea island slave women. One of the most elaborate examples of the hair care practices of slave women is provided by an ivory bust of a former slave woman who

²⁵B. A. Botkins, ed., Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1945) 71.

lived at the Retreat Plantation on St. Simons Island, Georgia.²⁶ The neckbase of the sculpture is carved with the legend: "Nora August, slave, age 23 years. Purchased from the market, St. Augustine, Florida, April 17, 1860. Now a free woman." An anti-slavery medallion is carved on the neck. It says: "Am I not a man and a brother?" Above the medallion is carved: "Sold east of plaza, 1860."

The sculpture of Nora August portrays thick kinky hair which is divided into five sections and braided into dense, thin rows; each section is molded into raised, pyramidal-shaped wedges which form a starfish-shaped pattern in back. The top three sections of the hair converge into three braids which are formed into a cord-wrapped crown at the top, front of the head. The two sections of the lower back of the head converge into a single, cord-wrapped, U-shaped braid at the nape of the neck. The even, intricate detail of the hair indicates that the parting and braiding of Nora's hair was done by another woman. The elaborate, sculptural hair style is reminiscent of the treatments of hair on figures carved in traditional West African cultures.

Little is known about the specific circumstances out of which the hairstyle was produced, so at this writing, it is not possible to say whether the style was entirely a direct African retention or the spontaneous, creative response of two black women to the sculptural potential of thick, kinky hair. A likely assumption is that it was a combination of both impulses. One aspect of the style of braiding used in Nora's hairstyle was a retention of a technique used by African

²⁶Photographs of ivory bust of Nora August by Kym S. Rice (unpublished). Bust, on display at Sea Island Golf Club, St. Simon's Georgia.

women: the "cornrowing" or continuous weaving of the hair into parallel rows.

Presented to the nurses at Darien, Georgia in 1865, the sculpture was carved from life at Retreat Plantation which was occupied by Union troops and used as an army hospital and camp for contraband slaves. The sculptor was probably a Union soldier. The portrait of Nora August is a striking representation of African feminine beauty created out of the fusion of a dual inspiration: the inspiration of the black female hair stylist(s) to articulate a black woman's distinctive charm through an intricately-detailed hair form, and the inspiration of the sculptor to work a piece of ivory, probably indigenous to Africa and a medium difficult to carve, into fine detail to produce a lasting portrait of a regal, self-possessed, African-featured woman.

Descriptions of slave women's hair care practices appear infrequently in the American slave narrative collection and in historiography and fiction about slavery, but a few accounts in these sources and in southern folklore studies conducted in the late 19th and early 20th centuries provide glimpses of hair care practices that originated in slavery. The few comments on hair care in the slave narratives include fond memories by two former male slaves. A former slave on a southern Louisiana plantation recalled: "The girls dress up on Sunday. All week they wear they hair all roll up with cotton they unfold from the cotton boil. Sunday come they comb the hair out fine. No grease on it. They want it naturally curly."²⁷

²⁷George P. Rawick, ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1972) Vol. 5, 18.

Memories of string-wrapped hair evoked joy in the former slave, Peter Clifton: "I meets Christina and seek her out for to marry. Dere was somethin' about dat gal dat day I meets her, though her hair had about a pound of cotton thread in it, dat just attracted me to her like a fly will sail 'round and light on a 'lasses pitcher."²⁸

Forklorist Elsie Parsons noted the hair wrapping practice among the Gullah people of South Carolina in the Folklore of the Sea Islands:

Women, old and young, quite commonly wear kerchiefs around the head and tied at the back. Underneath, the hair is likely to be "wrapped." You "wrap um" (i.e., wrap strings around wisps of hair), beginning at the roots of the hair, and winding to the ends, "to make um grow."²⁹

A brief description of a Missouri woman's string-wrapped hair is contained in a 1893 study by Mary Owen:

There was nothing Aunt Mymee desired less than a "head-handkerchief," as she wore her hair (except on Sundays, when it was carded out in a great black fleece), in little wads the length and thickness of her finger, each wad being tightly wrapped with white cord.³⁰

Keeping the hair restrained and untangled, the string wrappings primarily functioned as devices of maintenance, not style. Like kerchiefs, string-wrappings were a provisional response to the

²⁸Yetman, Life, 59.

²⁹Elsie C. Parsons, "Folk Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina," Folklore Society, Vol. XVI, 204 quoted in Melville Herskovits, The Myth of the Negro Past (New York: Harper & Row, 1941) 149.

³⁰Mary A. Owen, Old Rabbit the Voodoo and Other Sorcerers (London: 1893) 10, quoted in Herskovits, Myth, 149.

problematic image of kinky hair in a society which deemed, as an essential feature of feminine beauty, long, soft tresses.

LITTLE GIRLS, FREE BLACK WOMEN

Young black girls normally wore their hair uncovered, either string-wrapped, in braids, or short and loose in the style that later would be called the "Afro." Considered unseemly for adult women, wiry, kinky braids could assume an amusing, animate character of cuteness when worn by little girls.

Braids were an outstanding part the "pickaninny" caricature which proliferated in 19th century American popular culture. "Topsy," originally appearing in Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, was the most famous of the pickaninny figures. When the slave child "Topsy" arrived at her new master's household, her "woolly hair was braided in sundry little tails, which stuck out in every direction."³¹ The child was dispatched to the mammy of the household who forthwith clipped her hair. "(S)horn of all the little braided tails wherein her heart had delighted," Topsy was deprived of an element of her antic charm.³² But the image of Topsy with electrified braids persisted in the popular imagination and was reproduced in the tide of posters and other illustrations depicting the pickaninny that followed the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin and stage productions based on the book.

While young slave girls usually wore their hair uncovered, the experience of the mulatto slave child, "Vyry", was different. Margaret

³¹Stowe, Cabin, V. 2, 32.

³²Ibid., 39.

Walker told the story of her grandmother Vyry in Jubilee, a novel based in family records and lore, and extensive historical research. In the novel, "Vyry" is the charge of a mammy who covers the girl's long, sandy-colored hair with tightly wrapped rags. The mammy is aware that the mistress at the Big House is troubled by "Vyry's" resemblance to her (the mistress's) own daughter, who is in fact, half-sister through the father to "Vyry." As the following scene from Jubilee suggests, special hair concealment practices among female slaves were also motivated by a perception that long, soft, curly hair was a significant attribute in feminine beauty and black female slaves were considered -- and forced, if necessary, to have a lesser feminine identity:

While Caline combed and brushed Miss Lillian's hair into curls Vyry stood by and she said, "Can I have curls, too?"

But Miss Lillian (Vyry's half sister) laughingly said, "Niggers don't wear curls do they Caline?" And Caline watching Vyry's stricken face said, "Naw Missy, they sure don't."³³

The purposeful diminishment of the black feminine image was a consequence, in part, of the polarized pattern of conventional 19th century American thought. Structural anthropologists describe this pattern as "binary opposition," a way of thinking which assigns opposing values for ideas and things, dividing and classifying them according to perceived differences. In this way, if the prototypical Northern European feminine type is considered pretty or pleasing, then its opposite -- the prototypical West African feminine type -- is considered unappealing or ugly.

³³Margaret Walker, Jubilee (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1966) 30.

While some black women in antebellum Northern towns and cities struggled to achieve a physical appearance resembling white women, other black women actively expressed pride in their African features and ancestry. They were members of groups of Northern free blacks who identified themselves as "African." These African people in America studied African history in the Bible and other available sources, and included the word "African" in the titles of their independent schools, churches, newspapers and societies. So, while as early as the 1850s, when some blacks were experimenting with commercial hair straightening processes, others were skeptical of the inventions. In 1859, "Hodgson, the Great African Hair Unkinker" was rebuffed by a black woman at a demonstration of the product in New York City. Noting that she also took pride in her Indian blood, the woman said that she wouldn't "abandon her race for straight hair."³⁴

As the memory of Africa vanished and the popular image of the African physical character was increasingly degraded, black women in the North lost their desire and ability to express their racial identity in evolving feminine styles and fashioned their personas (hair, dress, jewelry, and later, make-up) in the established image of white women. This emulation, itself however, required original thinking; for example, as black women ironed rough dry clothes, some reasoned, "If this flat iron can smooth out the wrinkles in this laundry, it can do the same for my hair." In a practice which became widespread in the North and in some areas of the South, the hair of

³⁴M. A. Harris, The Black Book (New York: Random House, 1974) 190.

black women and girls was spread out on flat surface by another woman and pressed with a heavy heated flat iron. The process was cumbersome and risky but black women endured its rigors because the singular, Caucasian standard of feminine appearance in America decreed that the hair should be soft, silky and well-styled.

ENSLAVED HAIR IN FREEDOM

The notion of "higher and lower" races continued to grow after the Civil War along with a rampant "Negrophobia." As it gathered force, the popular conception promoted by the Abolitionists of blacks as humble, suffering Christians gave way to the stereotypical image of blacks as grotesque, degenerate creatures -- pariahs. The sweet promise of the Union victory soured as well as in this climate, leading in 1876 to the official abandonment of the Reconstruction effort in the South.

"Negrophobia" assisted blackface minstrelry's evolution into the most popular form of entertainment in 19th century America. Both inspired by blacks in the 1830s and ridiculing them, minstrelry evolved and branched out during the 1880s and '90s into vaudeville and musical comedy. Black people's sensitivity about the African character of their physical features was increased by minstrelry's grotesque caricatures of blacks. The minstrel performers, usually white men in blackface, spoofed black people's hair by wearing wild outlandish wigs and joking that blacks had to have their hair filed, not cut.³⁵

³⁵Robert C. Toll, Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in 19th Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) 67.

In late 19th century America, demeaning caricatures of blacks proliferated in advertising, on post-cards, sheet music covers, product labels and in other popular media. The composite black male icon created in 19th century popular media has been designated by American historians as the "Sambo" stereotype. Historian Joseph Boskin says that the icon was propagated as a means of social control: "The ultimate objective for whites was to effect mastery: to render the black male powerless as a potential warrior, as a sexual competitor, as an economic adversary."³⁶

While appearing less frequently as an image in blackface minstrelry, black feminine stereotypes were familiar images in American popular culture, appearing in advertising and household product labels, in illustrations for ragtime sheet music covers, comics, and books, cards and calendars depicting scenes from southern life, and in craft items such as ceramic cookie jars and dolls. As with the production of black male stereotypes, the use of black feminine stereotypes functioned as a form of social control by diminishing the appearance of black women's possession of feminine, sexually-desirable qualities. The obese, bustling "Mammy" was the familiar icon of the black woman in this media and a symbolic aspect of the mammy's persona was the bandanna which implied a kind of gender-linked inferiority. The ^Pimplicit meaning of the bandanna was that black women concealed their kinky locks in shame.

³⁶ Joseph Boskin, Sambo: The Rise and Demise of an American Jester (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 14.

Arna Bontemps, an African-American historian, made a tongue-in-cheek allusion to the "appealing" aspect of the bandanna in describing reactions to the death of Frederick Douglass's first wife, the brown skinned Anna.

The expressions of sympathy that filled Douglass' mail in the following days often struck a quaint note. Old companions of the abolitionist campaigns tried to incorporate all their impressions of the naive woman in comments about her good cooking, her tidy house and the appealing picture she made with her head tied in a bandanna. Few of them succeeded in hiding a still stronger feeling which her death revived: admiration for Douglass who, while outgrowing Anna, had never so much hinted that he felt unequally yoked.³⁷

A year and a half later in 1884, Douglass, the Recorder of Deeds in Washington, D.C., became the first prominent black person in the United States to marry a Caucasian when he wed the woman who had been his secretary at the Deeds office, a woman whose head, no doubt, was unencumbered.

During the post-bellum era, the popular media depicted black girls as rambunctious "pickaninnies" whose wiry, little braids looked lightning-struck. The unmistakable message of the pickaninny icon was that the natural behavior of kinky hair is comical. The close, well-cropped hair of black males, however, was harder to caricature.

Lithographs and photographs of students attending the Freedmen Bureau's schools show many black girls in the close hair style that we now call the short "Afro." But this appearance would soon mark the child as being of a low social status. With more time and access to

³⁷Anna Bontemps, 100 Years of Negro Freedom (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1961) 112.

their children in freedom, black mothers began to intensively work on their daughter's hair so that it would grow. Black women in the urban outh phased out wrapping the hair with strings as a means of maintaining their hair and discarded the bandanna and kerchief as a means concealing kinky hair, while continuing to develop hair straightening processes, including the technique of "training" the hair.

To "train" kinky hair between washings, a woman would wet her hair at night with water and sometimes oil, and braid or twist it up. When the dried twists or braids were undone, the hair was softer, wavier and easier to style in standard ways. But, this smooth, "trained" condition was temporary. The hair would "go back" just in the wear, and more quickly if exposed to humidity, perspiration and other forms of moisture.

Among black women in the rural South, the practice of "wrapping" the hair with thread or string continued well into the 20th century. When store-bought thread was not available, women used the white string off of cotton bags, tobacco vines, or strips of stockings to wrap hair which had been oiled with lard or fatback grease. Keeping springy hair elongated and untangled, the technique somewhat straightened out the hair.

Women usually wore their hair wrapped during the week. On Sunday morning, the string was removed and the wavy "trained" hair was styled to be worn under a hat to church and "out" for Sunday dinner.

"Trained" hair styles were simple: the hair was brushed back, patted

down; longer hair was usually secured with pins or twisted into a knot or bun at the back of the head.

Black women in the post-bellum South were self-conscious about appearing in public with string-wrapped hair. In Mama's Daughters: A Novel of Charleston, DuBose Hayward describes the tensions which attended the image of southern black women's string-wrapped hair in the urban 20th century South.

How the old woman must have longed to adopt the head kerchief such as was worn by Maum Nett and was the traditional badge of the house-servant! But she was well aware that this would be a fatal presumption. For the present, at least, she must depend on the neat, partly worn clothing on Mrs. Wentworth for her borrowed respectability. As for her head, it was still treated in the astonishing manner common among older negroes who had not been born to the dignity of the kerchief, and whose generation had not yet adopted kind-remover. The wool was divided into a dozen or more equal tufts. Each of these was tightly wrapped with string, commencing at the tip and ending at the scalp; then the collection, resembling rope ends, was drawn together and united in a tight knob on the crown. The general effect was as though an enormous tarantula had settled upon the head, and was holding on tightly with outstretched legs. But if Mamba dared not essay the head kerchief, she did the next best thing, and was seldom seen thereafter without her hat.³⁸

Hair wrapping recollections are a part of an untranscribed body of black southern feminine folklore. Mrs. Alma Hunter of Chester, Virginia recounts one such story. In the 1900s in Buckingham County, Virginia, Mrs. Hunter's grandmother was visited by a neighbor who was blind. The blind woman settled down by the hearth and reached out to greet her neighbor's daughter. Feeling the girl's head, the blind

³⁸DuBose Hayward, Mama's Daughters: A Novel of Charleston (New York: The Literary Guild, 1929) 15.

woman said, "You musta wrapped this child's head real tight because her eyes are standing on her forehead!"³⁹

In urban America during the first decades of this century, the appearance of African-American womanhood underwent a revolutionary change. In a fashion resembling the new mass production of motor cars along assembly lines, black women's heads, en masse, were mechanically processed at stations in beauty parlors into oily, abbreviated imitations of white women's hair. Hair straightening rapidly became a socially mandated practice for black females and the hair, as the final part of the Afro-American feminine mask, fell into place. Of the gender-neutral Afro-American persona of this era, Paul Laurence Dunbar said, "We wear the mask that grins and lies,/It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes."⁴⁰ Dunbar was referring to a feigned self-effacing behavior by blacks that was reassuring to whites. This double self--the real self and the masked self--was analyzed in the early 1900s by W.E.B. DuBois:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴¹

³⁹Alma Hunter, personal interview, August 1988.

⁴⁰Paul Laurence Dunbar, The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1920) 71.

⁴¹W.E.B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970) 3.

The women who contributed the hair to our mask of self-effacement were industrious deeply religious women--America's first class of colored businesswomen. In the teens and early 1920s, black beauty colleges and affiliated shops were established in large Eastern and Midwestern cities. At the beauty culture colleges, young women studied the formulas and properties of various hair preparations; they learned about health of the scalp, how to remove the kink from the hair, how to fashionably style it, and in so doing, were furnished with a skill that would be of continually increasing demand in the black community.

These beauticians developed a style that reached beyond the black community to influence the hair fad of the 1920s "Jazz Age" -- the sleek "bob." Black chorus girls in the 1921 musical hit show, "Shuffle Along" introduced the style on Broadway. One reviewer, writing under the byline of "Ibee" in Variety, noted:

Broadway may not know it but the fashion of wearing the feminine head with the bobbed hair effect has more fully invaded the high browns of the colored troupes than in the big musical shows. All the gals in "Shuffle Along" showed some sort of bobbed hair style, principals and chorus alike. It wasn't so successful for some, but they tried just the same.⁴²

The not so "successful" styles perhaps were "going back," reverting from perspiration and humidity to natural form.

In 1925, Josephine Baker, a bobbed-haired starlet, went from the chorus of a black revue in New York to become a popular symbol of modern, exotic chic in Paris as she soared to stardom in the Revue

⁴²IBEE, "Shuffle Along," Variety, May 1921, quoted in Robert Kimball, Reminiscing with Sissle and Blake (New York: The Viking Press, 1973) 98.

Negre. Throughout the 1920s, elements of African-American styles were infused into American "jazz age" culture. Black dance, song, hair, and speech styles went into the generation of a fashionable new persona -- "the vamp." However, as black styles were expropriated by whites and merged with mainstream forms, the black originators were generally ignored or disdained.

The women who presided over the black beauty culture institutions were sometimes called "Madame"; the most prominent and prosperous among them was Madame C. J. Walker, nee Sarah Breedlove.

Born in Delta, Louisiana in 1869, Breedlove struggled through an era that was chaotic for the newly freed blacks. Lacking stable income sources, many were migrants. Married at 14 and widowed at 20, Breedlove wandered to St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Denver and Indianapolis, working as a laundress and marketing her "secret formula" hair straightening process. She had dreamed about this process which would bring kinky hair into the straight, gleaming "perfection."⁴³

Upon waking, Breedlove paid two dollars to have a small, metal reproduction made of the comb that she had seen in the dream. When the comb was heated and pulled through hair that was treated with a waxy oil-base salve, the interaction of wax, oil, heat, metal and motion worked magic: kinks vanished! The process would earn a double distinction for the remarried "Madame Walker": With "two dollars and a dream" she became the first black person as well as the first woman of

⁴³David Levering Lewis, When Harlem Was In Vogue (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) 110. See also: Roi Ottley, New World A-Coming (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943) 171.

any race in the U.S.A. to earn a million dollars through her own efforts.

Settling in New York shortly before World War I, Madame Walker built a school of beauty culture next to her house on 136th Street in Harlem, a student dormitory and a hair product manufacturing firm. She then established affiliated schools and shops across the country for beauticians trained in the "Walker Method." Although the processes she pioneered were later linked to rejection of self in African-American women, Madame Walker was a "race woman," upholding the self-help, "pride of race" philosophy of Marcus Garvey and following a creed that resembled the generous spirit of the West African braider. Every night, America's richest self-made woman prayed, "Lord, help me live from day to day, in such a self-forgetful way, that when I kneel down to pray, my prayers shall ever be for others."⁴⁴

Other black beauty institutions included Madame Washington's Apex School of Beauty Culture in Washington, D.C. which produced its own type of hot comb and hair products and had affiliates in Atlantic City and Richmond. Poro College in St. Louis originated another type of hair straightening utensil--"pullers," a set of two round balls mounted together on a handle, which, when pulled through the hair, loosened the kink.⁴⁵

During a concert tour in 1918, the "celebrated Negro tenor" Roland Hayes visited Poro College with his mother, a simple, deep religious

⁴⁴Lewis, Harlem, 110.

⁴⁵Clytie H. Grant, retired beautician, personal interview, August 1988.

woman from rural Georgia. In a memoir, he recalled that the "proprietress had accumulated quite a comfortable fortune from ointments which make kinky hair straight...Ma walked about amongst the laboratories and classrooms quoting Ecclesiastes on the subject of vanity.⁴⁶ Like Mrs. Hayes, many black women in the rural South spurned the new mechanical hair straightening techniques, preferring the more simple, natural means of maintaining the hair by "training" it.

Presumably with a wish of self-affirmation for his own child, not vanity, Hayes would name his daughter, "Africa."⁴⁷ Like his contemporary, W.E.B. Dubois, Roland Hayes held a deep appreciation for both the fine arts of Europe and the folk arts of southern black culture. Members of an intellectual vanguard in American society, both men also admired the African features of black women.

Challenging the notion that a woman's primary worth lay in her beauty in the 1920 essay, "The Damnation of Women," DuBois nevertheless hastened to state his appreciation of the beauty of black women's crinkly hair:

If a woman is "pink and white and straight-haired, and some of her fellow-men prefer this, well and good; but if she is black or brown and crowned in curled mists (and this to us is the most beautiful thing on earth), this is surely the flimsiest excuse for spiritual incarceration or banishment..."⁴⁸

⁴⁶MacKinley Helm, Angel Mo' and her Son (Boston and Co., 1942) 115.

⁴⁷Ibid., 272.

⁴⁸W.E.B. DuBois, "The Damnation of Women" reprinted in To Be a Black Woman, ed. by Mel Watkins and Jay David (New York: William Woodrow & Co., 1970) 233.

Concluding the essay, DuBois repeated his admiration of the African physical character of African-American women:

For this, their promise, and for their hard past, I honor the women of my race. Their beauty--their dark and mysterious beauty of midnight eyes, crumpled hair, and soft full-featured faces--is perhaps more to me than you, because I was born to its warm and subtle spell; but their worth is yours as well as mine.⁴⁹

The sophisticated attitudes of Hayes, DuBois and the like-minded "New Negroes" of the Harlem Renaissance era could have contributed a basis of support for the cultivation of original African-American physical personas by black women. There was a great potential for such a persona to emerge out of a traditional black feminine ethos. But a stronger current, surging in another direction, swept black women up in its flow. In fashioning personas, our spirits did not "jump at the sun."

TO JUMP AT THE SUN

Black women in the South created a way of life out of which attractive, original African-American feminine personas could have evolved. In the 1900s, Lucy Potts Hurston of Eatonville, Florida urged her children to "jump at the sun."⁵⁰ Although her husband thought that it was not good for black folks to have too much spirit, Lucy intervened between him and their imaginative daughter, Zora, because

⁴⁹Ibid., 235.

⁵⁰Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road reprinted in I Love Myself When I am Laughing: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader ed. by Alice Walker (Old Westbury: Feminist Press, 1979) 33.

she did not want to "squinch" the girl's spirit.⁵¹ Zora Neale Hurston grew up to be the liveliest wit of the Harlem Renaissance group, a novelist and an anthropologist.

Lucy and Zora Hurston's original, resourceful way of looking at life was characteristic of southern black feminine folk ways. This culture was shaped by the sensibilities of "strength" and "sass." Bernice Reagon, a historian and performing artist, describes this dual nature in the name of her black women's a cappella singing group: "Sweet Honey in the Rock." "Rock" denotes a hard, sturdy exterior; "honey" connotes the sweet, soft, fluid qualities at the rock's core. The strong aspect of black women's character was reinforced as they learned how to "make-do" without many of the material resources and emotional supports that most other women took for granted.

"Sass," a combination of incisive wit, figurative speech, vocal inflection and body language, is a form of self-protective rebuke expressed by strong but vulnerable black women. The sassy behavior of African-American women has been linked by Joanne Braxton to a West African practice in which women suspected of being witches were forced to eat the poisonous bark of the sassywood tree.⁵² If the woman survived, she was presumed to be innocent. Apparently with some memory of this custom, black women in the American South retained the word "sassy" in their vocabulary and mannerisms of sass in their behavior.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Joanne M. Braxton, Autobiography by Black American Women: A Tradition within a Tradition (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1984).

An excellent example of sass is recalled in the slave narrative collection by 92 year-old Delicia Patterson (b. 1845):

When I was fifteen years old, I was brought to the courthouse, put up on the auction block to be sold. Old Judge Miller from my county was there. I knew him well because he was one of the wealthiest slave owners in the county, and the meanest one... So, when the bid for me, I spoke right out on the auction block and told him: "Old Judge Miller don't you bid for me, 'cause if you do, I would not live on your plantation. I will take a knife and cut my own throat from ear to ear before I would be owned by you." Se he stepped back and let someone else bid for me. My own father knew I was to be for sale, so he brought his owner to the sale for him to buy me, so we could be together. But when my father's owner heard what I said to Judge Miller, he told my father he would not buy me, because I was sassy, and he never owned a sassy nigger and did not want one that was sassy.⁵³

The color counterpart to "sass" is red which suggests high-spirited spontaneity. Where dyes were available, black slave women featured the color in their dress, quilts, and head coverings. They made red dyes from walnut, elm cherry and red oak; a favorite shade, "turkey red," was made from bamboo.⁵⁴

Lacking personal income, slave women found ways to devise distinctive, colorful personas. A long narrow cloth, often in a small print, was worn over the shoulders, crossed in front of a calico dress, wrapped around the waist and tied in back, creating a contrasting accent to the dress. Aprons were also worn, even in leisure. In cool weather, a shawl was added to the costume. Some black women in coastal South Carolina and Georgia managed to keep or acquire gold

⁵³Yetman, Ibid. 239-240.

⁵⁴Gladys-Marie Frye, "Slave Quilting on Ante-Bellum Plantations," Something to Keep you Warm. (Jackson: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1981) 5.

earrings from Africa. They incorporated the large, shining hoops into personas which were completed by artfully wrapped turbans.

Developing practices begun in slavery, black women in the early 20th century rural South created a remarkable material culture. They built frames from logs on which to piece quilts; the quilts served as colorful room-dividers in humble log cabins as well as "something to keep you warm."⁵⁵ Spotting a fine dress in a shop window in town, these women went home and traced out from memory a pattern for the dress on newspaper. Grain sacks were used to make girl's dresses and underwear and, as the practice grew, grain suppliers cheerfully responded by printing gay designs and borders on the sacks.

Out of their own ingenuity, these rural women produced most of life's necessities and comforts. They made hats from cardboard and scraps of fabric, toothbrushes from pine needles, brooms from straw, dolls from corncobs and straw, and they made "stores" (barrels of grain or produce), a means of exchange--"Trade ya one of this for two of those." In big cauldrons in the yard, they made soap from lard and lye, and concocted teas, medicines and dyes from barks, berries, roots and herbs that they gathered in surrounding fields and forests. They dug holes in clay earth to preserve fruits and vegetables, and applied curative leaves and cobweb bandages to wounds.

These "geniuses of the South" made a wealth of stories, inspirational sayings and songs, as well. And, throughout the post-bellum era, they made primary schools, prayer by prayer, nickel by

⁵⁵"Something to Keep You Warm", title of the Roland Freeman Collection of Black Quilts from the Mississippi Heartland (private collection).

nickel, book by book... Bernice Reagon calls all of this powerful making, making "a way out of no way."⁵⁶ The way was made through imaginative uses of human and environmental nature. Generously endowed with ingenuity, "sass," and the bountiful resources of the earth, black women in 20th century America could have developed approaches to style which would have resulted in original, attractive black feminine personas.

As black women migrated to the cities from the relative autonomy of their lives on the land, their material culture lost much of its vitality. Not wanting to look different, they shunned clothes that were bright, hairstyles that looked rough, ways that seemed "country." They were moving into an age of mass produced images in places of limited economic opportunity for blacks. In these circumstances, it would have required extraordinary courage, vision, and perhaps even selfishness for black women to have followed their memories and feelings in the creation of original, natural hair styles and personas for themselves.

The conflict between the old ways of black women and the new was described by Maya Angelou in her autobiography, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings. Reared by a grandmother who grew up in the pre-mechanical rural South, Angelou recalled the woman's prohibition against hair straightening along with her own Hollywood-inspired fantasies: "Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black and ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the

⁵⁶ Bernice Reagon, "My Black Mothers and Sisters" in Black Women and Liberation Movements ed. by Virginia A. Blandford, (Washington, Institute for the Arts and Humanities, 1981) 17.

place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?"⁵⁷ But the onward march of mechanical and technological "progress" was relentless and by the 1930s, the regular use of hot combs to straighten the hair had been adopted by younger black women throughout the rural South.

While attitudes of racial superiority among whites were reinforced by the limitation of whites by blacks, social ethicist J. M. Mecklin in 1914 maintained that the convention was bad for both races:

The slavish imitation of the white even to the attempted obliteration of physical characteristics, such as woolly hair, is almost pathetic, and exceeding significant as indicating the absence of feeling of race pride or race integrity. Any imitation of one race by another of such a wholesale and servile kind as to involve complete self-abnegation must be disastrous to all concerned.⁵⁸

The emulation of Caucasian physical traits by black women was disastrous because of the imbalances it created. Black women ceased to draw from our own spirits in the creation of hair styles. Instead we became imprisoned within personas which reflected the society's disparagement of the character of our Africoid physical nature. We were going against nature, against self, and, ultimately, against others: self-alienation in black women contributes to patterns of alienation in the relations of black people with each other and in our relations with whites. The acceptance and love of others begins in an acceptance and love of self.

⁵⁷ Maya Angelou, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (New York: Random House, 1969).

⁵⁸ J. M. Mecklin, Democracy and Race Friction, a Study in Social Ethics (New York: 1914) 43, cited in Herkovits, Myth, 21.

CHAPTER III
TALKING HEADS:
HAIRSTYLES AS PUBLIC SYMBOLS

Hair styles possess an eloquent symbolism. Heads do "talk" and among African-Americans, the dialogue carried on through the styling of the hair has been intense. Straightened kinky hair communicates a message of acceptance of traditional Caucasian-oriented standards of appearance for black women. Natural hair styles in the African-American feminine persona symbolize a proclivity towards naturalness in many areas of life, an affirmation of African genetic heritage, and an interest in making this affirmation publicly known.

In the late 1980s, an aggressive dialogue took place through the hair of black males. Spurning the drippy "curly perm" which was popularized for males by entertainers such as Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie, a rising generation of black males sculpted their hair in its natural state to create a diverse array of visual designs and forms. Dubbing the styles, the "Fade," "Pyramid," etc., they coordinated their hair, dress, music, speech and sports styles to create a unified culture.

Factors of gender compound factors of race in the reluctance of black women to comparably project and celebrate the African aspect of our physical features. In the popular view, kinky hair, dark pigmentation and full facial features contribute to an impression of strength and power in the black male persona but the full combination of these traits are considered to detract from feminine attractiveness and thus kinky hair is banished from the black feminine persona.

The values and functions that operate between African-American women's hair and the perceptions of others form a critical relation which is seldom analyzed. The only medium in which the subject has been explored to any extent is the fiction, poetry and autobiographies of modern black women writers. The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks, for example, begins her autobiography with a statement on the social values ascribed to hair in the Chicago black community of the 1920s:

One of the first "world" - truths revealed to me when I at last became a member of SCHOOL was that, to be socially successful, a little girl must be Bright (of skin). It was better if your hair was curly, too -- or at least Good Grade (Good grade implied, usually, no involvement with the Hot Comb) -- but Bright you marvelously needed to be. Exceptions? A few. Wealth was an escape passport. If a dusky maiden's father was a doctor, lawyer, City Hall employee, or Post Office man, or if her mother was a School teacher, there was some hope: because that girl would often have lovelier clothes...and her hair was often long, at least, and straight -- or so Hot Comb straight!!

Abandoning straightened hair in the late 1960s, when she was in her 50s, Gwendolyn Brooks adopted the short Afro as a well-functioning

¹Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part One (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972) 37.

style and as a symbol of self-esteem and pride in her African genetic and cultural heritage.

Symbolic acts have an important function in the social interaction and collective well-being of human beings. This chapter examines symbolic acts and images associated with black hair care in 20th century America and in the recent experience of black women in Richmond, Virginia.

"GOOD HAIR," "BAD HAIR"

For many years, the terms "good hair" and "bad hair" were frequently used idioms in the black community. People would say someone's hair was "good" or "bad" as easily as they would say, "The sky is blue." No one thought much about the psychological implications of the terms.

Straight, wavy, soft-curly and fine-frizzy textures were considered "good grades" of hair. "Bad hair" was what most black folks had: a hairy dilemma to which black folk humorists, storytellers and blues singers readily responded. According to a popular tale, "bad hair" was formed in the pre-world when black people were souls waiting to collect their body parts and be born. In a version of the tale told by Newton Curry, when the first call for hair was issued, colored people did not respond:

They wanted to finish the watermelon. The other people, Chinese and Japs and whites, put the hair on and smoothed it down. (All the other people have smooth hair.) Then they issued a second call to the colored people. The only hair that was left was what the other people didn't want--they had stepped on it. (Gesture of

twisting foot into the ground.) So the colored people had to put on kinky hair.²

African-American folklore on themes of black people's features and colored people's time succinctly expressed the dilemma in which black women found themselves--for example, the popular saying: "If you light, you all right. If you brown, stick around. If you black, jump back!" Gender-specific references in folk sayings include those made in this rhymed "rap":

Yellow gal, your train is here
Brown gal, your train is near
Black gal, your train done gone, what the hell you waitin' on?

In other words, African-American women whose African features were modified by the genes of other races generally "arrived in society" before their more African-featured sisters. Generously "mixed" girls tended to be high achievers in school; they were the preferred mates of black business and professional men, and they enjoyed more advantages in the workplace and in other areas of life. At the same time, expressions of natural, original or African-inspired styles for black women were discouraged from within the black community as well as from without.

And the pain of suppressed identity remained. Psychologists William Grier and Price Cobb maintain that the pain of a fragmented identity lies at the heart of a diminished sense of feminine self-worth among many black women. In a discussion of the relation of hair

²Richard Dorson, American Negro Folklore (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, 1967) 176.

straightening to self-image, Grier and Cobb detail the rigors of hair straightening which do not beautify but merely make black women appear acceptable in society, ("...the black woman is never free to the painful remainder that she must be transformed from her natural state to some other state in order to appear presentable to her fellow men")³ and they say that rejection of African features discourages the development of a healthy "feminine narcissism" in black women.

Concurring with this view, Delores Davis, a Richmond community leader, maintains that black people should engage in probing discussions on how we view the physical character of our appearance. "We need to concentrate on how we see ourselves," says Davis. That's the painful surgery that we have to perform on ourselves. We need to deal with it, get it out. How we see ourselves will be the clincher. Once we have good images of ourselves, then we have power."

Not always fully aware of the social and psychological processes that empower the hair-straightening imperative, African-American women accept straightened hair styles as the smoothest, neatest, most presentable way of wearing our hair, and the practice has been reinforced by the mainstream business sector and a powerful mass media.

The process is circular. As black girls mature, they assume that in order to be attractive and successful, they must conform to a fairly restrictive standard of appearance which is maintained by prominent figures of glamour or authority (e.g., entertainers, advertising and fashion models, public school teachers, civic leaders). The hair of

³William Grier and Price Cobbs, Black Rage (New York: Basic Books, 1968), Chapt. III reprinted in To Be a Black Woman, 94.

most prominent black women is straightened and expertly styled; very little natural-haired imagery breaks through this gleaming panopoly.

Natural-haired black women are seldom portrayed as romantic figures or successful professional women in American mass media yet the reality is that most black women's natural hair is kinky. Black owned and/or oriented media (most notably Ebony magazine) also propagate racially and sexually chauvinistic "codes of appearance" for black women. Hair relaxers are a major source of advertising in Ebony and Essence and other black mass-market media. The hair of the models in these ads is described in terms of attributes not innate to kinky hair:

"Hair that moves."--An ad for TCB No Lye Relaxer.⁴

"Not just straight. Bone Strait...It smooths out the crinkles. Unwinds the curves.... Conditions away coarseness...." --TCB Bone Strait Relaxer System.⁵

"I would never have believed OPTIMUM could straighten m coarse hair...but it did! ...and made it silky smooth, too. What a difference!" -- Optimum Hair System.⁶

The illusion in black women's hair styling and in the popular conception of black feminine beauty has become so entrenched that most African-American women assume that it is better to apply heat and strong chemicals to the hair rather than to attempt to style it in its natural condition. And even when a black woman realizes the physical and psychological disadvantages of the hair straightening practice, she still may be faced with a dilemma such as the one expressed by a woman

⁴Advertisement in Essence, June 1989, 22.

⁵Ibid., 20.

⁶Advertisement in Essence, August 1988, 106.

who sought counsel from Ebony's magazine's "Ebony Advisor." In a letter to the advisor, "K.A.G." Copperas Grove, Texas, says that she has a good marriage but there is a problem which threatens it:

After nine years of having my hair chemically straightened, I have decided to allow the process to grow out. I want to take a break from chemicals and go "natural." However, my husband feels that I will become undesirable to him and has said that he might leave me if I do. I'd hate to lose him or leave him because of this, but I dislike the trouble and illusion straightening my hair brings me. I long to be free of chemicals and I wish he could accept me "naturally."⁷

The "Ebony Advisor" concedes that the woman has the right to stop the straightening process but recommends that "since exercising your right would jeopardize your marriage, I'd say continue with the chemicals. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and if your husband says, 'Don't go changin'...I love you just the way you are,' you better heed. It's a relatively small price to pay for keeping the gleam in his eye gleaming."

Johnson Publications, not surprisingly, has no interest in conceding the detrimental effects of the hair straightening convention; it is part of an enterprise which produces and distributes commercial hair straightening products. And while Essence, "the magazine for today's black woman," makes a good effort to present examples of the natural hair alternatives, these sporadic visual messages get lost in the massive straight-haired imagery of the magazine's fashion spreads and advertising.

⁷"The Ebony Advisor," Ebony, Sept. 1988, 90.

Today there are few highly visible examples of the creative possibilities of natural hair styling for black women. African-American women require strong, clear rationales in order to feel inspired to wear our hair naturally. Deborah Needham, a Richmond woman who wears a short Afro, explains: "It's (the natural look) not acceptable, I know women who have to buy wigs. They do what they have to do."

A BLACK MALE'S PERSPECTIVE

King Davis, professor of social work at Virginia Commonwealth University, discusses issues of African-American hair care and styling from several perspectives: that of a social scientist, a black man who admires the transformation that natural hair styles bring to black women (he cut and shaped his wife's hair into an "Afro" when she first decided to 'go natural'), a father of three teenaged children whose values about the image of black femininity are more influenced by those of mass culture than his own, and a member of an informal network of black business and professional men. Davis is concerned about attitudes about black women's hair that have been expressed by his children and some of his male friends. He cited as an example, a discussion of the films, "The Color Purple" and "School Daze" during which his friends made disparaging remarks about "nappy haired" women. "They're finding it unacceptable," Davis said. "They find straightened hair more attractive."

Expressing concern about some of his children's values, Davis said that his daughters and son believe that "flowing hair is the thing." The topic is usually sparked by something that happened in school or on

television. Davis' teenaged son has noted that his male friends like girls with long hair. "The image of the acceptable beautiful black woman is to have long hair," Davis explained. We don't have that image of natural hair."

The interview with Davis took place around the time of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Davis was elated by track runner Florence Joyner Griffin's stunning performance at the games but he was dismayed that an extravagant "hair weave" was a feature of her celebrated beauty. The naturalistic black feminine imagery of the "black consciousness" era did not evolve because, Davis contended, "we missed the prize":

"We assumed that the goal of all this activity was integration. Once we achieved the public accommodation part and interacted in certain ways that were denied us, that became the piece (that was satisfying). As a result, we missed the boat: that black is beautiful. It was a real set back for us. There were several losses: the self-image, the psychology of being black...a decline in community -- we don't live near each other.... We don't have black business anymore, black institutions, black organizations are dying."

Davis said that we believed that one of the goals of the "prize" was "not to be with whites but to be like whites." He described the situation as "anomie" and said that one solution lay in the co-operation of African-Americans and Africans to help develop West African nations. Women in West African societies are "culture carriers," transmitters of values that unite families, communities and nations. When African-American women deny the expression of creative

patterns in our psyches, our communities as well as ourselves are diminished.

EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN RICHMOND, VIRGINIA

Many of the natural-haired women respondents for this study said that their hair communicated information which was perceived in ambivalent and negative ways by others. In this section, we shall examine the public symbolism of natural hairstyles in the perception of both natural and straightened-haired women in Richmond, Virginia.

Professional and clerical employees of the Richmond public school system represent a good cross-section of black working women in the metropolitan area. School employees participating in a 1989 survey for this thesis described their preference for straightened hair in terms of control: "It's easier to manage that way for me." "It looks neater." "It's more manageable in this state and healthier."

Responding to a question on natural-hair styles, some of these women recognized black feminine natural hair styles as expressions of racial heritage but they suggested that natural hair styles are not the most appropriate way to express race pride: "Some (natural styles) look very nice; others look shabby, kind of junky." "(The success of a natural style) depends on the structure of the face and personality." "Some are appealing, some are farfetched." "Complexion has a lot to do with it." "I look to see if it's appropriate to the face and if the over-all appearance is neat and clean."

Ann Arnason, a school counselor, is a tall, fair-complexioned black woman who wears a short Afro. Like the attitudes expressed in the survey, the reactions from co-workers to her natural hair style are

ambivalent. Some tell her that they like the style on her because she has "a good grade of hair."

"I get that all the time," says Arnason. She is disturbed by these conditional responses. "I say a natural is a natural." While Arnason's hair is softer and less tightly curled than most kinky hair, it nevertheless is "kinky," not "wavy" or "straight." Regardless of hair texture, "anybody ought to be able to wear a natural," Arnason maintains.

Deborah Needham wears short natural cuts; she wore her hair cut very close in July 1988. In the hot, humid weather, Needham's scalp was well-ventilated though the fine, very short strands of hair but she noticed that some black people were responding to her look with hostility. "It was like they're thinking, 'What is she trying to prove'?" she said. And, when she was jogging down a street in her middle-income, residential neighborhood, teen-aged boys gathered in one yard joked about the style. "You're almost bald-headed," they shouted.

The people who react with hostility to Needham's look apparently do not understand why this delicate-looking young woman would adopt a style that is identified with black males and African women. In effect, the question posed is, "Why would a woman want to look less feminine or more African?" But another tension exists because admirers of this style take a strong, opposing view: that the close cropped natural hair style, a very open, vulnerable look, increases the impact of a woman's delicate, vulnerable qualities, enhancing her femininity as well as her cachet, her distinctive personal style.

Chandra Washington, a media technician, wears her natural hair in a distinctive style that she devised as a variation of the short Afro: short in the back; longer natural sprigs of hair spring like a fountain from the front. "It (hair style) does say that I'm secure in who and what I am," says Washington. "It's interesting, but I find white people less threatened by the way I look and carry myself than blacks (are), particularly black females. Often I pass by white people (who respond) with admiring smiles. Some times I experience intimidation and even anger from black women." Black women, not surprisingly, react more strongly than other groups, because on the basis of both gender and race, black women identify more personally with Washington.

Some black women tell Washington, "I like the way your hair looks, but I don't think it would look good on me." Washington believes that her hairstyle challenges many black women's sense of the relation of aesthetics to racial identity "When some one challenges this and is successful, you get a sense of selling out but you deny yourself by saying, 'My face isn't right for natural hair styles'."

Like most natural haired black women, Washington contends that the hair straightening convention among black women is caused by pressure to imitate white feminine beauty standards: "Black folks are trained like Pavlov's dog. 'Nappy' equals 'ugly'. 'Straight' equals 'pretty'. Black women accept hair straightening as a fact of life. For this reason, most of us don't even consider wearing our hair natural."

"Chandra communicates a style I don't see in a lot of black women," says Belinda Hereford, a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University who wears a close-cropped Afro. The style,

symbolizing common values and shared experience, also facilitates social bonding between black women. As strangers, Chandra and Belinda gravitated towards each other at the university out of appreciation of each other's hair styles which is complimented by comfortable, individualized dress.

Most of the natural-haired black women that Hereford knows have independent work and lifestyles: many are graduate students; some are lesbians. "Most black women who get to graduate school didn't conform in a way that got themselves husbands, a bourgeois job, etcetera," explains Hereford. "The willingness to conform physically indicates a willingness to conform emotionally, socially and in the workplace."

Like many natural-haired black women, Hereford says that the texture and style of her hair raised concern when she entered the job market: My cousin said, "If you want to get a job, you have to change your hairstyle." But Hereford would not bow to convention. As a consultant who works with prison parolees, Hereford feels that she does not have to "fit in." In fact, the style helps to increase rapport with her parolee clients. "They see me as challenging the system. They trust me in a different kind of way." Because she does not look like a conventional professional black woman, Hereford senses that whites who meet her at a worksite assume that she, herself, is a parolee and behave cautiously until they discover who she is.

A few years ago, Mona Dickerson devised ways to style her shoulder-length hair without straightening it. Among her inspirations were the fanciful, feminine women in natural cornrowed hairstyles depicted in illustrations by her sister-in-law, graphic designer Julee

Dickerson. Julee's sister, Amina Dickerson, a museum director, who wears cornrowed styles, has pointed out: "Our hair is something that communicates our feelings about ourselves. People have loved and admired us, disdained and abandoned us, over matters of hair. But the bottom line is that it doesn't matter what people think, if we are comfortable with what our hair 'says.'

Mona Dickerson was confident about what her medium long, conservatively styled natural hair "said," but pressures to find work in Richmond two years ago forced her to abandon this statement. The black woman employment agent that Dickerson consulted will not refer natural-haired black women to her clients. Contending that whites view the style as militant, the agent persuaded Dickerson to straighten her hair.

The image projected by a meticulously-groomed black business woman, who wears a short Afro, met with a similar response from a black woman panelist at a seminar on image development for professional women held at Virginia Commonwealth University in 1987. Requesting that her name not be given in this study, the woman said that the panelist, a consulting firm owner, told her that "I would have to polish my look. A number of her clients would have difficulty in accepting my look not only because it was natural but because it was short." The natural-haired woman surmises that the consulting firm owner associated her natural look with the sixties and militance: "That's the first impression that they (the clients) would have to get over. Then the shortness might make them question if I might be gay." The woman's request that her name not be used reveals the uncertainty and

trepidation that a prominent black woman feels in discussing hair as a social issue. She feared that if her identity were made known, her remarks might jeopardize the good relations that she has established with the business and neighborhood communities that she serves.

Carol Dent Campbell, a computer programmer, says that when she was job-hunting in Richmond, a black woman acquaintance advised that she would have better luck if she changed her image: "(She said) I should give up the whole natural look and get a perm: "It's not in style. You're in a conservative town and if you think you are going to get a job, you better..." (straighten your hair)."

Campbell prefers instead to wear her long, unstraightened hair in braids. Nonetheless, feeling that long natural hair worn in braids is "an entirely different look" for black women which triggers anxiety in conservative white co-workers, Dent twists up her long braids and pins them into a bun for work.

Like many natural-haired black women, Saphronia Burrell chooses not to straighten her hair for a variety of interconnecting spiritual, aesthetic and ideological reasons. She wore a short Afro when she applied for a position teaching biology at Virginia Union University, a predominantly black institution: "I did not go in there with the braids or dreads until I had gotten established. I was not a fool. I have to live. But I realized that once I prove myself, then any good lawyer in the city should be able to represent me."

When Burrell let her Afro grow out and wore her natural hair in braids to school, a colleague threatened to "make waves" in protest of her hairstyle. She asked why he objected to the braids. The colleague

said that the style reminded him of the days when whites referred to blacks as "picknannies." Burrell calmly replied, "They call us 'nigger' too, but just because they call you so, does not make it true."

Sabrina Johnson was also criticized when she let her short Afro grow out and wore her natural hair parted and braided into small loose plaits. During this period she wore neat skirts and sweaters around which she often threw an exquisite Ghanaian "kente cloth," a wrap made of strips of hand-woven bands of brilliantly-colored, natural fiber threads. Director of a foundation which was formed to promote interracial understanding, Johnson says that the issue of her image was raised at a foundation board meeting by two directors who said that they had heard comments questioning whether she was presenting an appropriate image. The comments came from two black women who work with organizations that are affiliated with the foundation. The board surmised that the women objected to Johnson's hairstyle.

Johnson put the question directly to the board, "Are you telling me I should change my hair?" Knowing about a hair-related suite filed by a black woman against her former employer in Washington, D.C. area, a black woman attorney on the board spoke up: "No." The discussion, Johnson said, led to the realization that her decision to wear a simple natural hairstyle reflects the purpose of the foundation: to promote the ability of all people to be "comfortable with being who and what we are."

The struggle of black women in Richmond to develop natural personas is comparable to the situation of natural-haired women in

other areas of the country. While the political values of black America are monolithic and progressive, its standards of appearance for women are more ambiguous and have tended to be conservatively expressed. There are degrees of acceptability accorded to the types of natural hair styles worn by black women. While some wearing close-cropped Afros experience negative reactions to their hair, short Afro's on black women are generally more acceptable than longer loose natural hair, natural braids and locks. The observation of anthropologist C. R. Hallpike that cutting the hair symbolizes complying with a "particular disciplinary regime"⁸ helps explain objections to black women's longer, natural hair styles:

Long hair is therefore, I suggest, a symbol of being in some way outside society, of having less to do with it, or of being less amenable to social control than the average citizen. but the means by which one attains this condition are of course various. anchorites, witches, intellectuals, hippies and women all have long hair, but there is not single quality which they have in common besides the negative one of being partially or wholly outside society. There is, however, one character which is often associated with being outside society, for whatever reason: this is animality.⁹

In her interpretation of social values that are attributed to smooth and shaggy textures, Mary Douglas says that smooth textures are equated with social acceptability and refinement whereas shaggy connotes social non-conformance.¹⁰ Shagginess, in long, natural black

⁸Hallpike, "Social Hair," 260.

⁹Ibid., 261.

¹⁰Mary Douglas, Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology (New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 102.

hair, however, is not willful nor necessarily the result of neglect: kinky hair is highly textured, not smooth. So while, according to conventional values, the visual effect of long, nappy hair may unfavorably be considered "shaggy," black women who wear long, natural hair styles experience the unpredictably spiraling quality of their kinky hair as interesting, intricate, stimulating to touch, and sculptural in form.

Black women are motivated to style their hair in natural ways by a need to resolve basic inconsistencies of being: contradictions between the texture of their straightened hair and their Africoid facial features and contradictions between Caucasian-oriented personas and their African genetic and cultural backgrounds. The ambiguous "dual consciousness" described by DuBois in 1903 persists today in these contradictions.

In George Wolfe's play, "The Colored Museum," a dispute between a black woman's Afro and straight-haired wigs symbolizes the tensions between/within black Americans' way of seeing alternately, or simultaneously, through the points of view of the minority and majority cultures. Totally bald because she "done fried, dyed, de-chemicalized her shit to death," the woman is challenged by both wigs as she prepares to dress. The long, straight-haired wig urges:

Set the bitch (the Afro wig) straight. Let her know there is no way she could even begin to compete with me. I am quality. She is kink. I am exotic. She is common. I am class and she is trash.... So go on and tell her you're wearing me. Go on, tell her! Tell her! Tell her!!

¹¹George C. Wolfe, The Colored Museum (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, Inc. 1987) 23.

At the same time, the Afro wig protests:

Who you callin' a bitch? Why, if I had hands I'd knock you clear into next week. You think you cute. She thinks she's cute just 'cause that synthetic mop of hers blows in the wind. She looks like a fool and you look like an even bigger fool when you wear her, so go on and tell her you're wearing me. Go on, Tell her! Tell her!¹²

African-American women have lost most of the ethos and the material culture that supported the creative, natural hair tradition in Africa. We are familiar with the technique of skillful parting and braiding as a means to manage and style kinky hair, and most of us consider cornrows and braids suitable, even appealing for little girls, however, we consider these styles unflattering for women unless enhanced by "extensions" (longer additions of synthetic or human hair plaited into the braids) which, in turn, can be alienating if too long. Braids are also considered inappropriate for work in most business and professional fields. Sculpting, twisting and other creative forms of natural hair styling are unfamiliar to most black women, and while admirers of the short feminine "Afro" consider the look classic, other black people associate it with a by-gone era, or, as in Deborah Needham's experience, consider it a masculine style.

Hair images, which to some black women are familiar and attractive are, to others, foreign and unnatural. Culture shapes the way a black woman regards the image of her kinky hair. This element of cultural variability is shown by singer Miriam Makeba's reaction to having her hair straightened after arriving in this country from South Africa:

¹²Ibid.

The day of the opening, Mr. Belafonte's people take me to Harlem to get my hair made up for the show. I do not want this. I like my hair the way it is: short and wooly. But the straight, long, elegant look like Diahann Carroll's is in.... The woman who does my hair was once married to Joe Louis. She has a beauty salon where she straightens my hair. I thank her, but I cannot look at myself in the mirror. I'm too afraid. When I get back to the hotel and see what has been done to me. I cry and cry. This is not me. I put my head in the hot water and I wash it and wash it.¹³

While contemporary trends in black male hair styling are beginning to make black women's original, natural hair styles seem less unconventional and threatening to Americans, these styles are still so scarce that some people find them laughable. Having recently seen the film "School Daze" at the time of our interview, Belinda Hereford noted that black people in the audience laughed at natural hair styles worn by female characters in the film: "They" (people in audience) thought they looked like pickaninnies."

The implicit messages in the mass medium of African-American women's straightened hair is not funny. It is that we assume that we must imitate a physical characteristic of physically dissimilar others. In the process, we have suffered social, psychological and material losses. Haki Madhubuti, an African-American poet, political analyst and publisher, maintains that anxieties about hair are one of five critical problems affecting black Americans today. The women interviewed for this study have responded to the problem by looking

¹³ Miriam Makeba, Makeba: My Story (New York: New American Library, 1987) 86.

within to begin the healing and working from the inner dimension, outward.

In the contemporary United States, the hair straightening convention does not symbolize a fanciful wish of black women to be white; as a group, black women primarily and positively identify with each other. The problem is that we have not collectively developed an aesthetic which would allow us to visually symbolize the African components of our physical and cultural legacy. "Turn back and get your history," urge West African women through the hair style inspired by the sankofa bird whose unique anatomy gives the impression that it is looking backwards. Turn back and get your history! In turning back, we see that the lessons of our history adapt very well to a vision of African-American women in the future: Free...revealed through creative patterns originating from the depths of the psyche...hair functioning as expressions of ideals and as art...bodies, liberated, pulsating with the energy of life. Women in open-ended evolution!

CHAPTER IV

CONDITIONS: HAIR AND HOLISM

The evolution of an authentic persona is an integral part of an African-American woman's full realization of self, and the process can lead, further, to the transcendence of self. Throughout this process, the persona is a flexible or "flowing" reflection of personality, beliefs, preconscious experience and bodily conditions as well as a projection of racial identity. This chapter traces the evolutionary phases of black women's natural hair orientation and explores relations between this evolution and the wholistic, self-transcendent experience of reality.

Throughout the course of this research, I was in contact with progressive, enlightened black women who straighten their hair. What, then, I began to wonder, motivates some black women to make a permanent, philosophical commitment to natural hair styling? Are there factors of personality and experience which predispose women to make this commitment? Although this study was not specifically designed to identify and measure the predetermining psychological and sociological factors of black women's hair-related behavior, in analyzing commentary from black women and reviewing what is generally known about the

experience, I have been able to identify some factors in motivation of African-American women to "go natural."

A common factor of experience is exposure to African cultural traditions. The experience usually occurs through study, social contacts, participation in cultural activities, and/or travel.

Personality traits include artistic interest and ability and independent thinking. These sisters* are significantly involved in the arts, either as practitioners or supporters, and in their routine living, show a flair for making things with their hands and putting together interesting costumes and decors from eclectic odds and ends. Their lack of allegiance to social convention allows them to perceive and value the symbolic and liberating attributes of natural hair styles.

A wholistic orientation to life is a significant underlying factor in black women's predisposition towards natural hair. This orientation, linking hair styling to the experience of the all-encompassing Whole, is described as the major focus of this chapter.

Age is also a factor. The majority of women who adopt natural hair styling were born between 1943 and 1959. Of the sisters in the primary group of respondents for this thesis, four were in their 20s, five in the 30s, two in the 40s and one was 64. The highest concentration in the 30s age bracket has some significance: A woman who was 35 in 1987 (the year this research was begun) was 18 in 1970, the year when the "black consciousness" movement was beginning to peak

*Note: In this chapter, the succinct term "sister" will be used for the longer, more cumbersome referent, "an African-American woman who has a natural persona and way of life."

and the Afro style was reaching its highest level of popularity among African-American women. Black women who were over 45 in 1987-88 had well-established adult personas 20 years ago when the "natural" was introduced and, over the years, have been less likely than younger women to experiment with their hair. (Very few black teen-aged girls wear natural hair styles. In addition to being subject to considerable peer pressure in matters of style, these girls were infants or not yet born during the late 1960s to early '70s era when the concepts of "blackness" and "naturalness" were merging in the minds of blacks.)

The sisters in their 20s were influenced in individually various ways: Belinda Hereford, 29, enjoyed braiding hair when she was eight or nine and was favorably impressed with an adult woman in her community who wore a natural style. A native of Danville, Virginia, a hotbed of civil rights activity in the 1960s, Hereford remembers Martin Luther King coming to speak at her church, a cousin dating Jesse Jackson, and an uncle going to jail. "Politics were real strong around my house," she says. Hereford started wearing her hair natural in 1976 when she was in high school: "It was a way of being kind of radical without opening mouth." The youngest respondent, Gletsa Feggans, 23, a keyboard player, had just begun to wear her hair natural as a result of joining a reggae group composed of "dreadlocked Rastas."

Aside from consideration of age, the following appear to be the most fundamental, predetermining factors in the motivation of sisters to wear natural hairstyles: (1) the regard of kinky hair as a symbol of racial identity and pride; (2) an ability and desire to use the physical self as a means for the outer expression of inner ideals; and

(3) the inclination to explore one's individual potential as fully as possible.

THE LONELY PATH

In evolving a self-affirming persona, an African-American woman proceeds through introspection to inner dimensions of the self, while creating outward expressions of what she finds there. Discovering what for her feels right--what for her is true, she achieves a quality of being which emanates from the mythoforms of her being. Feminine beauty, in the evolutionary sense, is bringing out what nature intends. "Beauty is truth/truth, beauty." The "beauty" projected is not simply an aesthetic presence: it is an "affecting presence," a visual pattern arising from the psyche.

This evolutionary process involves intuitively understanding how the self should look, feel, and function and objectively understanding how it should present itself to others. African-American women are socialized to care about how others regard them, and sisters do respond to this training; their hair, although not conventionally styled, is kept clean and well-groomed.

C. J. Jung used the term "persona" to describe the psychological and physical attitude that individuals adopt to mediate between the inner and outer worlds. One of the functions of this mediation is the symbolic representation of the inner self to the outer world. Jungian psychologist Jolande Jacobi explained that the "weaker a man's ego and the less sure he is of his own worth, the more he craves the acceptance

that a pleasant and positive persona can bring him."¹ Whereas, in a good mediation between the self and the outer world, the persona is an appropriate and authentic reflection of the self:

...as long as the persona develops naturally, remains flexible, and is sufficiently differentiated for the individual to put on and take off at will, it is helpful... So we must learn to recognize the difference between a persona developed and worn natural and one which is unnatural, studied and mechanical, either because it was chosen wrongly from the start and has never developed properly, or because, in the course of time, it has become one-sided, detached from the whole and completely predictable.²

Developing a well-fitting natural persona can be a lonely process for black women. Janine Bell compares it to travel through "unchartered territory." "I guess it's something that each woman has to do for herself," said Bell, "but if there was some support system, externally, so that women wouldn't feel (so alone). Because when you take a step like that, it's really almost like traveling unchartered territory and you don't really know where you're going. And so, many people are afraid to take that step. It takes a lot of courage to be able to take a step away from all of that and, in fact, come into your own."

Even the well-cropped and relatively, socially, 'safe' short Afro can present challenges such as finding a stylist who knows how to achieve a feminine look in a natural cut and maintaining body weight so that the head and body are proportionate. The classic feminine Afro is

¹Jolande Jacobi, Masks of the Soul (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmons Co., 1976) 40.

²Ibid., 41.

sensitively shaped; usually fuller in the front and gracefully tapered at the ears and at the nape of the neck. The new geometric naturals also require a high level of expertise in cutting. An open, simple style, the short afro accentuates naturally good looks: fresh, glowing skin; clear, bright eyes; clean, healthy teeth.

Regardless of the style chosen, the way to achieving it, for most sisters, is not easy. The evolution of longer styles (cornrows, loose plaits, twists; long, variously-styled loose nappy hair; locks, etc.) is trickier than the short natural look because styling methods for long, kinky hair are less familiar.

While the "natural look" is conscious (and may even be 'contrived' in the sense that most sisters style their natural hair in some way), each sister's persona is the one most well-suited to her own physical and psychological being. This persona results from the mediation of three factors cited by Jacobi: (1) the physical and psychological constitution; (2) the ego ideal; and (3) the collective ideal of the period (or group) with which one wishes to be seen and accepted in one or another form.³

THE PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTITUTION. Natural hair styles afford many physical and psychological advantages to women; straightened styles are correspondingly disadvantageous.

Natural hairstyles accommodate the physical structure of tightly-curved hair and some sisters believe that conventional combs, not being designed for kinky hair, are inimical to it. The fine (i.e. slender),

³Jacobi, Masks, 42.

straight strands of Caucasian people's hair pass easily through the narrowly-spaced teeth of a comb: one straight form is interacting with another. But while combing is generally used to help groom kinky hair, the antagonistic interaction of the comb with the tightly spiralling kinky strands causes them to break off. Frequent, vigorous combing is one factor in the seemingly limited growth potential of kinky hair. When trying to comb her unstraightened hair, Saphronia Burrell recalls: "I felt as if I was going against my nature. Combing my hair and seeing it fall out in the sink. I couldn't take it."

Sisters who wear "locks" believe that nature supplies the appropriate means to groom kinky hair: fingers and water. The fingers are sentient, possessing a "somatic imaging" ability, and, unlike the comb, can sense the structure of the hair and gently work with it. And, not requiring intensive conditioning, comb-out and setting rigors when they are washed, locks are frequently washed--contrary to a common conception which views the style as dirty and unkempt, perhaps because some black homeless and/or mentally ill persons' hair is matted, or more fundamentally, as Hallpike suggests, because shaggy hair is associated with "animality."

Other natural styles also do not require use of combing for maintenance and styling. Wearers of very close-cropped Afros dispense with the comb entirely because, when very short, the curl in strands of kinky hair is minimized and the hair tends to lay flat against the scalp. A shower and light brushing is all that is needed to maintain the well-groomed appearance of the close natural. The creation of "cornrows" utilizes a wide-pronged comb or "pic" in removing tangles

from just washed kinky hair and in forming the neat, even parts. However, the style, being fixed, does not require daily combing for maintenance. Between braidings, the scalp can be scrubbed and the cornrows, washed, without being undone; to style, the cornrows are simply patted into place as they dry. Small, loose plaits can also be styled without combing: between braidings, the thin plaits are shampooed, styled and conditioned as if they were single strands of hair. After a few washings, the plaits become fuzzier and the hair assumes a fuller appearance. Some women re-braid portions of their hair between full braidings; small plaits can be worn for about a month before new growth indicate that it is time to undo all the plaits, wash and condition the loose mass of hair.

Natural hair styles have advantage of health over straightened styles. Hair straightening interferes with the functioning of the physical body in restricting movement, discouraging the contact of head with water, and causing burns from contact of body tissue to heat and chemicals, etc.

Sylvia Spottswood says that the rigors of hair straightening made an ordeal of each morning: "Every single morning I had to use the hot comb. Every morning, I stood at the stove, straightening and curling my hair." A mother of six, who now wears a short Afro, the 64 year old former civil servant, says that her "biggest inspiration" to go natural was the fact that I didn't have to do anything to it."

Straightened hair styles discourage physical activity because perspiration or exposure to other forms of moisture make hot-combed straightened hair to "go back." In the spring of 1988, Jarene Fleming,

naturally straight/wavy-haired African-American women said she missed the company of other women of color at the pool where she regularly swam. Fleming's hair was covered by a cap when she first entered the pool area of the Calhoun Center which serves a black community in central Richmond. Greeting her enthusiastically, the black male life guard told her that black women seldom came to swim at the pool because they did not want to "mess up their hair." In restricting the expression and movement of the physical self, "oppressed hair," as Alice Walker describes straightened hair,⁴ oppresses the mind and spirit, as well.

The repeated usage of hair straightening processes diminishes the structural integrity of the hair. Janette Powell, a professional Richmond braider, feels the difference in her fingers:

I enjoy braiding natural hair--hair that has not been treated with chemicals--because I can do more with it. It does what I tell it to do. I love touching natural hair because its feels so earthy, so rich. Hair that's been permed, I can't do much to it. It's so damaged and unpredictable. It may come out anyway.

The physical consequences of hair straightening may even go deeper. Describing its perils at a national conference of braiders in 1982, Thulani Jordan, a professional braider from New York City cited the experience of one woman whose brain tissue was harmed by chemicals in a permanent.⁵ While such invasive damage, if it did occur, is

⁴Walker, "Oppressed Hair," 52.

⁵Thulani Jordan, "The Hair Sculptor: Matters of Economy and Health," paper presented at the symposium "Contemporary Black American Braids:" held November 1982 at the National Museum of American History.

unusual, products formulated to "relax kinky hair (even those claiming to contain "no lye") carry a mandatory warning: "Follow directions carefully to avoid skin and scalp irritation, hair breakage, and eye injury." If these warnings are not strictly followed, serious problems can result. Malcolm Little had such a problem when he dunked his head in a toilet bowl. He was trying to soak a burning, just applied "conk"* when the lye couldn't be rinsed out in a sink that had a broken tap. Malcom X, as he was later known, used the incident in his autobiography as a symbol of the physical and psychological pain suffered by kinky-haired black people in the United States. Describing the first time he processed his head with "conglolene," a gooey mixture made from lye and potatoes which was stirred with a wooden spoon because it would "turn a metal spoon black," Malcolm said that, although his head was on fire and his knees trembled, the gleaming transformation compensated for the intense pain:

My first view in the mirror blotted out the hurting. I'd seen some pretty conks, but when it's the first time on your head, the transformation, after the life time of kinks, is staggering... This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all that pain, literally burning my flesh with lye, in order to cook my natural hair until it was limp, to have it look like a white man's hair.⁶

*"Conk:" Derivation of "conglolene," the term black males gave to a mixture of sodium hydroxide (lye) and starch which was applied to the head to remove the kink from tightly curled hair. In the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the style was popular among black male entertainers, boxers and hustlers.

⁶Malcolm X, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (New York: Grove Press, 1965) 55.

In the experience of girls, the pain caused by stringent management of kinky hair can undermine self-esteem. Psychologists Price Cobbs and William Grier say that in the logic of young girls, the pain of vigorous combing translates into feelings of personal anxiety and doubt: "If mother has to inflict such pain on me to bring me to the level of acceptability, then I must have been ugly indeed before the combing."⁷

Respondent Carol Dent Campbell cited a similar example in the experience of a young woman that she met several years ago in the New York area. The woman said she "was glad that naturals were 'in' because she said that when she was little she would get these permanents, and they would burn her scalp, and her mother would say, "Well, if you didn't have that bad hair, you wouldn't have to do that. That's the price you have to pay to be beautiful.'"

THE EGO IDEAL. A sister's progress away from socially-defined personas is evolutionary in that it occurs through continuing visualizations of the self which make the self a continually unfolding creation. The ego ideals towards which the sisters are evolving are an apotheoses of everything that we have been denied: Denied African identity. Denied femininity. Denied loveliness. Denied wholeness. The ultimate ideal is past "ego" altogether, past the concept and entire experience of one's self as a self-exclusive entity: "We are the world." In his psychology of self-actualization, Carl Rogers defines this progression entirely in terms of process: "As individuals strive to discover and become themselves, they seem to become more

⁷Cobbs and Grier, Black Rage, 93.

content to be a process rather than a product."⁸ In process, every sister's persona is a reflection of changing inner circumstances and the ongoing, all-pervasive flow of life.

Sha-tt Peron describes her natural persona in terms of flexibility and flow. In her work as supervisor of business accounts for a large insurance firm in Richmond, she feels that her persona should conform to fairly strict professional standards yet should not camouflage her own identity. Describing her close cut Afro style, she says, "It's enough to be distinctly different but not radically so. Sometimes I feel African, exotic, businesslike or conservative. With this style, I can express all of these variations, yet maintain the essence--a woman of African descent."

The deepening realization of self that accompanies the sister's evolution of a natural persona occurs through the harmonious inner relations of psyche and body and inner-outer relations of hair, dress, diet, social and cultural activity, and world view. The evolution of this persona is an organic process--a systematic coordination of the elements that comprise the totality of the self and one's relation with the social and natural worlds.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes the evolution of symbolic body behavior as an organic process: "First, the drive to achieve consonance in all levels of experience produces concordance among the means of expression so that the use of the body is co-ordinated with

⁸Carl R. Rogers, Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 122.

other media."⁹ This covariance expands beyond the self so that the same drive that integrates physical and social experience will also affect ideology and spirituality. "Consequently, when once the correspondence between bodily and social controls is traced, the basis will be laid for considering co-varying attitudes in political thought and in theology."¹⁰

THE COLLECTIVE IDEAL. Being in open-ended process, the natural-haired black women interviewed for this study are growing in ways which connect self to community, community to humanity, and humanity to planet Earth. These connections include: (1) recovering African and Native American identity, (2) developing rapport with people in poor and working class communities (the natural orientation is incompatible with status-seeking behavior), (3) responding to all people on a basis of spirit (i.e., not physical or class difference), (4) working in ways which encourage cooperation and mutualism and (5) developing ecological awareness as a friend of the earth.

Full collective cooperation evolves out of individuation. In his "biology of ultimate concern," the evolutionary biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky envisions as a goal of human evolution, the proliferation of a multifaceted global culture, one unified through diversity. As the international community coalesces, "human personalities are expected to

⁹Douglas, Natural Symbols, 95.

¹⁰Ibid.

grow in depth and to maximize their individual uniqueness," says Dobzhansky.¹¹

PHASES IN THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

A sister's discovery and expression of identity is carried out through a series of interactions between self and others, and self with self. In the initial phase of the self-other interaction, she is impressed by examples set by black women who wear natural hair styles. A type of self-self interaction occurs when the creative spirit experiments with styling kinky hair and the objective self responds either favorably or urges further effort. The ultimate self-self interaction occurs when the unconscious and conscious dimensions of the self grow together to produce, in Jung's term, the "Self." More than the sum of its parts, the Self exists in dynamic relation with the Whole.

At the time of our initial interview in 1987, Chandra Washington gave me a resume that showed wide-ranging capabilities centered around a nucleus of skills and interests in broadcasts media, the arts, recovering African traditions, and holistic health and healing. Since 1987, in addition to her work as an electronic media specialist, she has taught advanced level African dance classes at Virginia Commonwealth University; contributed to a newsletter on nutrition, produced a public program on techniques of natural healing and performed with two "world beat" ensembles: the "Ululating Mummies" of Richmond and the Philadelphia-based "Sun Ra and his Arkestra."

¹¹Theodosius Dobzhansky, The Biology of Ultimate Concern (New York: New American Library, 1967).

In 1979, Washington realized that her straightened hairstyle was a "contradiction" to her developing interest in a healthy lifestyle. "I wanted to come clear with myself--being real and getting into natural foods at the same time I changed my hair. It is unnatural and inconsistent or anyone or anything to alter its natural state. It's dangerous, in terms of your understanding of self, in terms of health--chemical straighteners do become absorbed through the pores of the scalp, and in terms of being manipulated by society because of one's weakness to conform." At the time, Washington was wearing her natural hair parted in the center and cornrowed in two braids which extended from the front to the back of her head; soon after, she devised a new style: long, lively twists in front; a closely cut, contoured Afro in back.

Sylvia Spottswood began wearing her hair natural after seeing the folksinger Odetta discuss apartheid and perform at a house party. "It was my first exposure to the South Africa problem," Spottswood said. It was a moving experience. I said to myself something like, 'This lady has this beautiful voice, sings these songs, is committed to action, while looking so beautiful, I wish I could be like that'."

Soon after getting a short Afro cut, she noticed the effect of the natural hair change in other areas of her life:

It was then I stopped crying. (Previously,) something bothered me, I would cry. It (natural hair) was freeing! It was freedom from bondage, freedom from going to the beauty shop, and getting up in the morning to do (straighten) my hair. It was a big relief! To be able to go swimming, not to have to say, "I just got my hair done."

Overall, for Spottswood, the natural look meant that "you can be free to determine how you want to do something as opposed to the way someone else wants you to do it." She felt good about being able to say about her appearance, "This is natural. This is the way I am." When these realizations coalesced, Spottswood, then a mother of adolescent and grown children, finally was able to face life without tears.

Joyce Williams wears locks. Six years ago she had high blood pressure. She relieved it through healthy diet, an independent workstyle as manager of the Richmond-based Awareness Arts Ensemble, and a natural orientation in all areas of her life:

I don't eat flesh or frozen products. I like to use as many natural products as I can. My shoes are handmade. I make scarves that I wear on my hair. I like anything that's made by human hands rather than machines because it's sturdier. My money goes a lot further by buying articles that are going to last me, than (buying) for style. I'm not into style. I crochet scarves, purses and vests.

I am at peace with myself in lots of ways... The texture of my hair is much stronger than when I put chemicals on it. It doesn't cost me anything to care for it other than washing it every day. And it feels great. I make my own shampoo; just cactus and water... Out of 36 years, after the last four years of my life, I can truly say that I know Joyce.

At age 37, Joyce Williams bore her first child and soon thereafter conceived another. Today the mother of two healthy children, she looks forward to continuing her formal education and traveling to Africa.

I met Gletsa Feggans, like Chandra Washington and Joyce Williams, at Fare Share, a Richmond member-owned cooperative grocery that stocks organically-grown produce, whole grains and other natural whole foods.

Feggans began letting hair "lock" about a year ago and enjoys the tactile involvement with her hair which she massages once a day. She devises total looks (clothes, accessories) around her hair style and wears caps that she crochets. "I'll spend hours to get it (hair) right. I try to be creative. I study my hair. Feel the little coils and ringlets." Feggans, 24, wants her evolving persona to express her appreciation of her kinky hair, her African heritage, and her beliefs in an unpretentious, natural lifestyle: "I believe that every aspect of me is my identity."

Even within the walls and modern office modules of the corporation where she works, Deborah Needham/Sha-tt Peran continues to be influenced by the rhythms of the planet. On June 15, 1988, she explained her affinity with the seasons:

The solstice is coming. At this time I plan for the coming yearly cycle--not on January 1st. It (personal cycle) follows nature. In the summer, plant the seed (for personal development). In the fall and winter, the seed is germinating, and in the spring, it flowers forth. This is the way nature works. You are not going against the cycle. You are going with it.

Most of the respondents have progressed through several stages of experience and knowledge in evolving original natural personas. The process began for Saphronia Burrell in 1972 when she was a student at Virginia State College:

I never learned to straighten my hair. At college, I had to get perms; they made my hair break off and I didn't like sleeping in rollers. They always hurt my head and made it hard to get rest. And, I thought straight hair was too time consuming. My first approach was to cut all of my hair off. I had an Afro that was about three centimeters long. I wore my hair like that for five or six years. Sometimes I would get tired of short hair and I would grow my Afro to a certain length but didn't like hard

manageability of the (longer) Afro so I would try to braid it into something that was acceptable. But I didn't like the way my own personal braiding looked so I noticed a sister on campus who braided hair and I asked her to do it for me, and I liked the way it felt. I liked the freedom of it. I liked the economics of it.

Burrell continued to wear her hair natural after college, eventually tried straightening processes, then returned to natural styles:

Got into the jheri curl.* That was too expensive, and after a while I didn't like the greasy pillows. Then I started wearing braids again, now going to D.C. and paying \$60 for the extensions. I got tired of sitting for seven hours. I got tired of spending the \$60 in trying to mimic (natural braided hair). Back in 1973, I had got into Bob Marley anyway--listening to his music, and was already a Rastafarian sympathizer. And it was like, "I'm just going to go for it (locked hair).

Burrell links her evolving style to an evolving perception of her personal and cultural identity. During this period, she asked herself, "How can I believe so much in one way and express another?" She began to read African history and participate in pan-African cultural activities: "I never felt so good as when I went to the Ontario Theater in D.C. to hear Steel Pulse (reggae band) and there were all of these people of natural consciousness. It's beautiful. The way they dress, their jewelry, hair, spirits. It's awesome: living art!"

Janine Bell, an arts administrator and African dance performer who wears locks, says that evolving a natural persona, particularly one comprised of longer, growing kinky hair, is like "swimming upstream":

*"Jheri curl": A chemical hair straightening process, introduced in the late 1970s, which transfers tightly curled hair into a mass of loose, slick curls.

I first started wearing (natural hair styles) around when I was in graduate school and that's been about 10 years now. That's when I first started changing my diet, first started questioning beliefs that I had always had, that my parents had passed on to me. And I really felt like, "wow Janine, you are out of it because all these things that everybody around says are right, don't feel right anymore." It's really a transitional process, an evolutionary process, until you start feeling comfortable with, and I guess learning, who you are. Maybe it's sort of coming out of a cocoon and the butterfly starts getting its colors and being reborn. And so, at this point, I feel very comfortable with who I am. But the struggle has not decreased. I'm still swimming upstream as I was then.

For me to decide to dread was a growing process. You don't, for me, just do it. (She stopped straightening her hair in 1978 or '79.) I saw this woman one day who had her hair in braids, very similar to the way you're wearing now (free-hanging shoulder-length plaits), except I think she had extensions but they weren't very long. And I was just amazed. I said. "This is wonderful." and so, very shortly after that, I started wearing my hair in braids and dreads... My baby was born in '85 so it was around '86 that I made the decision to lock up.

During the meeting with Bell, I commented on the well-integrated aspect of her overall persona (items made from natural materials, hand-crafted items) and asked her to describe what she was wearing.

My locks are secured with beads of dough that are soaked in myrrh oil and so they are scented. They're in several strands that open up so I can wear them around my waist, around my neck, or however. Shell earrings that are triangular, and (around neck) round shell beads and a cowrie shell pendant. The dress is in a light khaki color with huge pockets in blue. It's 100 per cent cotton gauze that's very easy to wear. Around my waist is a kente cloth (band of hand-woven strips from Ghana) in shades of deep blue, green, red, gold and black. The bracelets are made out of bamboo and lacquered wood in early colors.

When she is not dressing for a formal meeting, Bell says she dresses "on a vibe--whatever I'm vibbing on, I want to put it together."

Sabrina Johnson was an educational foundation director at the time of our interview; she is now enrolled at the law school of The College of William and Mary. Johnson began the chronicle of her evolution with a recollection of the difficulty she had in managing her straightened hair.

I really struggled with it (straightened hair). I think my hair was part of some sense of low self-esteem for a long period in my life as I was growing up because my sisters had hair, it was long. Mine was short, so it was hard to do anything with it when it was straightened except put these rubber bands on it and the pigtails would stick out like this. So, I really struggled with what to do with my hair, and I used to have a complex about my hair. It was always a sore spot for me because I could never make it do anything. And I sweat a lot and it's always nappy.

Like most of the other respondents, Johnson felt that she needed to express some elements of her African heritage in order to become whole. She described a correlation between African dance and natural hair in her personal evolution:

I needed that something that I knew was good about me, felt good about me, that was naturally a part of me, that no one could take from me or make me feel bad about. It was like a hunger for some kind of way to express myself, to portray myself, or something that was natural for me. It was not something I had to try to copy off of someone else, or (use to) try to be like some one else. It was just mine. It almost feels to me--dance to me feels like my hair. It was finally the way mine is, and it's good! It's not something I have to feel embarrassed about. I needed that opportunity to feel good about what was natural to me.

Sabrina Johnson now wears her shoulder-length natural hair in lots of small, loose plaits. A turning point in her evolution of her natural persona occurred during her participation in student leadership group at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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It all started with a white man. He said to me in the group: "I really think you are a beautiful woman!" I had never heard that before. It just blew me away. Growing up in Virginia Beach, if you were dark, if your hair wasn't long, you did have many opportunities. You got all these bad nicknames. I was still struggling with my hair. It had gotten to the point where I couldn't straighten it any more. So it was out there. A bush. I don't think I meant for it to be but I perspired so much that it wouldn't stay pressed and I had never done a perm before. When he said that, it kind of sparked something. And soon after that, I saw Ezibu (African dance company) perform on campus. I used to get books on ballet and do things at home, but I wasn't going to fit the image of a ballerina. I started dancing (with Ezibu) and feeling better about myself. Being part of Ezibu family, you get into appreciating what is ours and (receive) constant reinforcement.

Johnson says that the evolution of a natural persona has many dimensions of meaning and function for her:

For some, (braids) are just a style rather than being a part of their whole thing. For me, it's not a hair style. Personally, I don't mind when it's growing out some. I don't like it when it's really placed. I like for there to be some freedom to it. That they're going to fall where they fall. That's part of the whole attitude. The most attractive thing is the freedom of it.

As I understand who I am as a descendant, as an African woman, I understand that I am supposed to be more in tune with what naturally happens as opposed to trying to impose some structures on what happens. I think that the ultimate, then, would be to pretty much allow (my hair) do what it will, to be what it can be. I think I am a step closer to that by braiding it loosely, and wherever it falls, I just kind of work with it. It's a very natural step to being in touch with who I am and being comfortable with what I am--in terms of my heritage and what I am by nature; the very next step is to allow my hair to be an expression of that. Again it goes back to the freedom; perming and pressing to me is altering what's naturally there. There's something very nice about this kink, this curl, and the fuzz and the softness. My hair is much softer, it's nicer to touch than the grease with the curl (curly perm) or the other stuff with the straightening. And, it's a lot more convenient. I maintain a tremendous pace. Maintaining (my hair) is a lot easier.

Because I like an African accent in dress and jewelry, my hairstyle creates a total picture. In some ways it dictates how I look. If I'm going to go formal, I can't wear a high neck (gown) and lace and all that. That would be a direct conflict. It

almost sets a tone for everything else, if I want everything to look like it's together. And I like the tone that it sets. It works real well with everything. As I do African dance, especially if I'm performing, I like to look the part. I look more the part like this than if my hair was in tight little curls (a conventional straightened style).

Joyce Peterson is a Rastafarian. A religious group originating in Jamaica, Rastafarians believe that one step leading to evolution of a planetary culture is the healing and unification of African-descended people throughout the diaspora. Their religious principles are reflected in their vegetarian diet and in their regard of the hair as a spiritual property. They believe that hair straightening interferes with the hair's ability to function as a physical projection of the spirit. Rastafarian women generally wear their hair covered in public.

"Sister Joyce" (as she is known to her friends) summarizes her spiritual evolution within the context of the development of her natural hair orientation; she now wears locks:

I feel more comfortable here (at this point in life). Before, I felt like I was in outer space.

Life is spiritual; it only looks like it's physical. We are coming together to make one and I'm in my position.

I was natural in my hair before I was a Rastafarian. I stopped straightening my hair around 1971 when my son was born. I wanted to identify with Africa and also, it (my motive) was just the vibration towards being natural. When I became Rastafarian five years ago, I was wearing a short 'fro. When a person locks, it's a consecration. All of a sudden, I found me.

I feel comfortable when I wear African clothing. There are certain things I'm not going to do. I don't concentrate on how I look. I don't worry about hair and clothes. Life is a serious movement. Who wants to waste time on vain things? I want to study.... Life is continuous change.

Joyce Peterson refers to the relation between individuality and universality when she comments, "We are all coming together to make one and I'm in my position." The achievement of one's own unique identity facilitates a progression towards the transcendence of finite ego-boundaries and leads to the recognition that we all comprise a larger, organic and interactive whole. As the Jungian psychologist Edward Edinger explains:

...at the center of the experience of individuality is the realization that all other individuals share the same experience as ourselves of living in a single, sealed world, and that this realization connects us meaningfully with other units of life. The result is that we do experience ourselves as part of a continuum. Internal observation, at sufficient depth, hence contradicts external observation...we are both unique indivisible units of being and also part of the continuum which is the universal way of life."¹²

As sisters evolve natural personas, we grow in three ways towards one: oneness with self; oneness with others; oneness with the universal whole.

HAIR AND HOLISM

The ideas and findings of contemporary thinkers in biology, physics, psychology, theology and philosophy are useful in showing relations between hair and holism. "Holism" is the concept that "whole entities, as fundamental components of reality, have an existence other than as the mere sum of their parts," in other words, and from a human perspective, that the totality is subsumed within the individual and the individual is subsumed within the whole: "one in all, all in one."

¹²Edinger, Ego and Archetype, 178.

In looking deep within herself for reflections of how she should be, the sister is involved in process of meditation which is holistic because it integrates all aspects of the self into a unified being. From this level of whole being, she can experience further unity as mentally-erected divisions between subject and object, "self" and "other" give way to awareness of the deeper, indivisible, all-encompassing whole. On the basis of experience as a psychologist and Buddhist meditation instructor, Jack Engler maintains that the integration of the whole self is a precondition of the "no-self"--the oneness in all:

If...it is seen that both "self" and "objects" are functions of a certain level or state of object relations development, and that in a more inclusive perspective there are no objects whose loss need be mourned and no self to mourn them, if all self-object ties have finally been "outgrown," then perhaps not only object relations development but mental suffering itself comes to an end.¹³

"Leading edge" thinkers in biology and physics hold that everything that we experience as "reality" on Earth is an inseparable part of an interactive energy system, a "biomass." The divisions between material objects that appear within the biomass are created in our minds through thought and language. This discriminating form of consciousness has contributed to human survival and progress through the development of science and technology and other logical systems. However, it has also produced a dominance of fragmented, mechanistic

¹³Ken Wilber, Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development (Boston: New Science Library, 1986) 24.

thinking in "civilized man" which conceives reality in a way which is contradicted by findings in quantum physics.

The physicist David Bohm describes a reality which exists prior to "rational" thought in terms of an all-inclusive flow:

A new form of insight implies that flow is in some sense prior to that of the 'things' that can be seen to form and dissolve in the flow...in this flow, mind and matter are not separate substances. Rather they are different aspects of one whole unbroken movement.¹⁴

Victor Turner, an anthropologist, uses the term "flow" to describe how such holistic unity is achieved:

Flow.... The merging of action and awareness, the crucial component of enjoyment. Flow is the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement, a state in which action follows according to an internal logic, with no apparent need for conscious intervention on our part.... There is a loss of ego, the self becomes irrelevant.¹⁵

According to findings of quantum physics, matter essentially takes neither the form of sub-atomic particles such as electrons, neutrons and photons or waves (as in the flow of light) but, instead, fluctuates between particle and wave formations. Fundamentally, matter is comprised of "fields" of electromagnetic energy patterns rather than tiny, discrete building block particles. Because of the essential non-material basis of matter, the discrete boundaries between

¹⁴David Bohm, Wholeness and the Implicate Order; quoted in Jeremy W. Hayward, Perceiving Ordinary Magic: Science and Intuitive Wisdom (Boulder: New Science Library, 1984) 178-179.

¹⁵Victor Turner, Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) 254.

"consciousness" and "matter," and "self" and "other," do not exist in the fundamental reality; the discrete boundaries of these phenomena are erected through the mind's classification of the "flow" of stimuli that it receives from senses.

Discovering and unifying the self as a whole, the sister creates a gestalt of being which can lead inward to a dissolution of the boundaries between "self" and "other" while leading outward to a full, authentic projection of the self. C. G. Jung called the interactions between the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self, "individuation," and said that this exchange leads to the emergence of a totality, the higher, deeper "Self."¹⁶ According to Jungian psychology, individuality has an existence prior to consciousness, a principle which Jungian psychologist Edward Edinger interprets as meaning that "one's unique individuality has a transpersonal origin and justification for being."¹⁷ Applying Armstrong's anthropology to Jungian psychology, one perceives how the mythoforms of the psyche may form the templates or channels through which individuality is linked with divinity.

Comparative studies in mind research provide insight into the relation between introspection and self-transcendence. Representative studies in this area are cited by Ken Wilber as he explains of how the internalization of awareness experienced through meditation ultimately can lead outward to the infinite:

¹⁶ Edward Edinger, Ego and Archetype: Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche (New York: Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1972) 62-69.

¹⁷ Ibid., 158.

Evolution, to (Heinz) Hartmann (the founder of psychoanalytic developmental psychology), is a process of progressive 'internalization,' for, in the development of the species, the organism achieves increased independence from its environment the result of which is that...reactions which originally occurred in relation to the external world are increasingly displaced into the interior of the organism.¹⁸

In this way, says Wilber, because the mind is interior to the body, "it can escape it, go beyond it, transcend it."

Through the sister's process of introspective discovery, she may become aware that object relations which seem separate on the surface level of experience are, in a more primary way, continuous aspects of an all-inclusive energy system.

Meanwhile, on another level, she continues to live in the external social world where symbolic acts are significant and in this world, the hair on our heads, more than other part of the body, symbolically represents consciousness. Unlike other parts of the body, the hair is amorphous--changing in form, manipulable, not bound to the service of specific, life-sustaining functions. Because it lacks functional specificity and is highly visible, the hair easily assumes symbolic form and meaning.

Hair symbology usually suggests crowns, halos and auras--all of which are representations of divinity or "holiness." The hair, for example, springs from the "crown chakra" at the top of the head which, in Kundalini Yoga, is identified as the body's highest energy center--the portal through which transpersonal consciousness is achieved.

¹⁸Wilber, Transformations, 156

Symbolic acts have an important function in self-actualization and self-transcendence because symbols are the language of the unconscious, and full personhood is achieved only as the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the self learn to communicate with, and complement, each other. One way in which hair symbolism can function in personal transformation is explained by Edinger.

(A symbol) is a living, organic entity which acts as a releaser and transformer of psychic energy.... The symbol leads us to the missing part of the whole man. It relates us to our original totality. It heals our split, our alienation from life. And since the whole man is a great deal more than the ego, it relates us to the superpersonal forces which are the source of being.¹⁹

The feeling of relation to superpersonal forces is one of joy; and, for the sister, the hair is a symbolic focus of joy resulting from both an emergence from self degradation and an immersion in transpersonal experience: Joy in curious gifts of nature--crisp, tight springy, "personable" ringlets of hair! Joy of healing: natural styles are reparation for the pain to generations of black women caused by the perception of "bad hair." Joy of renewal, of triumph. Joy in "telegraphing" the good news to others: "See, 'bad hair' is actually very nice!", in sharing with all a message of black women's potential for completion. Joy in wholeness!

Specific ideals, moreover, can be achieved through symbolic physical behavior such as hair styling. As a sister projects an image of simplicity, strength, honesty and freedom through the form of her natural hair, she herself, becomes simpler, stronger, more genuine,

¹⁹ Edinger, Ego and Archetype, 109.

more free: the symbolic and pragmatic functions of natural hair styles operate simultaneously.

The Sri Lankan estactics in Gananath Obeyeskere's study specifically describe their hair in terms of empowering symbolism. By allowing the hair to assume the form of matted locks, they indicate that they have broken the bonds of convention and ego-centered identity and are totally responsive to transpersonal forces.

...matted locks are her protector and guardian deity, and that represent Huniyan himself. The hair was given to her to show... the power of (the God's) shakti (strength, creative essence). She also refers to the locks as ahatu, relic or essence or life force. Another refers to her matted locks as her prana vayu (life breath, life force.)²⁰

Unlike matted-haired Sri Lankans or the West African braiders, most African-American women who evolve natural hair styles do so without the example or support of community traditions which associate hair with spirituality. Alice Walker in the essay, "Oppressed Hair Puts a Ceiling on the Brain", has expressed our mostly unspoken beliefs. Describing her "spiritual liberation" in relation to her transition from straightened hair to locks, Walker says that after an extended period of reflection:

One day... it occurred to me that, in my physical self there remained one last barrier to my spiritual liberation, at least in the present phase. My hair.

Not my friend hair itself, for I quickly undertook that it was innocent. It was the way I related to it that was the problem. I was always thinking about it. So much so that if my spirit had been a balloon eager to soar away and merge with the infinite, my hair would be the rock that anchored it to earth. I realized that

²⁰Obeyeskere, Medusa's Hair, 26-27.

there was no hope of continuing my spiritual development, no hope on future growth of my soul, no hope of really being able to stare at the universe and forget myself entirely in the staring (one of the purest joys!) if I still remained chained to thoughts about my hair...Eventually I knew precisely what hair wanted: it wanted to grow, to be itself, to attract link, if that was its destiny, but to be left alone by anyone, including me, who did not love it as it was.²¹

Walker stopped straightening her hair and, for a while, wore extensions of Korean women's hair braided into her hair. Dispensing with the extensions, she experimented with her loose mass of kinky hair, eventually letting it "lock". At this point, she experienced a spiritual release:

The ceiling at the top of my brain lifted; once again my mind (and spirit) could get outside myself. I would not be stuck in restless stillness but continue to grow... This was the gift of my growth during my fortieth year. This and the realization that as long as there is joy in creation there will always be new creations to discover, to rediscover, and that a prime place to look is within and about the self.²²

The route to ultimate knowledge lies through knowing oneself. A shared principle of all of the "humanistic" schools of thought within the social sciences, philosophy and theology is that each person has a unique purpose to fulfill: to "know thyself." In so doing, each person brings humanity closer to a collective destiny: the experience of ourselves as all different, all the same.

"All different, all the same": there is no paradox in this concept; it is a description of a unified duality: Day turns into night, night turns into day. Summer turns into Winter through Fall.

²¹Walker, "Oppressed Hair," 52-53.

²²Ibid., 53.

Life turns into death, death allows for new life.... Diversity allows for unity.

Although conventional opinion has held that the harmonious social assimilation of blacks and whites in the United States is achieved as blacks are able to physically blend in with the majority culture, the cumulative evidence of the 75 year old hair straightening convention indicates the fallacy of this idea. Yes, with slick, restrained, heat-processed hair on our heads, African-American women were able to walk more confidently into a "Negrophobic" early 20th century society, however, despite all of our hopeful strivings, an entrenched "underclass" of black people formed, comprised of the most physically Africoid members of the African-American community. The apartheid-like social stratification of whites, coloreds, and blacks is undesirable and dysfunctional, as are black folks' efforts to look less Africoid than we are. Freedom for African physical traits to be is a fundamental aspect of the means to personal empowerment for black people. We should not try to deny the actuality of our physicality and we should not be expected to make this denial for social acceptance or economic advancement. When we do, we suppress the flow of imagery and other vital energy from the mythoform; we deny the creation of "affecting presences."

Today from a holistic perspective, it is apparent that to the extent that African-American women are alienated from ourselves, African-Americans are alienated from each other, and this alienation affects our functioning in society and the world. Fulfilled and expressed self-knowledge is the basis upon which humanity can build an

integrated, organic global culture, one unified through appreciation of the cultural and physical diversity of its component groups as well as through recognition of its underlying unity. A visual representation of this phenomenon is the mandala, a figure composed of multifaceted forms radiating from the unity of a singular, circular core. East Indian philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan describes the phenomenon in this way: "These two elements of selfhood, uniqueness (each-ness) and universality (all-ness), grow together until at last the most unique becomes the most universal."²³

²³ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "Human Personality," in Clark E. Moustakas, The Self: Explorations in Personal Growth (New York: Harper & Row, 1956) 118.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are many topics relevant to this thesis which were not examined in this initial study and there are some ideas and issues that were mentioned which could be more substantively addressed. The writer hopes to develop a book-length examination of the thesis. Further study will include:

1. Examination of black women's hair-related behavior within a larger socio-cultural context. Fashionable white women make considerable effort to enhance the appearance of their hair. There are some significant differences, however, in the hair-related motivations and practices of white and black American women. Further research will compare and contrast these behaviors.

2. More extensive usage of feminist analysis. The politics of appearance has been a major area of interest in women's studies and can be applied to this thesis to show the connection between factors of race, class and gender in the vigorous propagation of the hair straightening convention among African-American women.

3. Detailed assessment of how the hair straightening imperative impedes open-ended evolution in other areas of the lives of black girls and women.

4. Augmentation and continuation of the section on the social and cultural history of black feminine hair care and image. The historical

section of the present study is rather cursory and ends with the 1920s. This chronicle will be strengthened and extended from the 1920s through each decade to the present.

5. Discussion of the problem of the development of an African-American feminine aesthetic. African-Americans are a racially-mixed, physically heterogenous group of people. While the appearance of African ancestry is predominant in most of us, a significant segment of the black population shows relatively less evidence of African ancestry and Caucasian-oriented feminine personas are not necessarily incongruous with their physical make-up. A question posed for future research is: What are the principles of an African-American feminine aesthetic which could affirm the suppressed beauty of African-American features in our women yet be flexible enough to acknowledge and accommodate our broad physical diversity? (It should be noted that the hair of most African-American women is kinky in its natural state. The genes of our African ancestry appear to be more persistent in our hair texture than in our pigmentation and the structure of our facial features.)

6. A summary of relevant concepts and findings in the area of sociobiology. Sociobiology has been disparaged by some social scientists who contend that it is based on racist assumptions. However, the influence of physical traits in the development of socio-cultural behavior is a legitimate subject for objective, conscientious study.

7. A survey of the images of black hair in African-American literature and visual art. The fiction, poetry, autobiography and

dramatic works of black women writers contain revealing insights into our "hair problem." Works by black male writers also contain relevant information. Black graphic artists have also used hair imagery to symbolize issues and themes in black American life.

8. Interviews with African-American braiders and documentation of their techniques.

9. A survey of black males, white men and white women to ascertain how people in these groups view the hair image of African-American women.

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