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## Everyday Hair Discourses of African Black Women

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**Abstract** Hair for African Black people has always had meaning. In the past, elaborate hairstyles communicated their status, identity, and place within the larger society. In present day society, hair continues to be a significant part of being an African Black person. Especially for women, who attach a number of different meanings to hair. This study casts more light on young African Black women's everyday perceptions of hair and uncovers the meanings they attach to hair and beauty. This is done by looking at how the intersections of race, gender, and class impact on their everyday perceptions and experiences of hair. The literature indicates that the hair preferences and choices of Black African women tend to emulate Western notions of beauty. This is due to a great extent to the historical link between Black hair and "bad" hair associated with old slave days. But, the narratives of participants contradict this normative discourse in many ways and provide new insights on hair—insights that reflect and motivate antiracist aesthetics.

**Keywords** African Black Women; Black Beauty; Eurocentric Beauty; Hair; Race; Racialization of Beauty

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### Introductory Remarks

Hair, as organic matter and part of the human body, has been subjected to manipulation and styling throughout history (Mercer 1989:34). It has always carried social meanings—for instance, as a symbol of status or as a fashion statement. As in the rest of the world, hair plays a vital role in the lives of African people, and South Africans are no exception when it comes to a preoccupation with hair (Erasmus 1997:12). The importance of hair in African communities is first seen in the curiosity surrounding the hair of a newborn baby (Mercer 1987:35; Erasmus 1997:12). This interest in hair continues throughout life and is associated with individual and social issues of identity and beauty (White 2010:19). This attentiveness to, almost fixation with, hair can be observed through the every-

day efforts of African Black women to groom and style their hair (Mercer 1987:34). We analyze everyday discourses on hair as these intersect with race, gender, and class (Erasmus 1997:12).

The awareness that hair can be racialized is essential in opening up dialogues about, and meanings of, "good" and "bad" hair among African Black people. In the light of this, everyday hair discourses by African Black women can only be understood when historically and racially embedded (White 2010:19). The idea that discourses on hair are linked to the politics of skin color reaches as far back as the old times of slavery, when greater monetary value was attached to light-skinned Black women with straight hair (Russel, Wilson, and Hall 1992; Hooks 1994; White 2010:19). This generalized and stereotypical valuation of hair and skin color still exists to some extent—irrespective of the fact that hairstyles can be relatively easily styled to match personal preferences (Gibson 1995; Collins 2000; Hooks 2001; White 2010:19). When it comes to hair and hairstyling over the centuries, African women have been very creative in manipulating African hair. Even as early as the fifteenth century we find evidence of the various meanings and symbols attached to hair—as can be seen in depictions of the Wolf, the Mende, the Mandingo, and the Yoruba people from Africa (Patton 2006:27). In African communities, hairstyling practices were about more than an individual wanting to look good or make a statement—they also served as bonding sessions and united the community, particularly the women. Hair was perceived as being more than just aesthetic, it formed part of people's sense of identity (Patton 2006:28). However, after slav-

ery brought these communities in touch with the Western world, African people started to adopt new styles and ways to carry and maintain their African tresses.

One of the reasons for this change in hair practices was that African hair developed negative meanings. African women started to seek straighter, silky hair in order to fit into Western society and to acquire social mobility (White and White 1995:56). These attempts at using hair to signal class issues such as improved social standing were also influenced by the perception that a combination of African and white European genetic composition led to mixed race offspring whose physical features were regarded as more desirable than the kinky, coarse hair and dark skin of their African forebears (Badillo 2001; Montalvo 2004; Robinson 2011:361). These physical differences among African slaves created a social hierarchy based on skin color and hair texture (Lara 2010). Slaves with features closer to the European norm (lighter skin and straighter hair) also became more valuable in monetary terms. This even extended to special privileges being awarded to slaves of mixed race. This social construction of a caste system based on color tends to put African Black women at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. This is because African Black women, more than men, find themselves at the intersection of gender, race, and beauty (Wolf 1999; Arogundade 2000; Badillo 2001; Robinson 2011:363).

Against the background of these factors, we gathered discourses of hair among young African Black women in Bloemfontein, South Africa. We are interested in the meanings that African Black women

attach to their hair, the significance of hair in their everyday lives, including its everyday care and maintenance. We also discuss hair as a marker for identity and as a symbol of beauty.

### Hair as Beauty

Beauty has to do with personal likes and desires. It is difficult to be detached, clinical, or objective when talking about beauty. When reflecting on beauty, we inevitably enter the intersection of race and culture and gender. Various standards and meanings of beauty are also time- and gender-bound.

The advent of colonialism and the accompanying increase in contact between different racial groups greatly impacted on everyday perceptions of beauty in Africa, particularly among women (Erasmus 1997:12). People started to make comparisons with regards to beauty, comparisons that were largely linked to the physical features of the different races. Apart from the obvious difference in skin color, hair has always been one of the main areas of comparison. The literature indicates that, historically, negative meanings were attached to Black hair (Mercer 1989:36) and this shaped perceptions of “good” and “bad” hair in African Black communities (cf. Thompson 2009:834). On the one hand, everyday dialogues about “good” hair were understood as referring to straight hair. On the other hand, dialogues about “bad” hair usually referred to kinky or “woolly” hair (Mercer 1987:35; White and White 1995:56). This distinction would bring about an obsession among generation upon generation of African women, who would spend countless hours and large amounts of money to straight-

en their hair in pursuit of “good” hair. The legacy of slavery and colonialism is therefore not only restricted to oppression and exploitation in political and economic sense. It also led to beauty standards that reject and exclude distinguishing features of African Black women (Robinson 2011:358). It put an enormous burden on them in terms of the cost of attaining what was then seen to be the ideal.

There is a need to revisit the historical link between Black hair and “bad” hair. We need to find new discourses on hair that reflect and motivate antiracist aesthetics. To this end we investigate the connection between Black female beauty and Eurocentric standards of beauty, including hair and skin color. Racist beauty aesthetics always promote features of the dominant groups at the expense of minority groups (Craig 2006:159). It is why Black women often regard themselves as being at the bottom of the beauty pile, and how some come to accept racist beauty aesthetics as normal (Gaskins 1997; Taylor 1999; Arogundade 2000; Robinson 2011:359-360). There is little doubt that the racialization of beauty and hair has an impact on African Black women’s identity and that many go to a great deal of trouble to comply with Eurocentric standards (Robinson 2011:360). But, despite their efforts, Black women sometimes *still* do not fit into the Eurocentric standard of beauty—and, ironically, this can reinforce their internalization of, and desire to meet, Eurocentric standards.

### African Hair

Finding themselves within a predominantly Western-centric popular culture, the traditional connec-

tion between African people and their hair was, for a long time, largely severed. As noted earlier, this began in the slave trade era in the nineteenth century. The end of the slave era meant new beginnings for most Africans—including opportunities for new ways to think afresh about their physical features (Rooks 1996 as cited in Thompson 2009:834). For women such as Madam C. J. Walker (1867-1919)—an African-American entrepreneur, philanthropist, and social activist who became one of the wealthiest African-American women in the U.S. from a line of African-American hair care products she invented in 1905—this new trend in beauty care was also an opportunity to enter the financial bracket of the middle classes. She opened up the market for products such as hair softener and hair-straightening combs that would enable African-American women to obtain the straight, silky hair favored since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The *politics* of African hair evolved from interrogating this obsession with straight hair (Thompson 2009:837). These arguments range from issues of self-hate and self-love, to the freedom to express personal choice (Thompson 2009:837-838). Hair politics within the African community usually leads to debates about natural hair versus fake/manipulated hair (Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014:57). In turn, these lead to the notion of “good” versus “bad” hair. And, repeating the old stereotypes, “bad” hair gets related to natural and unprocessed hair, and “good” hair to chemically straightened hair.

In South Africa, these discourses on hair are explicitly promoted in the corporate and mass media worlds where there is a great deal of money to be

made on weave extensions and hair manipulation. But, there has also been a number of television programs that debate the norms that the market has created in relation to African hair (Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014:58). Also in the U.S. debates on hair among African-American women have been covered in shows hosted by celebrities such as Tyra Banks. Chris Rock’s 2009 documentary *Good Hair*, directed by Jeff Stilson, explores the perception among many people of African descent that curly hair was not “good.” The documentary delves into the hugely lucrative Black hair industry and explores popular approaches to styling, chemical straighteners, and people’s experiences of their own hair.

One example of the coverage of discourses on hair in South Africa was in the TV program—now discontinued—*3<sup>rd</sup> Degree* by Debora Patta, which was aired on South African television channels *e.tv* and *eNCA* in June 2012. Called *It’s Just Hair Isn’t It?* Debora Patta’s attempt to provoke debates on the “otherness” of African hair was widely criticized and even condemned as badly researched and sensationalist. Patta’s show attempts to highlight the importance that hair has on the everyday lives of South African Black women. She also tackled the notion that identity becomes attached to hair (Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014:58):

Hair is such an important part of our identity. We spend an inordinate amount of time and money on it. And it is not just about looking good. It says something about us. Whether we colour it or straighten it, or make it curly. It is intimately connected to our self-image. For Black women, it is an even more complex issue. Natural hair versus weave may sound

frivolous, but that frivolity belies an even deeper issue. It is about race, about Western versus African ideals. And what exactly defines beauty. It can potentially make you stand out in a crowd. One of our most notable features. Billions spent on it every year. But it is just hair, isn't it?

The Chris Rock documentary and the television shows hosted by Tyra Banks in the U.S. and Patina in South Africa all mention the high incidence of chemically straightened hair, point out that the fashion thrives despite a widespread awareness of the dangerous toxins contained in chemical relaxers. Erasmus (1997:11-16) argues that such an obsession, which flies in the face of the dangers and consequences of many hair treatments, points to South Africa's long history of racial division, which altered African Black women's relationship with their hair.

From the above it is clear that everyday discourses on hair are more than simply about hair. Hair can serve to define a person, and the juxtaposition of African hair and African beauty against Western hair and Western beauty indicates not only beauty standards: it also points to an internalization of racism via those beauty standards (Nyamnjoh and Fuh 2014:59). It can be argued that fake hair such as weaves are an emulation of Western beauty standards and therefore, to a certain extent, a denial of one's African identity. It is also possible to argue that it is entirely a matter of individual choice. Eusebius McKaiser (2012:24), however, warns that in present-day South Africa, individual choices also need to be analyzed as they are often the result of an internalization of the country's long and troubled history.

### Theoretical and Methodological Notes

This study relies on a number of theoretical frameworks to contextualize our understanding of African Black women's everyday hair experiences. The most relevant frameworks are phenomenology, social constructivism, and feminist theories (particularly those dealing with intersectionality). Phenomenology is concerned with people's everyday perceptions and experiences of the social world (Overgaard and Zahavi 2009:98). In other words, it is concerned with how people experience, feel about, and perceive their social world (Inglis 2012:86). By working in a phenomenological way, we thus seek to understand the influence of discourses on hair, and the different hair practices of African Black women, through the lenses of their personal perceptions and everyday experiences. Social constructivism also aims at opening out understandings of how people co-create their social world, and attach meanings to it (Creswell 2013:24). These meanings are assimilated during early childhood and communicated through social encounters (Harris 2008:232). In both phenomenological and social constructivist thought, the existence of an unchangeable objective reality is discarded in favor of understanding how actors actively (re)construct aspects of their everyday lives and how they come to view it as real (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Harris 2008:233). A dimension of feminist intersectionality also forms part of our theoretical bases, in step with the idea that African Black women's everyday lives are shaped by issues of race, gender, and class (Collins 2000:6), and that their everyday relationship with hair can be understood through analyzing an intersection of these factors.

Qualitative research attempts to make sense of how people experience aspects of their social reality by situating the individual's accounts within the broader social context (Brinkmann 2012:19; Creswell 2013:43). In this study, the narratives are collected in their natural setting and subsequently analyzed as life stories (cf. Webster and Mertova 2007:13). This is done with the assumption that narration is the practice of constructing meaningful selves, identities, and realities (Chase 2011:422).

Eight young females between the ages 19 and 29 and from diverse ethnic groups were selected to participate. Although they are from diverse economic backgrounds, they are all university students and therefore, in the context of South Africa, can be considered as upwardly mobile. They were selected based on physical appearance—all clearly took great care of appearance and hairstyling. Selection was also based on recruiting participants from a wide spectrum of hairstyle choices: weave extensions, braid extensions, chemically straightened hair, afros, or short hair.

We used in-depth, face-to-face interviews (Braun and Clarke 2013:79), which are ideal for building a dialogical relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Riessman 2008:23). This dialogical relationship leads to the co-construction of meaning between the researcher and the research participant. Open-ended questions allowed participants to engage in-depth with the research topic. We also used a focus group interview to augment the individual interviews (Flick 2009:195) and gain further understanding. The focus group interview also served as a way to validate the opinions and

attitudes expressed by the participants in the individual interviews.

All individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim. Verbatim transcription ensures that the full content and meaning expressed by participants are made available for analysis. Data were analyzed thematically (Riessman 2008:53). Special attention was paid to thick and rich descriptions given by the research participants.

The research received formal clearance from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (Ethical Clearance No: UFS – HUM – 2013 – 27) and complies with best practices regarding informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to dignity. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

### Narrating Hair

#### First Experiences

Participants were asked to recall their first-time experiences of having their hair done.

I don't think I remember my very first time doing my hair. I do remember that I have had long hair for most of my life, but I do remember my very first time cutting my hair. That's my most profound memory. I think I was ten or eleven years old and I went to the salon, and I said to my mom that I wanted to cut my hair. And then I remember I wanted to cut Rebecca Malope's hairstyle [South African female gos-



pel artist]. I don't know, but, for me, it was like the best hairstyle ever. It was very short on the sides and very big in the middle [German haircut]. So I loved that hairstyle and I was with my mom and brother. And I remember that it was a guy doing my hair. He cut my hair and he did it beautifully. I mean, you know [emphasizing]! But, at that time it wasn't accepted. I got to school and people were like: "Why did you cut your hair? You had such good hair!" And the guys were laughing at me. But, I never really cared. And it's my most profound memory of doing my hair. I cut it when I was ten. [Nthabiseng]

I can't remember that one, hey! [the first hairdo]. Because I have been going to the salon...from a very young age. So I was used to people doing whatever they liked with my hair. But, I remember when I first cut my hair. I looked into the mirror and I was like: "Wow!" Because it was very long. Then I noticed that I actually looked prettier with short hair than with long hair, although people tried to convince me otherwise—that all hairstyles suit you. They were even persuading me to do dreadlocks. But, I am content with short hair. So when I first cut my hair, I noticed that I look more beautiful with short hair than with any other hairstyle. [Palesa]

Even though the two participants do not remember the first time they ever did their hair, they do remember their first experiences of *cutting* their hair. And these experiences were mainly positive. For Palesa, it was a point at which she realized that she looks beautiful with short hair. For Nthabiseng, her first haircut was the best hairstyle that she ever had. For both, the choice to cut hair coincides with a point of independence in their lives: a decision to

wear and to cut their hair as they desired and an experience of freedom from the shackles of other people's opinions.

However, for Nonzuzo, her first experiences of doing her hair is associated with negative emotions as she recalls how painful the whole process was. She decides that the pain associated with doing hair is not worth it, even if it means she might look beautiful afterwards.

My cousin did my hair at the time. There was something called popcorn [plaits]. Do you know it? It's like braiding [braid extension], but with your own hair. Small braiding and then you just roll round it, roll it around. It was so painful! Some people do it with pantyhose, but my cousin never used pantyhose because I had long hair. So she would just wrap it around and it would stick hantle [nicely]. Yoh! When you sleep, the following day I woke up and I just undid it, like yoh! I unplaited it. Everything *nje* [just]. That's how I felt: *gore* [that]. I cannot! I cannot do this! It's just torture! So that's when I noticed that some things you don't need to do...to feel some pain in order to be beautiful. If you feel good, it's fine. [Nonzuzo]

Her last statements show that her negative experience has a positive spin—it makes her independent from a fashion norm.

### "Good" and "Bad" Hair

Participants agree that there is "good" and "bad" hair. But, they show different understandings of what makes hair "good" or "bad."

Mm, *ya*, there is "bad" hair, there is "bad" hair! Depending on how you carry your hair, how you treat it. It can be "bad" *wabona* [you see]. But, also sometimes you need to understand your hair texture as well. Then you know you can just enhance it...many people they don't understand their hair texture. And then something just goes deliberately like wrong. Because they don't know what to use and what not to use. They dye and then *moriri watswa* [they dye and then the hair starts breaking off], you know! Because their hair is softer, you know. You need to understand your hair. Hence, it becomes "bad" at some point. [Nonzuzo]

Even though Nonzuzo admits that there is "good" and "bad" hair, she says it all depends on how familiar one is with one's natural hair type and texture and how to work with that. She observes that people end up having "bad" hair because they do not have the knowledge of how to properly care for it. Notably, when she talks about "good" and "bad" hair, she does not attach any notions of beauty to it or associate "good" hair with a specific hair type. She also does not associate "bad" hair with a certain hair texture. Nthabiseng, for her part, believes that one inherits "good" hair and to keep it good just takes the right maintenance.

First of all, I sincerely believe that it's inherited: that's the first thing. "Good" hair is actually inherited. But, the second thing is maintenance, of course. When people started noticing that not all hair is "good" hair...then people started coming with products to maintain the "bad" hair. That's why there are products to maintain the "bad" hairs [hair] [everyone laughing]. I do sincerely think that "good" hair is in-

herited. But, you can also work towards "good" hair by certain products: boJabu Stone [Jabu Stone is a local hair product for natural hair such as dreadlocks and afros in South Africa]. [Nthabiseng]

In general, there seems to be consensus on the notion of "good" and "bad" hair by the participants. And contrary to literature discussed earlier, dialogues of "good" and "bad" hair among research participants do not directly associate Black African hair with "bad" hair.

### Hair and Identity

It is clear that hair plays an important part in the everyday lives of the female participants. They consider it an essential aspect of a woman's being and explain why they think so.

Yes, as much as the India Arie's song says: "I'm not my hair"...I don't think it's true. Women feel confident and more alive when they feel good about their hair. You might look good in what you wear, like with what you dress like. But then when your hair is not good, I think it impacts. It impacts on your confidence as well. You know that: Okay, my hair does not look that good, you know. I mean, when people look at you, they look at your face, and then the minute the head...it's your hair. So when people communicate with you, they look at you in your face. So your hair plays a very, not a very important role, it plays a vital role in feeling confident and being free. It can be anything—it can be dreadlocks, it can be an afro, it can be braids, it can be whatever. But, if you're confident with your hairstyle, you feel good. [Karabo]

Well, there is a saying that: “*Botle ba mme botloho*” [a woman’s beauty is in her hair]. Right? I think a weave defines who you are as an individual. What do you stand for? Because you with your dreadlocks: it means you are original, African woman and all of that. But, for someone who would stand between me and you. They will see you as more African than me because I...I am...I don’t know. And then there are people who are bold and they are still African with their boldness. Okay as long as someone’s head is neat. That’s all that’s important. [Lerato]

Not only does hair carry meaning, to Lerato, hair also signifies something about identity and serves as an indication of Africanism. However, this linking of hair with an African identity is rejected by some participants during the focus group interview. They were asked if they agree with the legendary South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela’s opinion that weaves and hair extensions are betrayals of the African identity. Hugh Masekela caused a stir a few months prior to the data collection for this project when he refused to have his picture taken at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, with female students donning weaves or hair extensions. Masekela was awarded an honorary doctorate from Rhodes University in April 2015, and he delivered the graduation address at the ceremony. He was given a standing ovation when expressing his disdain for the dwindling sense of heritage among young South Africans. After the graduation ceremony he confirmed his aversion to weaves and hair extensions at press conferences. For the participants in the focus group interview, Africanism and an African identity are more about a sense of humanity than having natural hair.

It’s about you. I’m very traditional. You heard me, right! But, if I decide to put on a weave [extension], I have my own reasons. It doesn’t mean that I am betraying the ethnic blah, blah, blah, you know. For instance, I’ve got natural hair [now], but at some point I braid it, I do weaves [extensions], but not for a long time. Because why? He [Masekela] does not understand the reasons. I don’t want to comb. I’m trying to save time. I’m attending classes, you know. He does not understand the concepts of putting a weave [extension] at some point. So, he will never relate. [Nonzuzo]

*Ya*, Africanism is about how friendly we are, about *Ubuntu* [a spirit of giving]. [Nthabiseng]

It is clear that the choice to wear weaves or extensions is a personal choice for the participants rather than a matter of betraying their African identity.

Okay, I am a natural girl as you can see. Mm, I love my hair natural. When I was growing up, my mom would put all these artificial hairs on my head. But now, now that I am a woman, I’ve had this short hair about eight years now. I’ve never grown my hair up to more than five centimeters [long]. So I just love being natural. [Palesa]

For the participants, hair is perceived as being important for communicating messages about themselves to others. Hair is also considered significant in building people’s confidence regardless of the style. They attach various meanings to hair and conceive of hair as forming an essential part of a woman’s everyday experiences in her lifeworld.

## Hair and Grooming

An important aspect of hair is that it serves as an indicator of how well people look after themselves in their everyday life.

As much as maybe I may not like certain hairstyles on certain people, I do feel, like your hair is an expression of a part of you. It’s also a look, it also forms part of a look you have. It also says how much you take care of yourself. So it’s also hygienic, it’s also fashionable. But, it’s also natural. You know, you should take care of your hair. You should make it part of who you are...It is important to do your hair every day. It should form part of your everyday life. [Nthabiseng]

## Hair and Gender

Hair also appears to be a form of symbolic capital, stratifying people according to different genders. Short hair often tends to be associated with boys. So hair length distinguishes girls from boys and strengthens the preference for longer hair among girls. It also seems that social conventions require girls to put extra effort into caring and maintaining their hair.

In my culture [Pedi culture], short hair is preferred, but there is no law. But, I have heard my uncles. My uncles are very old-fashioned. My mom’s uncles [Sotho culture], as well, are very old-fashioned men. When children relax their hair [chemically straighten their hair] *ya, ya* [yes, yes], they say: “You look like a girl now.” And when you don’t have your hair combed: “No! Girls are not supposed to look like that!”

Exactly, *le nna* [even with me]. They say that all the time about my hair. They always say: “Aah, you! I think you’re trying to look like a boy. Why you want to look like a boy?” And I don’t wear earrings as well. I just, I don’t think I need to wear earrings. Then: “Girls wear earrings!” No, I...I don’t have to wear earrings. [Nthabiseng]

The association of short hair with males is also evident in Karabo’s story:

Yes [giggles], yes! I cut my hair...my mom tricked me into cutting my hair. It was the shortest hair...it was like almost brush cut, you know. And then my head was very small. And they said I looked like a boy. And, you know, they teased me the whole time until my hair grew [giggles again]...It made me feel less of a girl because they said I looked like a boy [giggles]. It did hurt, but then, as I said, as time goes on, you just get used to it at the end of the day. [Karabo]

The decision to go for short hair for Nthabiseng is primarily based on her intention to show people that short hair can also be beautiful. She regards it as important for people to know that female beauty does not necessarily coincide with long hair.

Well, I have a cut [female hair cut] on my head now [laughs]. But, aah, I choose this hairstyle because I was tired of having long hair. I grew up with long hair and for some other reason it seemed like when you are a girl, you were supposed to have long hair. So I never understood that. I never understood why, you know. But, I never did anything about it. My parents were also like: why not? You just have long hair. So I was like: okay, fine, I will keep the long hair.

Then I got to varsity and I saw everybody, you know, doing what they want. But, what was very consistent was extensions and bondings [weaves], and this and that. So I was like: no, I don't want this. I don't want people to say I am beautiful because of my hair. So I decided to cut my hair. I change the hairstyles now even if my hair is short: I will have lines here and dye it like this, and I will have curls *ning ning* [now and then]. But, I do feel strongly about having short hair. Uhm, but I don't think it's because of some sort of statement that I am trying to make. It's just that I prefer it. And I think I am trying to maybe say that there is a different way of being beautiful. And it's not just long hair or extensions or this. There's a different way, and people compliment me all the time. So I think it is working. People like it—whatever their reason may be. I love my hair! [Nthabiseng]

### Hair and Beauty

Many of the participants clearly connected hair, beauty, and confidence. But, as Nonzuzo observes, there should also be acknowledgement that beauty does not just lie in outward appearances.

I think it's an important thing...Like: it's like you're important...Cause if your hair is clean, first of all you feel good. And you see yourself here [like that]: I am beautiful also. But, beauty is not about the hair. It's about you, the inner beauty. How do you see yourself? Have you accepted yourself? So the hair is just there to enhance who you are. But, if your hair is clean and you keep changing styles, you feel good as well. And you're going...according to your mood. If I feel like it's hot now, and my mood tells me that I should just cut all of it—I should just shave it. Then it's fine. [Nonzuzo]

Clearly, participants think that their hair contributes to how they feel about themselves, how they experience female beauty, and indicates something of their self-appreciation. These meanings are socially created, historically embedded, and shared and communicated through social encounters with others. In turn, these social encounters are subjectively reinterpreted by the participants as individuals, and in their everyday lives. It is via these overlapping cycles of influence that they co-construct their reality.

For Palesa and Thembeke, the decision to have short hair is mainly the result of how beautiful they think they look with short hair compared to other hairstyles. Their narratives reflect an appreciation for their natural physical attributes, which they seek to enhance rather than reject. Again, we find evidence against the idea that Black African hair and features are considered less desirable than Western ones; perhaps the idea itself has become out of step with the freedom young women feel and with the eclectic notions of beauty in current times?

I looked at my face. I saw that I have a round face. And I noticed that when I have a weave on or braidings, or whatever artificial hair, I looked more round. So I noticed that short hair makes me look normal. Yes, I have a round face, but I looked better with short hair than long weaves or braids, or with long hair in general. [Palesa]

It's like...it goes so well with my skin color and my complexion...it's my hair with my natural color. [Thembeke]

But, as a further comment from Thembeke shows, hair and beauty is not just about appreciating your natural looks. It is also about keeping up with the latest trends, and clearly these are plentiful and move fast:

[Indicating her hair] Black, soft, dread. Back in December, you know, everyone is like: "Okay, you're coming to Cape Town! Here's money to do your hair!" This is actually my cousin's hair piece. She went for a German cut [the fade] and then she's like: "You can have my hair piece." Because she won't be having [long] hair anytime soon. So that's how I got it. But, *eish*, my hairstylist wants me to do this brown, blonde, box braid...that's what I want to do soon, *eish*.

### Hair and Convenience

Many of the narratives have already demonstrated that convenience and practicality are important when choosing hairstyles. Arguments about convenience, particularly the time that must be spent on maintaining a hairstyle, are mainly raised by participants with short hair.

Aah, what I love about my hair [thinking]? Aah, it's convenient, it's very convenient. I don't know why people don't think that natural hair [ethnic hair] is convenient. But, short hair is convenient. It's cheap and it looks good on me. I mean, I haven't seen anything that suits me like this in a very long time. If I had an opportunity to change my hair, would I? I wouldn't change my hairstyle, but I would change the texture of my hair. I just wish it was more hard and natural, you know. So that I can cut it in all different ways, but with a natural look to it. So I would

change the texture just to make it a little more natural. I just have fluffy hair, fluffy hair. [Nthabiseng]

What is interesting in Nthabiseng's narrative is that she wishes her hair was *more* "natural," meaning *more* African; again, the narratives contradict the idea that young African women seek to emulate Western looks.

Relaxing [hair takes] less than an hour. So I like the fact that you don't sit for hours doing your hair. And it's much cheaper...I think it's plus or minus two hundred rand [R200] in a month. Because afterwards you will be just, [be] washing it and putting in some treatment. That's it. [Nonzuzo]

So finances are also important factors in the types of hairstyle chosen by the participants and costs influence how often they do their hair or renew their hairstyles.

Whatever hairstyle a girl wants to do, she has to either buy a hairpiece and then pay someone to do her hair, or rather go to a salon where everything will be provided. But, you'll just settle the amount they want you to pay. So, basically it [money] does play an important role which style you want. Because the amount of hairstyles vary. It's not the same for each and every hairstyle; they are different. [Nonzuzo]

The last hairstyle I had was short hair; cut hair and I dyed it and there was a bit of S-curl, I think. I have changed from that because I wanted to grow my hair. And the reason I put on an extension braid is because...okay, it's been trending. I have been seeing it a lot and I'm like: "That is nice. It is very nice!" And



the fact that I am trying to grow my hair makes it easier to maintain as well. Because hair that doesn't have extensions is very hard to maintain and stuff. [Karabo]

## Concluding Remarks

Using an interpretivist approach, we aim to reveal young African women's everyday experiences in relation to hair, including their everyday practices in caring and maintaining it. We are also interested in the meanings that they attach to hair in their dialogues and their practices. It is clear from the narratives that for young African Black women, hair is more than just hair: it impacts on their everyday evaluations of themselves—how they perceive and feel about themselves. It is also about how they are perceived by others: they believe that hair says a lot about a person and, as a result, most go out of their way to maintain their hair and take pride in it.

Black women attach various social meanings to hair, including a sense of identity. Historically, hair symbolized for Africans who they were and where they came from. But, with the advent of slavery and colonization, the natural relationship of Africans to their hair became challenged. Especially for African Black women, the relationship since then has been like a roller coaster ride—lunging between positive and negative emotions as they move between trying, on the one hand, to obtain straight hair in order to fit into Western societies' assessment of beauty, and, on the other hand, trying to appreciate their natural hair. Whereas historical, as well as current discourses link hair to race and promote the idea that the desired norm for Africans is the straight

silky hair associated with Western looks, the narratives of young Black African women participants in this study show that there is also a return to, and appreciation of, natural African Black hair. Their ideas about "good" and "bad" hair are not, as the literature suggests, arranged along racial or cultural divides; it is, more simply and *a*-culturally, about the genetics of having healthy hair versus weak hair. So there is less evidence in our narratives indicating that the normative notion of Western beauty is as strong as suggested in the literature reviewed for this article. Rather, notions of beauty are quite eclectic and both African and Western forms of beauty are appreciated.

Hair is undoubtedly intertwined with conceptions of beauty—we think this is likely to be true for all women, not just African women. African Black women spend large amounts of money caring for and maintaining hair, and so do White women. Some of this time and money is spent by young women participants on weave extensions, braid extensions, and the use of chemical hair relaxers—all of which indicate that straight hair remains an important choice for some young women. But, our research indicates that this is more a matter of personal choice, and that young women move between more traditional African styles and Western styles as they wish. They are free, they follow a wide variety of fashions, and they opt for styles that make them look more beautiful. This does not fit with the idea that, via the hair-related discourses and practices, African Black women emulate whiteness and express symbolic self-hate. For participants in this research, hairstyle choices and practices do *not* signal a betrayal of their African roots.

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