Malika Anderson

Linear Hyperessay

Discourse Analysis: Participatory Culture

The Politics of Black Hair and the New Natural Hair Movement

Women’s struggle with identity in all aspects of society is a social and political issue that is on going. Strides have been made to combat some of these struggles for autonomy and acknowledgement in the public sphere, and progress has come from this; however, this is not an indication that women’s roles in society are not still bounded in many ways. One way in particular that women’s identities are bounded by society is the constant focus on beauty as a measure of our value. For women of all colors and ethnicities, beauty has become a way in which we are defined in society—by ourselves as well as by other people. For Black women in particular, much of the focus on our beauty is attributed to our hair. Black hair is part of the Black identity because it is so unique in comparison to hair of people of other races: it is an identifier of African ancestry. For some people, this is problematic because of the social, political, and economic implications that are associated with Blackness as in identity. But for other, this is a reason to take pride. In recent years, many Black women have begun to take pride in their hair and Black hair has become popularized, inciting the most recent Natural Hair Movement. The Natural Hair Movement of today is not the first, which is why I refer to it as the New Natural Hair Movement. To be clear, this is not to say that there were not women who took pride in their hair before this movement nor is it to say that all women who do not wear their hair naturally are ashamed of their hair; however, in the past few years this natural hair craze has taken over the Black hair care world.

Black hair comes in many different forms and textures. Our hair can range from loose, silky, waves and curls to tighter, coarser coils, or anywhere in between. Our hair can be thick or thin. There is a lot of versatility within Black hair, despite the common misconception that there is not. To be natural is defined differently by different people. It is agreed upon that to be natural means that your hair has not been chemically processed by straightening relaxers, often called “perms” or “texturizers.” But some people believe that if one uses heat to straighten their hair, by using heat, that person is not “natural.” There is often disagreement with this because if a Black person whose hair has not been chemically processed uses heat to straighten their hair; it will go back to its natural form as soon as moisture touches it. Because of this, there is versatility as well as some divide within the movement—which is common of most social movements.

Some women, including myself, have joined the movement because they want to embrace themselves and their Blackness. They think their hair is beautiful the way it grows from their head and do not feel, or no longer feel, the need to chemically alter the texture of it. For some women, it is about feeling good in your own skin and not giving in to beauty standards set by a society that has never accepted Blackness in the first place. Some women who are natural or have gone natural for this reason straighten their hair with heat sometimes. Some do not. Some women who fall under this category have had natural hair their entire lives and some have had relaxers in the past but have made the decision to start over by cutting their hair off—often called “the big chop”—and growing out their natural tresses. Some women are a part of the natural hair movement for health reasons. Relaxers often damage hair, making it dry, thin and susceptible to breaking off and falling out. Because of this some women no longer want to relax their hair. Some women that relax their hair have been doing so for their entire lives and do not know what their natural hair looks like. Because of this, some women go natural because they want to know what their natural hair looks like. Some women join the natural hair movement simple for aesthetic reasons—they love the way their natural hair looks as opposed to straightened or chemically processed hair. In addition to this, some women find it easier to take care of their natural hair than to take care of chemically processed hair. Some women have joined the movement for no particular reason.

In the 17th century, white European imperialists began taking voyages to the continent of Africa, in which they first encountered Black/African people. When the Europeans reached African land and came across African peoples, they observed them through Eurocentric lenses and made decisions about what they believed African peoples to be based on their own standards of livelihood. The Europeans witnessed African women partaking in daily activity while in the nude, eating raw meats, and practicing their tribal traditions. To the Europeans, this way of living was disgusting. According to the Europeans: the nudity of the African women was evidence of their promiscuity, eating raw meats was evidence of their savagery and animalistic nature, and speaking their native tongue, practicing non Judeo-Christian religions, and partaking in other native or tribal activities were evidence of their heathenism. All of these ideas attribute to the justification and origin of the Black female body being hypersexualized, objectified, and viewed by Europeans as immoral. While the Europeans were observing the behavior of the African women, they also took note of their physical appearance—they had different (darker) skin, hair texture, and body types than that of white women. The Europeans did not view these differences simply as differences, but as evidence of inferiority, which resulted in African women being viewed as physically subordinate as well. Because the African women were unable to meet the European constructed standards of white beauty, they were classified as “ugly” and grotesque. Over the next few centuries, these ideas were (and continue to be) spread and perpetuated in Western Europe as well as here, in the United States.

Originally, Black hair was merely an indictor of African ancestry; therefore, it was also an indicator of Black identity. The concept of Black identity in itself is political because of the historical and contemporary context in which Black people existed and exist in American society. Blackness, and therefore Black hair, has long been associated with inferiority because the notion of “Black inferiority” was used as a justification for slavery and its aftermath (Black codes, Jim Crow, etc.). During slavery, Black hair was politicized. Many field slaves were made to cover their hair while house slaves were made to wear wigs made from white people’s hair. After slavery, Blacks had societal pressure to straighten their hair in order to assimilate into white America.

The idea of Black women’s physical differences being ugly on their own but especially in comparison to white women brought a lot of focus to Black women’s hair. It is noticeably different than white women’s hair and in no way meets white standards of beauty preserved by society because of this. The constant perpetuation of the idea that Blackness is ugly—whether it is by slave-owners of the 19th century, random individuals of society, or contemporary mass media—has had, and still has psychological effects on all members of society. The result of these ideas being passed on for so long can be seen in forms of self-hate and internalized oppression by some members of the Black community. If Black women are taught their entire lives that they are ugly because of their skin, hair, and body types, why wouldn’t they try to change these things? Women are constantly defined and valued by society by their perceived aesthetical beauty. Thus, if Black women want to be viewed as beautiful by their white counterparts, the first thing to be done is to straighten those naps and turn that “ugly” hair into something “beautiful.” And that is exactly what many Black women did. They wanted to look as close to white as possible because whiteness was and still is considered the standard. By being closer to whiteness aesthetically (and in other ways such as mannerism and speech) Black people were thought to be more respectable. Because of this, in the late 19th and early 20th century, many Black people found ways to lighten their skin, and straighten their hair.

But not all Black people wanted to be respectable in the eyes of whites. Many Black people did not believe in assimilation into white culture and would no longer accept the ideas about beauty that had been constructed by whites and forced onto Black people for so long. Some of the Black people that felt this way were a part of the Black Power Movement of the 60’s and 70’s. During this time period, the first recognized Natural Hair Movement in the United States was taking place. In the mid-1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was transforming into the Black Power Movement, a new emphasis on embracement and celebration of Black identity came into focus. Black people involved with this movement refused to have their voices taken away any longer and were ready to embrace their autonomy and shed the identities given to them by whites. Black men and women wore afros as a “way of showing their visible connection to their African ancestors and Blacks through the diaspora.” Many different types of Black people, from regular civilians, to celebrities began wearing afros.

Members of the Black Panther Party—key members of the Black Power Movement—also wore Afros and because of this afros became associated with militancy in the eyes of whites, making people who wore afros targets for arrest and harassment by white law enforcement and individuals. Some people believe this is part of the reason the Natural Hair Movement of this time began to die down in the late 70s and ended in the 80s. In addition to this, natural hairstyles such as braids and cornrows were not welcome in the work place, causing many Black people to go back to straightening their hair.

It is clear from this history that Black hair has always been political; however, the relationship between Black hair and the Politics of Respectability is arguably the most political aspect of Black hair. The Politics of Respectability refers to marginalized groups policing themselves and other members of their demographic on basis of morality, propriety, and aesthetics in order to show their social values as being continuous and compatible with dominant culture rather than challenging the majority for its failure to accept differences. Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois believed that by adhering to respectability politics, whites would recognize our worth as humans and begin to give us equal treatment. The issue with this is the dismissal of the inherent racism and internalized-oppression within this way of thinking. One group of people should not have to alter their behavior and appearance to coincide with that of another in order to given human rights. Black hair ties into this because Black hair is completely different than white hair; therefore, it is not respectable. One cannot wear natural Black hair and simultaneously “blend in” with whites. Black hair was, and sometimes still is, said to be “unkempt” and “unprofessional.” Black people have historically and in recent times been kept from or fired from jobs for wearing their natural hair. This sends a clear message: Only straight hair is “professional.” Black hair has also been viewed as a sign a bad hygiene. This sends a clear message as well: If one’s hair is not straight, it is dirty. These classifications that have historically been associated with Black hair were created as a way to police Black identity. By teaching Black people that their hair is not good enough, the white oppressor has used Black hair and respectability politics as politics tools to perpetuate self-hatred within the Black community.

There are a lot of efforts already being made in attempt to educate people about Black hair, the history and politics of Black hair, and why movements such as the current Natural Hair Movement are important on an individual level as well as to the Black community as a whole. People have written books about the topic; people have started campaigns to bring awareness to all people about the current Natural Hair Movement and its significance; people have started hair blogs that educate people on care and health of Black hair as well as encourages women who have yet to embrace their natural hair to do so. All of these things are important in terms of educating people on the movement and adding to the conversation and progression of the movement.

Works Cited

Banks, Ingrid. Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness. New York: New York UP, 2000. Print.

Byrd, Ayana D., and Lori L. Tharps. Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America. New York: St. Martin's, 2001. Print.

Roberts, Tonya. "5 Trends Set to Shape the Black Haircare Market in the Next 5 Years." 5 Trends Set to Shape Black Haircare in the Next 5 Years. Mintel, 23 Sept. 2014. Web. 10 May 2015.

"The Changing Business of Black Hair." Unruly. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 May 2015.