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‘Good Hair’ and ‘Bad Hair’ in the Construction of  
Black Women’s Identities

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## DEDICATION

To Susan, who taught me to see my own invisible knapsack

To Anna, who keeps teaching me the beauty of discourse

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## INTRODUCTION

In Nina Simone's brilliant song *Ain't Got No... I've Got Life*<sup>1</sup>, hair is the very first thing that is mentioned when it comes to acknowledging what she has actually *got*. What seems like yet another part of our natural body has been powerfully mobilized as a signifier of cultural identity, of social worth. While this fact barely reverberates within the literature available on the body, the self and identity, we constantly experience its effects in our everyday lives. Hair is a collective identity marker whose experiential horizon is even shared by those who do not have it due to several reasons. What separates it from other parts of our body is its capacity to grow from it, inhabiting a space between the body's inside and its outside. The texture of hair as both a genetic extension of our physical body and an autonomous, highly malleable material predestines it to become a powerful marker of identity and difference. It invites creativity and constraint, versatility and containment. As a mobile signifier it caters to all sorts of voices that attempt to exploit these characteristics to reinforce their ideological ideals.

The following study is fully devoted to hair as a means of signification. It is mainly interested in the way hair is mobilized when it comes to gender, race and beauty in everyday life. My main assumption is that if hair is really *that* culturally powerful it must be a mediator of social pressure and struggle. Consequentially, it must be rewarding to look at it critically, from a counter-hegemonic cultural studies perspective. The question at heart of my endeavor, then, is: How does hair mediate experiences of exclusion versus inclusion, belonging versus otherness? In narrowing down my focus I decided to zoom in on black women's hairstyle culture, and came up with a more particular example in the localized context of the USA. In a recent documentary entitled *Good Hair* we are exposed to a semi-educational 'hair journey' whose primary intention is to explain the reason for black women's 'obsession' with 'good hair'. The movie's approach towards this phenomenon has stimulated controversy within the black community due to the

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<sup>1</sup>See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUCXI2BIUOQ>, last accessed 19 December 2010. In the course of this work I will use in-text citation for direct and indirect references made to source texts. Additional information will be supplied in footnotes.

number of references made to the legacy of slavery and the stigmatization of black hair as naturally ugly. This conjures up the question whether black women's eagerness to attain 'good hair', which is mostly straight hair that looks European, is yet another expression of submission to white supremacy. According to the movie's portrayal the quest for such 'good hair' involves intricate and expensive treatments, might be as well read as its exact opposite; status acceleration by means of a new black consumerism whose focus on 'looking good' can be understood in terms of (financial) liberation and choice. In the light of this colonial subtext, *Good Hair* lends itself to a discussion from a cultural studies perspective. I will look at what seems to be at stake in recent black women's hair struggles in the US and attempt to disentangle the complex relationship between 'good hair' and a racist, Eurocentric history of beauty.

Arguably, hair struggles have to be conceived in terms of perpetuation and challenge to colonial notions of beauty at the same time. From this perspective, hairstyle practices can be understood as performative acts which inscribe the body with meanings reminiscent of the past and anticipatory of the future. Chapters 1 and 2 of this study are thus devoted to developing such an approach to hair in discourse. By understanding hair as phenomenon between flesh and fashion, I will provide a theoretical framework which is able to capture the oppositional ways in which hair might be functionalized in discourse. Most basically, depending on whether we regard hair as a vulnerable part of the body or as a raw material for creative expression we might come up with quite conflicting notions of 'good hair'. These conflicting notions are often at the center of heated debates, as we will see in the example of *Good Hair*.

When the flesh/fashion framework is set to use in chapters 3 and 4, I am aware that this distinction is made provisionally, and that in order to arrive at a satisfying, humane and desirable notion of 'good hair' we have to acknowledge the entanglements of the flesh and fashion distinction and embrace ambivalence. Yet in order to show the need for ambivalence as an opportunity to overcome white privilege, one has to understand the currency in which colonial discourses of hair have been dealt in the past and how their legacy might resurface in the present.

We have to understand that white supremacy has been most effective in mobilizing hair as a marker of identity and difference. Analogous to the currency of black skin, the African follicle has been stigmatized and devalued as the epitome of eternal ugliness. In natural opposition to this we find the white, relatively straight hair texture as an expression of cultivation and normality. The legacy of this powerful dichotomy has evolved within the field of black identity struggles. This impact on recent discourse will be discussed in chapter 3. On the basis of this evaluation of its historical ballast, the issue of black women's hair in popular discourse will be tackled extensively in chapter 4. The leading question throughout this project is whether recent hairstyle debate comes up with a notion of 'good hair' that does justice to a liberating concept of beauty as variety and choice, or whether it reproduces a dominant concept along the lines of straight, European-like hair.

What I expect to find is that conflicting notions of 'good hair' exist next to each other, yet that there are tendencies in the way these notions are facilitated by different media. What is yet to be ascertained is whether *Good Hair* in its orientation towards a heterogeneous mass audience is more likely to support the portrayal of the dominant 'straight hair' paradigm, and whether more 'ordinary' discursive spaces such as the talk show and online debate lend themselves to more diversified approaches to hair. Even though I expect that *YouTube* discourse online invites a more diverse audience to participate in the negotiation of alternatives to the 'straightness' paradigm, we have to put into consideration that *YouTube* might as well be limited to a relatively small 'black hair community' which is already interested in challenging persisting regimes of beauty. Whether we succeed in balancing the 'good hair' stakes of flesh and fashion and embrace a concept of beauty that is oriented towards diversity, might be as much determined by each person's individual effort to reject white privilege and embrace ambivalence. This is as uncomfortable as it is necessary to arrive at a stage where black hair can eventually be free from its colonial entanglements.

## **1. STUDYING THE BODY AND HAIR IN REPRESENTATION**

In the following section, I want to sketch out the theoretical context in which the concern about ‘good hair’ was born and in which it is conceptually embedded. I will introduce the question of identity as it has been problematized in cultural studies and as it comes to be deployed in this study. More precisely, this chapter will discuss the theoretical implications of the ‘body turn’ in cultural studies, in the course of which the body was discovered as a site of discourse, power, meaning, and identity (Shilling 1993: 2). Theorizing the body in this respect has brought about an invaluable array of suggestions on the relationship between the body and the self that often stress identities as fluent, in motion and never complete. In cultural studies, the body has come to be understood as ‘unfinished biological and social phenomenon’ (Shilling 1997: 82) in the sense that it inevitably participates in the cultural process of signification, of meaning making. How bodies become meaningful and what meanings are at stake, however, has not only turned out as highly complex but rather ambiguous matter. Depending on how it is approached, one body characteristic might have several conflicting meanings.

This study wants to get to the core of the cultural polyvalency of hair. It thus calls into question hair as a signifier in popular discourse, representing various notions of the self and cultural identities. In cultural studies, the term discourse is used to refer to the contingent networks of cultural powers that produce certain representations of the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’. Most central to this approach is the understanding of discursive processes as processes of struggles in which dominant versions of the normal come to be negotiated, incorporated or resisted. Discourse, in this work, is understood as the process of signification whereby meanings about our bodies and selves are negotiated. Discursive powers are the ideological drivers of so-called signifying practices, practices that bestow our everyday objects and experiences with meaning referring to existing networks of domination and liberation. In discourse, we make our bodies and selves mean by reading and inscribing them according to the intuitive logics of our cultural memory. This memory makes our life world feasible in terms of potentials and constraints. The material body comes to life via its cultural inscription, and its

subsequent readability as, i.e. ‘beautiful’, ‘different’, or ‘chaste’. It is on the basis of such ascriptions we are enabled to perceive and perform distinctions between ourselves and others. It is from a pre-defined vantage point of our subjectivity that we engage in discourse to generate meaning about the world.

One of the central aims of this study is to assess the material effects discursive powers have exerted on Black female identities over time. As has been the main consensus of feminist and postcolonial critics, a past of misogynist, racist Eurocentrism whose ideological apparatus has constructed *Black femininity* as unfavorable subject position does not go without stigmatization of the bodies at stake. Hair and its close attachment to genetic ‘truth’ are at the very core of this stigmatization. This, as has been argued, is mainly due to our cultural training, which has encouraged the reading of biological characteristics in the vocabulary of misogyny, racism, Eurocentrism.

Whereas the need to trace and challenge the legacies of misogynist colonialist history still prevalent in notions of the self and difference today has long been stressed in feminist and postcolonial literature, representations of hair in the media seem to remain remarkably immune to this line of criticism. Many volumes promising a ‘general’ historical approach towards hair or beauty actually present historical approaches to *white* hair or beauty (for instance Corson 1965, McCracken 1995). From what is absent in such dominant representations of hair, one can see that black hair has been naturalized as different. Black hair history, as represented in Corson, for instance, does not partake in “the first thousand years” of “fashions in hair” (1965).

### **Understanding ways of becoming**

Thinking about identity, Stuart Hall proclaims, is to think about its “production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 2007: 51). In order to do that, representation supplies us with versions of reality, as well as with suggestions how to read them as normal. It is important to note that these suggestions are far from monosemic – they are readable in different ways from different positions – they are to be



negotiated in the process of reading, which, in cultural studies gains major attention.

Reality as something that is made meaningful from the perspectives of various reading positions is a powerful idea, as it dismantles every representation as the ideologically entrenched product of a certain discourse. Furthermore, it stresses the notion of the reader as the co-author of a text. What is suggested as a dominant meaning of a text does not always converge with what the reader eventually makes of it. From this perspective, top-down reading suggestions are somewhat undermined by the reader's own potential to subversion and resistance. The powerful notion of discourse and the counter-hegemonic potential of the reading positions are concepts that have been influential in cultural studies. They suggest that everyday life is the site in which political struggles come to be fought via representation.

Along these lines, there is a broad consensus that identity is something discursive, something that can be imagined as 'work in progress'. Attempts to understand what kind of 'work' is at stake in this progress, however, have varied widely. For instance, who tells us what our agenda should look like and how to define our working tasks? Are we employers or employees, freelancers or working class? Is it possible to fully organize ourselves, and if yes, under what conditions? Is it more liberating to just 'drop out', living on the streets far off identity civilization? Yet the most important question for cultural studies, which are primarily interested in the notion of empowerment, might be: How can we understand our identity work so that we can come to terms with it in a humane way?

In the light of such questions, identity turns out as a field of power relations, as an integral element of what Paul du Gay has called the *circuit of culture*. According to this model, identity is yet another moment in the intertwined dimensions of production, representation, regulation and consumption of meaning. If we choose to study the nature of identity we actually choose to study its relations to production, representation, regulation and consumption (Woodward 2007: 13).

## Studying Identity for Democracy

It has been one of the explicit concerns in cultural studies to make transparent and challenge hegemonic ‘regimes of truth’ that work against democratization and diversity. Consequentially, there has been much interest in the study of the popularized, the trivialized and the marginalized in terms of their hegemonic construction as ‘other’. The study of identity thus, as understood by cultural studies, and as implied in my approach, is the study of power relations that create and naturalize sameness and difference, that produce and perpetuate logics of privilege and marginalization, of dominance and oppression.

The initial appeal of these neat, seemingly unproblematic dichotomies should not mislead one into assumptions about theoretical homogeneity. While the attention to the historically popularized, trivialized and marginalized is a basic ethical principle in cultural studies, two conflicting epistemological positions, whose implications are as equally plausible as they are incompatible, have evolved. For the sake of contextualizing the notion of the self that is to be implied later on, I shall briefly discuss these the two epistemological positions at stake.

The first epistemological position stresses subjectification as the *result* of normalizing regimes that govern the human being (Rose 1998: 130). This proposition follows a radical historicizing of subjectivity as meticulously practiced in Foucault’s work. Arguing that “the ways in which humans give meaning to experience have their own history” (Rose 1998: 130), human experience must be a *product* of history. Interpellation is thus the product of highly rationalized schemes that – according to conventionalized objectives (Rose names femininity, civility, pleasure (ibid.)) – discipline us by means of highly complex cultural technologies, i.e. school, church, medicine etc. The resulting question of identity, then, concerns the way technologies of discipline work to regulate and police identification. This so-called “perspective of government” (Rose 1998: 130, Foucault 1991) has come under critique precisely because of its top-down logics and the “absence of attention to what might in any way interrupt, prevent or disturb the smooth insertion of individuals into the subject positions constructed by these discourses” (Hall 1998: 11, also see Grosz 1994: 147).

The second epistemological position follows a line of argument that is more interested in the microcosm of the individual's own needs, desires and experiences that induce them to make meaning and identity. In psychoanalysis as well as in Nietzsche's idea of the *power to will*, this focus on bottom-up psychosomatic capacity stress the energy and impetus of the individual in meaning making (Grosz 1994: 148). Identity in this sense results from our drives and desires being deferred, projected and transferred to the realm of the social, where they re-enact our intrinsic constraints and potentials in an institutionalized shape. Even for approaches outside the classical psychoanalytic paradigm, this approach certainly highlights the need to turn to people's realities and constraints – not in their structural sense as a simple “medium on which power operates and through which it functions” (Grosz 1994: 146) – but as agents and participants in culture and representation. The kind of criticism launched at this conceptual agency position is obvious – too much trust in the human ‘will to power’ is suspicious of going megalomaniac or going metaphysical, suggesting ‘something inherent’ which magically enables us to overcome all constraints of socio-cultural history.

While history offers an ample selection of examples how the blindness of the past can foster extremism and populism, it has also been argued that it needs a fair amount of ‘blindness’ for us to be able to act. The point is that most emancipation movements could not have been successful had their leaders focused on restriction, domination and what is unlikely to happen due to historical contingencies. Even if the accusation of populism is justified, there is something about ‘strategic blindness’ that enables us to think about emancipation (Singer 2005). Arguably, the constant awareness of the reality of social control and constraint works as self-fulfilling prophecy highlighting the inevitability of subjectification in any moment of being. The epistemological agency position in cultural studies does the reverse; focusing on the individual *experience* level of structural inequalities and developing strategies of resistance and empowerment from ‘below’.

The two conceptual stances discussed above suggest two different interests in the body – they start, so to speak, at the two oppositional ends of embodiment. While Foucault's approach towards embodiment is credited as one of the first to consider

the body as central site of identity (Gatens 1992: 128), we have seen how his suggestion of the body as a kind of ‘medium’ shaping the individual according to governmental calculus has remained controversial (Grosz 1994: 146). Undoubtedly, however, the idea of the ‘docile body’ as disciplined and sanctioned, and thus essentially *cultured*, is a remarkable touchstone in a broader sociological turn towards the politicized body (Gatens 1992: 128).

In the context of second wave feminism, the notion of the docile body was crucial to the rethinking, the denaturalization of a private/public dichotomy culminating in the groundbreaking conclusion that bodily practices are inevitably political. This shift of paradigm challenged the previous notion that the phenomenology of the body ‘belonged’ to the realm natural sciences, which viewed the body “as the pre-social, biological basis on which the superstructures of the self and society are founded” (Shilling 1997: 73).

In pre-Foucauldian sociology the naturalistic body had hardly been challenged, but entered sociological theory in the shape of functionalism: “Sociologists were thus able to draw rather obvious comparisons between organic systems equilibrium and the equilibrium of the social system in relation to its environment” (Turner 1992: 9). Apart from the development of organic body metaphors employed to describe social systems, the body had played a rather marginal role in sociological theory (ibid.; Frank 1992; Shilling 2007: 78).

Gatens (1992: 121) and Frank (1992) argue that one of the most obvious reasons for this is the traditional male-centeredness of cultural and social theory; issues of the bodies were easily trivialized and excluded from ‘serious’ discourse by patriarchal patterns of naturalization. As postcolonial theory has stressed, trivialization also follows the logics of white privilege, which facilitated Eurocentric thought, implicitly silencing the racialized other. Noticing the absence of this (gendered, racialized) other went hand in hand with noticing the presence – and in fact, domination – of white maleness in all social and cultural spheres. The new Foucauldian interest in bodies as the results of cultural power plays encouraged much feminist work theorizing body styling as altogether serious practice. Simultaneously, ‘the body’ as a somewhat totemic category (Hall

1998:11) was embraced by social theory due to its liberating potential. After all, imagining the self as inhabiting an unrestrictedly malleable body opened up a whole new way of negotiating identities. Finally, subjectivities could be imagined beyond their seemingly ‘natural’ space. A perspective of the ‘government’ – as reductive as it might appear from the vantage point of third wave feminism – was a crucial conceptual step enabling researchers to make visible, to call into question narratives of oppression resulting from the inequitable distribution of power.

Constructivism liberated sociological and culturalist thinking in that it pointed towards the relativity of knowledge. The idea that knowledge is the result of highly contextualized processes of classification and simplification somewhat shattered the authority of meta-narratives that had previously been accepted as adequate explanations of the world and human existence. If knowledge can never keep the promise it inevitably makes – that it is possible to ascertain reality thoroughly and objectively– the superiority of naturalist knowledge about the body is diminished

### **Embodiment in cultural studies**

As concerns the ‘body turn’ in cultural studies, it was by means of appropriation that the notion of discursive identity was celebrated. As much as Foucault’s radical constructivism was embraced as a framework challenging essentialism, it is charged for the unproblematic fashion by which individuals are thought to enter subject positions. Most basically, his genealogical approach is blamed for “revealing little about why it is that certain individuals occupy some subject positions rather than others” (Hall 1998: 10). The core of this criticism has been the conceptual condensation of subject and subject position, denying the discrepancy between the *potential* for a body/subject position to be infinitely malleable, and the *politics of actualization* of this potential.

According to Hall, Foucault ignores the latter when he claims that “nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as a basis for self-recognition” (Foucault 1977: 153), arguing that Foucault’s invaluable insight into the discursive instability – what he calls volatility – of bodies does not prevent us

from *imagining* it as a stable. Arguably, the body volatile does not annihilate its ideological function as a signifier of stable selves, and “this function cannot simply be dismissed because, as Foucault effectively shows, it is not true” (Hall 1998: 11). Crudely put, the attempt to convince the organizers of pro-femininity workshops that their idea of ‘feminine power’ is constructed and therefore due to change, is likely to fail.

Hall’s critique is indicative of a more ‘moderate’ approach to constructivism, which evolved due to the problematic political implications of radical anti-essentialism. As cultural studies theorists have argued, boundless malleability – as liberating as it might look at first glance – inevitably shatters the idea of ‘shared experience’ as a source of oppression and resistance. The notion of unlimited discursive construction trivializes the relevance of group identities as well as it belittles experiences *in the flesh* (Singer 2005). This is crucially at odds with the academic project of cultural studies, which seeks to make transparent relations of power, structures of oppression and seeks to *empower* politics of difference.

The appropriation of constructivist ideas, however, turned out to be highly conducive to this political agenda, as it allowed for a view on the body as a ‘text’ on which contingent cultural narratives of the self are written. As an important aberration from Foucault, the *negotiation* of these narratives of the self were taken seriously in terms of the subject’s bottom-up capacities of meaning making. Making the body mean became a matter of *both*, hegemonic discursive ‘governing’ and the subject’s strategic potential of incorporation and resistance via reading. In short, I interpret the cultural studies interest in embodiment as a two-fold, somewhat conflicting approach, which mobilizes the apparent incongruity of constructivism and essentialism for the same ethical objective:

First, the strategic investment in constructivism destabilizes what seems stable: Seemingly ‘neutral’ politics of top-down hegemonic discourse are analyzed in their ideological making. They are revealed as ‘regimes of truth’, which naturalize and normalize the body in certain ways. In this respect, then, cultural studies aims at denaturalizing what seems natural, pointing to seemingly ‘natural facts’ as actually made by contingent discourses. By the same token, it deploys strategic

essentialism in order to take seriously our everyday valuing of these narratives as a source of 'truth'. In other words, even though the logics of the 'normal' might be discursively constructed, they are nevertheless used as points of reference constituting our sense of belonging. From the perspective of 'culture as ordinary', the relations of everyday life are analyzed in their political potential, as a resource of negotiating and challenging hegemonic ideals.

The dialectic nature of these powers has been famously modeled in the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay/Hall et al. 1997, Hall 1998, Woodward 2007, Shilling 2007), which presents several 'snap shots' in the continuous process of meaning making. Embodiment, as it is implied here, can never be finished as long as we participate in culture, nor can it ever be conceived beyond conflict. The cultural studies strategic schizophrenia discussed above has been central to a number of post-Foucault approaches; I want to draw on Judith Butler's work in particular, because her notion of performativity helps us to understand systems of representation as repetitions with differences, representations as indicators of what has come to be seen as 'natural', and representations as potential expressions of resistance.

Butler's main thesis "that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1990: 34) has been particularly helpful in identifying the mutually constituent aspects of *constraint* and *becoming* in this respect. Arguing that it is always in a sphere of power and restriction where rules of the self are generated, it is this very sphere of restriction that enables identification (Butler 1993: 95). Seemingly 'natural' ways to read and perform the body are initially problematized in terms of their cultural contingency, as they recursively draw on our cultural memory, recovering sources of belonging. Simultaneously, there is the very performative act in which these sources of belonging are actualized, reified via embodiment.

Consequentially, there is no way of seeing identity other than in terms of *becoming*, in its dynamic formation, which – as Butler clarifies above – implies the existence of *constraints*. Simultaneously it puts major emphasis on spatiality as the sphere in which becoming materializes. In cultural studies terms, the

contingency between spatial strategies and systems of representation comes to be conceptualized as the point of interpellation, of identification. Performativity somewhat stresses that bodies are inevitably spatial as well as they are cultural. Not only do we thus engage in the continual process of signification, but we inevitably invest in this process – by means of corporeal strategies which ‘urge’ us into spatiality, into the struggle between potential and constraint.

For my own approach, then, I want to adopt performativity as a concept which seeks to ascertain the dynamics of being and becoming, materiality and symbolic in the representation of hair. It reminds us of the impossibility to study the body independently of the self, as it constantly reminds us of the mutual constitution of meaning and doing. From the methodological perspective of performativity, there is no way of regarding hair without history, hair deprived of any cultural valency, challenging a long tradition of “non-body bias” in the Humanities (Frank 1992: 36).

### **Strategic Essentialism: A pathway to marginalized identity**

While feminist critique has rightly been celebrated as vital influence on the body turn, the impact of postcolonial theory as a theory of marginalized bodies and selves often goes unnoticed in sociological accounts, which often equate “bringing bodies back in” with “bringing women back in” (Frank 1992: 41).

There is reason to believe that when Western feminism rediscovered the significance of the female body, what they found was a white body, not a black one. The body political – entwined, as it is, with other spheres such as home, gender, status – takes the notion of the body to a level on which it is inevitably ‘racialized’. While mainstream feminism fought to end female oppression by men, the underlying notion of “woman” presumed a western woman oppressed by a western man. Black feminism rightly criticized this universalizing of white experience, pointing towards the fact that bodies are constituted not only by gender but – equally so – by race and ethnicity. Bodies are racialized as well as they are gendered.



Along the line of Tracey Patton, I wish to contend that this ‘hidden’ white perspective can only be challenged when we look at white privilege as a construction which emerged in the course of colonial history. Arguably, it needs a quantum of Afrocentrism, a focus on the black body as legitimate body in order to imagine black identity *beyond* its relation to whiteness. It is one of the central missions in postcolonial theory to rehabilitate previously ‘othered’ subjectivities as independent identities *next to* instead of opposite to dominant subject positions. There is something in Afrocentrism that might help restructure racist taxonomies of otherness in terms of such a horizontal, equal relationship. On the other hand, however, Afrocentrism offers the same conceptual dangers as Eurocentrism. What it implies is an essentialist claim of the ‘black self’, which, though legitimating and embracing it, facilitates a vertical relationship of color, which merely inverts the hierarchies. Analogous to Eurocentric neutrality claims, the black subject is implied as the ‘natural’ center of investigation which contrasts against ‘other’ races.

What I suggest is a conscious use of modified Afrocentrism as a *provisional* safeguard against the stigmatization and victimization of black subjectivity. Incorporating the notion of the black body as natural resource for a self-determined participation in social discourse does not necessarily inflict its construction as essentially ‘African’. What I thereby propose is a framework which denaturalizes the romanticizing notion of an ‘organic community’ of ‘blackness’ by simultaneously acknowledging the *reality* of this category in social discourse. After all, *there is* a black community whose common experiences are to be taken seriously as authentic expressions of the participating selves. The conscious turn towards the lived experiences of black women and their meaning making strategies has been called *strategic essentialism*.

From a strategic essentialist point of view, we might look at black hair discourses ‘from below’, discourses that evolve in everyday life contexts and that might – even though not necessarily so – challenge dominant discourses. The main emphasis will be put on how these bottom-up discourses relate to structures of power – not the other way round. That way, black women’s identities are valued

in their potential to exert agency, not simply in terms of white, male determination from above.

Bringing bodies back in, then, actually reinforces the radical contextualization of identity and difference in their making. An interest in bodies as bodies cultural and bodies social enables theorists to make visible and challenge *all kinds of* structures of marginalization and privilege. They take into account that bodies have shaped and have been shaped in time and space and can therefore hardly be regarded as innocent. Bodies have histories and make histories. Bodies are inscribed – but not under conditions of their own making, as they evolve in an environment of pre-established cultural and social meaning. As bodies in representation, they actualize their contingent meanings. Furthermore, they are made liable as they engage in practices of inscription; they inscribe themselves and other bodies.

Bringing bodies back in, in this study, is bringing *Black American women* back in. The particular identificatory repertoire of this subject position is not drawn to the limelight as the deplorable *result* of colonial history. It is, first, to detect recursive representations of Black American female hair as normalizing ‘images of the past’, and second, to analyze strategies of actualization. This is to draw attention to the importance of previously marginalized bodies’ cultural *recreation* in late modern discourses of identification. There is a certain polysemic capacity of what Black American women read when they refer to ‘good hair’.

To ask what this polysemic capacity looks like is a feminist as well as it is a postcolonial project. The epistemological and methodological merits of such a theoretical perspective should be obvious: First, I choose it as a conscious focalizer on traditionally marginalized, silenced subject positions. Obviously, the theoretical and political horizons of feminist and postcolonial critique somewhat converge. They both work against the political mainstream that has been pervading the cultural logics of production, distribution and representation in patriarchal, racist societies. They stress representation as a central momentum in the negotiation of cultural power, as it provides us with narratives of the ‘normal’. Through it, there is the potential to both perpetuate and to challenge.

As a corollary of this, they equally stress discourse and body as constituting and perpetuating symbolic and material spaces of belonging, of privilege and oppression, and seek strategies to overcome persisting visions of ‘otherness’. Marginalized bodies – bodies inscribed as ‘other’ in white male societies – are re-read and rewritten. Performativity points to the constraints and potential inherent in such practices; there is the body as a seemingly malleable object, but there is also cultural memory in actualization of what kind of malleability is required for a successful subject position.

### **Conclusive thoughts**

By providing a brief discussion of the body in cultural theory, I wanted to demonstrate its eminent role in processes of becoming, thus qualifying it as an arena of meaning making, as a currency in which identity is dealt. What this theoretical enquiry into bodies in space, bodies in performance, should offer is a pathway to identity that suggests the radical politicizing of practices of representation as a tool to denaturalize what seems to be ‘obvious’ meanings.

I wanted to pinpoint the two extreme positions of top-down and bottom-up that have been developed in the course of a culturalist debate on identity, discussing why it is that these extreme positions have been sought to be reconciled. This study should be no exception in attempting to do justice to both, the structural nature of cultural memory and hegemonic restriction, and the creative potential given by bottom-up meaning making. Conceptually speaking, the project is to “negotiat(e) the recurrence of the image of the past while keeping open the question of the future” (Bhabha 1998: 59).

Arguably, then, there is a certain necessity to turn to the past to gain some insight into what it is that is remembered as recurrent images of ‘authentic’ identities. As Foucault’s work has shown, a genealogical turn to the past – one which refrains from belief in its essentialist value – does not imply to be a recourse to the comfortable realm of historical determinism. On the contrary, it is a prerequisite to counter-theorize historical inevitability, and in Grossberg’s words, to engage in “productive culture” (Grossberg 1998: 105).

The political demands underlying Grossberg's vision of "productive culture"<sup>2</sup> are an important key to understand the conceptual schizophrenia in cultural studies. Most basically, representation as the entanglements of discourse and material effects establishes the political valency of black hair. Turning to the work of representation from the vantage point of performativity, we can discover the *actual* in contingent images and the *contingency* in moments of its actualization. There is no past without its imagining from the present – there is no present that is not contingent on the past. This point of 'intersection' is where cultural memory meets 'productive culture' via a body in representation. The body and representation is, then, what needs to be taken to account in a theory of hair and in a cultural analysis of its negotiation.

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<sup>2</sup> Grossberg points to the conceptual dangers of remaining in what he calls a "modern" approach to identity as a currency of difference (Grossberg 1998: 97). Turning to the "other" in terms of its difference from the position of belonging, he suggests, means turning to its negativity, to its pastness, constructing a sense of difference which is, again, essentialist. What he suggests as "an identity worth struggling to create" is a version of *productive* culture, that is, realizing the creative potential of belonging "within the structured mobilities of contemporary life" (Grossberg 1998: 105).

## 2. BETWEEN *FLESH* AND *FASHION* - HAIR THEORY AT ITS CUTTING EDGES

As soon as we have become aware that differences in bodies are evaluated in different ways, we are likely to invest in a body that might be perceived as desirable, or at least acceptable. While notions of desirability and acceptability may vary according to social and cultural variables such as gender, age, or ethnicity, there is reason to believe that certain norms of desirability and acceptability have solidified in what has been called a ‘standard of beauty’, along the lines of which the making of ‘good’ bodies is achieved (Foster 2003: 93).

Undoubtedly, this also applies to hair, particularly when we hear people talk about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ hair. Judith Butler’s concept of performativity is helpful in understanding such tags as moments of reiteration within a persisting system of signification. The idea is that the hairstyles we perform when we have ‘good’ or ‘bad’ hair are referential to an assemblage of race and gender (Cheddie 2010). If we conceive of hairstyle as performative in Judith Butler’s terms, we might have a look at the “material or corporeal ground upon which gender [and race] operates as an act of cultural inscription” (Butler 1990: 186). What is at stake when we talk about the “material or corporeal ground” of hair? Does the performativity of hair allow for the same (physical, cultural, moral) reasoning as the rest of the body, or does the materiality of hair offer other suggestions?

In this chapter I want develop a perspective on hair which arrives from the previously discussed assumption that material space and cultural meaning are interrelated. If we take seriously the thesis of performativity, that everything physical is made meaningful in relation to its spatial order, it seems promising to look at the materiality/spatiality of hair as an indicator of its discursive and representational potential. My initial expectation is that the materiality of hair can only be understood in terms of its ambivalence. Located both within and outside of the body, there is a double spatiality involved. What I am interested in is how this double space of *interior* versus *exterior* results in hair’s discursive ambiguity. The basic question leading this approach is how the correspondence between material/spatiality and representational potential works. Arguably, the two dimensions relate to the two epistemological positions of essentialism and anti-

essentialism, leaving us with a binary approach towards hair. It is crucial to note that the two ends, though appearing as contradictory, are mutually constitutive and thus necessarily connected and intertwined. In what follows, I will analytically disentangle them *without* claiming their independence or detachment from each other. Step by step, hair discourse will show us that essentialist and anti-essentialist elements are always combined, and that the identification of binaries might help *trace* these elements, not propose their adequacy or sovereignty over others. The purpose of this binary framework, then, is not the invention of a totalizing matrix which classifies and thereby isolates discursive items for its own sake. Quite conversely, it is to show how such items conflate and dismantle opposing arguments when it comes to the negotiation of hair.

### **Knowledge, innocence, and the body cultural**

As previously discussed, bodies can never be thought as ‘neutral’ biological products as soon as they are part of the circuit of culture. They are made meaningful, and they are made meaningful in relation to something that is already ‘known’ due to our cultural memory. As representation works according to the rules of sameness and difference, similar material phenomena will be made meaningful in similar ways. As a consequence, different materials will lend themselves to different representations, whereas similar materials will converge with familiar concepts, creating a sense of comfort of the ‘already-known’. These dynamics are crucial when it comes to the representation of hair. What concepts are conjured up when we think about hairstyle is vital for understanding it as *politically* significant, as practice of liberation and empowerment, or as practices confined by hegemonic regimes.

In consequence, our bodies can never be innocent in the sense that they can never store ‘essential’ meaning. Rather, they acquire a sense of ‘naturalness’ via historically contingent discourses that naturalize our knowledge about what it means to be natural (Shilling 2007). Undoubtedly, sociological inquiry in ‘the body cultural’ has achieved a significant task in highlighting that whatever phenomenon has come to be identified can no longer be claimed to be neutral. It has suggested that once we know about the body it has lost its ideological innocence. Bodies, subsequently, become texts that are read by others, somewhat

in keeping with certain ‘reading guidelines’ offered by hegemonic truth regimes.

The ‘body cultural’ as an umbrella term in cultural and social theory has made us ‘clairaudient’ to this, as well as it has reminded us to remain skeptical towards naturalistic neutrality claims. From the perspective of the body cultural, ideas like genetic purity, naturalness, and authenticity appear as cultural constructions along the lines of ideological agendas. Most basically, it expresses a need to find orientation and continuity within a network of highly ambiguous, sometimes even random events in our existence, that drive us into simplification. ‘Knowledge’ about purity, naturalness and authenticity is a convenient and powerful means to achieve this. While there is nothing inherently problematic in gaining orientation as such, what the rethinking of a ‘body cultural’ demands from us is a certain destabilization of knowledge, a destabilization of what seems to be self-evident. It asks us to be aware that the ‘naturalness’ of bodily phenomenology is a chimera, that it is inevitably constructed in discourse.

Having said that the ‘body cultural’ approach celebrated in recent sociological and culturalist work features one major conceptual weakness in respect to my purpose. There is the focus on ‘the body’ as a somehow monolithic concept of all things physical, of the whole of human biological materiality (Featherstone/Hepworth et al. (eds.) 1992, Synnott 1993, Woodward (ed.) 2007). If we contend that objects in the world tend to be made meaningful in reference to their material functions, there are some difficulties with this approach. Analogous to the different functionalities our body parts may have, we are likely to find a remarkable complexity of cultural meanings based on the individual physical potentials and constraints they suggest. The body in representation opens up a vast field of signification reaching from more haptic (‘give me a hand’) to sensual (‘a heart of stone’) representations. When we look at these particular examples, we become aware that the ‘monolith’ body metaphor in sociology/anthropology is not able to explain existing relations between the concrete material functions and the cultural meanings at stake. This might be the reason why there is much more theoretical work to be found on ‘the body’ than on specific body phenomena.

As regards hair, there have been few but greatly varying sociological/anthropological attempts of explaining this specific type of embodiment. The most interesting commonality between these diverse approaches is the idea that hair takes a fringe position in relation to the body. It simply can be both, body and non-body, existing somewhere in-between, and this is where its powerful cultural value derives from.

What seems to be the conclusion from this argument is that even though hair grows from the physical body and is as such irrefutably part of the embodiment project, it is somewhat problematic to theorize hair solely in terms of its belonging to the body physical. If we look at hair beyond its organic, biological context, we find features, like its relative invulnerability and extreme malleability that would suggest its somewhat clear affiliation to other material realms. Having said that hair theory has to be inventive in capturing hair's schizophrenic nature as both bodily and 'beyond' the body<sup>3</sup>.

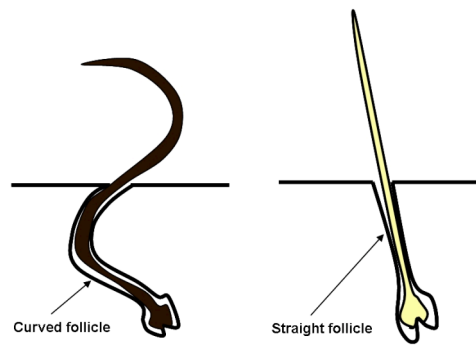
### **The double materiality/spatiality of hair**

As hair grows on our body, it is certainly located in it, yet it also grows from it, taking shape in its own right, in a space which is no longer bound to the logics of physical vulnerability. A cross-section scheme such as the one provided in figure 1 particularly highlights the double spatiality of hair. The vertical line defines the limit between two material spaces, two environments that hair inhabits: there is a space below and a space above skin level. This is what renders it materially ambivalent; hair is both the follicle and the filamentous outgrowth of the epidermis. Although literally routed in the body's interior (follicle), the part of hair extending above the skin's surface (hair shaft) is associated with the body's exterior and thus independent of bodily sensation. While inside of the body, hair belongs to the body, its extension above the skin's surface makes it almost invulnerable, and independent of it.

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<sup>3</sup>“Beyond the body” here refers to a physical dimension of hair that is associated with body-external materiality. This is a different notion of ‘beyond’ than used in Andrew Synnott’s hair theory of ‘oppositions’, in which ‘beyond’ is coterminous with ‘symbolic’ (Synnott 1993: 122). Beyondness in the way I use it here, is to refer to a type of materiality beyond the body. *The Body Social* (1993).





**figure 1: hair between the body's interior and exterior**

So the exact material location of hair is somehow ambiguous. In the beginning, hair is born in the very interior of the body, as a (curved or straight) follicle. Pushing up through the layers of dermis and epidermis, it passes the skin border, rising from the body's inside to the outside. We might take the schematic cross-section in its double signification as both representing material/biological space as well as cultural space of signification. The vertical line indicates the superficial epidermis, as well as the line of transition from the inside space to the outside space. Beyond the body surface, hair enters an altogether new material realm, all the while remaining anchored in its epidermal haven.

Depending on what space we refer to when we talk about hair, we emphasize different material qualities and thereby pronounce different characteristics of hair. If we refer to the material space of the follicle, our discursive constructions will differ from references made to the hair space above the skin. In the case of the former, we locate hair in the body's interior, while we are more likely to associate grown hair with the body's exterior. It is this material tension between follicle/interior and grown hair/exterior that is always present in cultural meanings of hair. Depending on the social and political context in which they evolve, hair discourses tend to pronounce one of these dimensions, even though the other one is *always* present as its constituent. In what follows I want to come up with a framework which is able to show the relations between the material and cultural dimension of hair, developing a perspective which sees discourses on hair move within a continuum of flesh and fashion.

## **Hair as Flesh**

Looking at the follicle/interior space, where we arrive is the mythology-ridden notion of flesh. Flesh has been influential as a general metonymy for ‘all things body’ in the course of Christian tradition, and as it has traveled to feminist “theory in the flesh” (Moraga/Anzaldúa 1981). The idea is that if hair is a matter of the body, it is likely to be a matter of flesh as well. As we have seen in figure 1, hair and flesh exist in close spatial proximity. Since hair grows from the scalp, they share biological territory. The follicle in every term of its existence – its genetic information, its formation, its nutritional supply – is located in the flesh. The biological and cultural mutual constitution of hair and flesh is also obvious in instances of pain; hair ripped or torn from the scalp induces the experience of an assaulted body, even if it is not hair itself that enables us to feel the pain. The scalp in pain, then, reminds us of the close connection between flesh and hair.

Quintessentially, flesh conjures up associations to a particular set of biological attributes, such as a specifically soft tissue, sensory perception, blood circulation. Most basically, the body-as-flesh perspective pronounces hair as part of a living organism. This implies the capacity of feeling (be it pain or pleasure) by virtue of physical vulnerability. This means that hair – just like any other part of the body – is prone to illness, gradual deterioration and decay. Hair follows the same career path like the flow of circulating blood whose termination is equivocal to the onset of death. On the other hand, flesh possesses the capacity to grow, rebuild, and regenerate. This is the reverse side of vulnerability; that in some lighter cases of physical damage, recovery of seemingly lost physical capacities is possible.

Hair discourses that use a flesh perspective stress hair’s proximity to the body and its quality as living tissue. They focus on aspects of mortality/vulnerability and growth/regeneration. When we turn to discursive fields such as biology, health and hair care, we are likely to find flesh discourses of hair. As regards descriptive discourses of flesh, there is most often naturalistic knowledge involved. A naturalistic perspective on hair is interested more in the ontological differences between follicle structures rather than the cultural stigma attached to them. It thereby constructs hair in terms of an essentialist focus on the body. Looking back at the cross-section in figure 1, the interest at stake is an apt description of ‘what

is there' and what its general function is.

In biological and botanic accounts, hair is looked at primarily in its ontological status as part of the physical body. It thereby activates an essentialist notion of the body, one which is focused on the “clear, authentic set of characteristics which... do not alter across time” (Woodward 1997: 11). We see this discursive focus in the cross-section scheme already discussed, but also in a definition of hair from the Anmol's Dictionary of Biology (figure 2). In this definition, hair is described in terms of its most general functionality, outside cultural variables. It discursively constructs hair within biology and outside its racialized, gendered and aesthetic context. In terms of materiality, it suggests hair as body-internal, as part of the flesh.

***Hair* : Bot. A slender outgrowth of the epidermis which is serving glandular, protective, or absorptive functions. Zool. (a) A horny, threadlike outgrowth of the epidermis in man and other mammals.**

**figure 2: naturalistic discourse on hair**

Even though the essentialist focus taken by flesh discourses suggests to explain hair's functionality in its entirety, it is by means of modeling, selection and simplification that descriptive knowledge about hair is generated. Looking at figure 1 and figure 2, we see a schematic model as well as the short definition of hair can cover only small portions of what could potentially be observed about hair. Nevertheless, descriptive flesh discourse imagines itself outside the space of cultural power, and within a sphere of descriptive neutrality. It is this very aspect of alleged neutrality and universality which makes descriptive discourse powerful and ready to become a regime of truth, realized in prescriptive discourse: The authority of ontological description allows us to come up with rules that regulate the use of knowledge available to us.

Prescriptive discourses from a flesh perspective take naturalistic descriptions of the biological norm of hair as their premise. Among them are discourses around health and hair care, which seek to optimize the biological potential of hair. Thus,

they oscillate around the discursive themes of vulnerability/mortality, and regeneration/growth, in an effort to minimize chances of premature decay. What the flesh paradigm has not been particularly interested in is hair outside biology. This has a liberating side to it. All of a sudden, hair's political weight, which goes along with the stigmatization of 'bad' hair, is eliminated and replaced by the zero ethics of biological occurrence.

In prescriptive flesh discourse, it is this aspect of physical health that sets the evaluative agenda. Whatever supports the health and longevity of hair is regarded as 'good'. The mortality/vulnerability theme is central in discourse on hair damage, hair loss, and other complications, as well as in prevention discourse. The latter also reverberates in the case of growth/regeneration where the emphasis is on what is conducive to physical health. This means that hair is associated with genetic determinism, biological health, and physical decay, which are processes that – all in all – seem to exist independently from culture. In the world of flesh, living organisms have common experiences resulting from what we may call the phenomenon of a transitory existence. Health, damage and pain are among these common experiences which indicate our success in the constant quest for biologically 'good' hair.

To sum up, 'good hair' from the vantage point of flesh refers to the practices undertaken to support the health/regeneration of hair. Practices which might infringe or harm the health/regeneration paradigm are constructed according to the vulnerability/mortality theme. This means that the longevity and health of hair is paramount to the construction of 'good hair', as opposed to hair which has (willingly or unwillingly) been 'invaded' by substances and techniques detrimental to health. Such substances are demonized and regarded as epitome of death/mortality, designed to undermine or destroy healthy biology/good hair.

### **Hair as Fashion**

Looking at the exterior/grown hair space, it is the "unsurpassed malleability" of hair (Synnott 1993: 103) which allows it to participate in the material sphere of fashion. As a matter of fact, we can identify some sartorial characteristics in hair which clearly mark hair as belonging to the realm of fashion. According to a

fashion perspective, hair functions independently from biological logics, beyond the body. Hair is a fabric which has been processed in the course of cultural practices and by means of various techniques. In fact, if we look at the material practice of hair dressing, we find revealingly many parallels to the practice of tailoring. In both cases, customers invest in a new ‘dress’, which is then ‘tailored’ according to their wishes (and according to their measurements). In both cases, fashion trends somewhat govern the tastes and choices of customers, which are then tried to be realized.

Hair – as well as textile – can be rinsed, bleached and dyed, it can as well be ‘sewn’ together and pressed into various forms. Analogous to textile, hair can be shaped and modified in various ways, enabling us to turn abstract ideas and tastes into concrete material products. Just like textile, the materiality of hair does justice to the most important imperatives in fashion: malleability and metamorphosis. Hair as fashion celebrates the potential to playfulness, choice and change in ephemeral acts of self-decoration. As expressions of identities and the self, the notion of the *look* comes in as an important cultural tool. It is the central currency in fashion, pointing to the vast creative repertoire that is at play when we style our bodies in distinct ways. Looks perform and evaluate versions of the self at the same time; they are contingent on the history of style while they classify themselves as certain expressive moments in it. They use tags like ‘hippie’, ‘punk’ or ‘natural’ to self-reflect upon their performative potential within the cultural politics of style. Looks are systems of distinction between various possible expressions of the self.

The ability to change empowers us to *choice* for a look we desire. Depending on whether we want to provoke a hippie, punk, or a natural look, we can style our hair accordingly. From a fashion perspective, hair functions as a medium through which we communicate who we are through the versatility of looks we are able to adopt. What the style and fashion perspective on hair thereby pronounced is that hair is in constant (need for) change, it is always ‘under construction’. It is the malleability, the changeability of hair which is most important in processes of communication. As a system of signification, hair has to remain flexible and bendable to comply with the changing requirements of ‘up-to-date-ness’.

In fashion discourses of hair, the body-external aspect of styling comes to be most pronounced. Hair is constructed as a malleable field of expression and creativity, rather than as biological phenomenon. In figure 3, a magazine cover of Hype Hair clearly allocates all things hair to the discursive realm of beauty, style and fashion. What comes to be emphasized in this representation is hair in its potential to acquire different social meaning, which is an anti-essentialist approach (Woodward 1997: 11). From a fashion perspective, hair is seen as the raw material whose malleability is used for creative self-expression (see figure 3).



**figure 3: fashion discourse on hair**

Hair is made meaningful in the currency of fashionable looks/styles, which are authorized by women of status within the community. In this example, it is Queen Latifah as the patron saint of 'regal style' who regulates what might qualify as successful look and what might fail in the struggle for adequate self-expression. The aspect of adequacy in regard to style is, then, what sets the agenda for 'good hair' in fashion terms. Hair as a powerful tool of human interaction is emphasized in its ability to communicate knowledge about social rules and spheres of

belonging. From this perspective, the 'look' is read as a powerful indicator of a person's cultural standing and status within a community.

What the malleability/versatility paradigm suggests is that this statement is an act of choice for self-expression by means of which individuals mark themselves as same or different. 'Good hair', from this vantage point, is hair reflects knowledge of the codes of acceptability. It is about using malleability and versatility in the 'right' way, in congruence with certain standards of beauty. What is frowned upon from this perspective is hair which reflects ignorance towards the fashion paradigm of the 'look', as such performative stances seem to express a lacking awareness of taste. That taste functions as a highly important instrument of social distinction has been famously shown in the work of Bourdieu. Taste seems to be one of the strongest indicators of cultural boundaries, regulating spheres of belonging. Hairstyle as a manifestation of taste is therefore a marker of status and social acceptability within a community. The codes of acceptability are literally weaved into our hairstyle choices, rewarding those who adhere to the 'legitimate' norm by the socially relevant label 'good hair'.

### **The Flesh/Fashion entanglements**

What I have attempted to sketch out so far are two radical discursive potentials arising from the double spatiality/materiality of hair. While a perspective which stresses hair in terms of the interior/follicle, converges with the discursive space of flesh, a perspective which focuses on the exterior/grown hair translates into the discursive space of fashion. I want to suggest that flesh and fashion can never be more than two opposite potentials whose logics, more often than not, overlap in the course of meaning making. As already mentioned, flesh or fashion might be pronounced in various discourses, yet its opposite force is never completely absent. Even though flesh and fashion, then, are nothing more than two extreme positions within a wide discursive spectrum, it might be useful to know about their particular characteristics and stakes when used in discussion.

The reason why I do not expect flesh or fashion discourses to appear in its 'pure' form is that both lines of reasoning have their limitations and weak spots that can only be balanced in relation to each other. As convenient as they may seem in

some respects, but the metaphors of flesh and fashion on their own run short of an adequate explanation of hair. A comparative look at the metaphors is enough to immediately spot some of their difficulties, since one metaphor starts where the other one ends.

### **Problems with Hair as Flesh**

With regards to flesh, the central themes that I dissected are vulnerability/mortality, which are two aspects that only partly regulate the material logics of hair. Vulnerability immediately evokes associations to physical pain and anguish, two states that are only imaginable as ‘hair specific’ in regard to the follicle. It is only by means of spatial proximity (the scalp in pain), not by primary experience that the grown hair is connected to physical pain. Hair in itself is incapable of pain, and is in this respect not subject to the rules of flesh.

Much of hair’s partial detachment from flesh comes to the surface in the discursive landscape of everyday language. Arguably, flesh conjures up associations to a particular set of biological attributes, such as a specifically soft tissue, sensory perception, blood circulation. Even though hair is undoubtedly part of our body, it might be one of the last items on that list. The most dramatic difficulties of hair as flesh arise when we think about damaged or injured flesh. Inevitably, severe physical violence against flesh causes bleeding and pain, as well as is most likely to inflict the permanent alteration of the body. Even if minor injuries can be healed, flesh once invaded is inevitably inscribed by the traces of this event – scars. They are the consequence of any event of infringement, irrespective of its slowness. As the somewhat recovered but often more sensitive epicenter of the scar indicates, what has been lost to flesh can neither be recovered nor rebuilt. In the case of hair, however, no mechanic infringement on hair can be said to be equally materially threatening. This is also suggested by the oddity to seriously talk about ‘injured’ hair. After all, popular hair discourse generally regards certain practices of manipulation as beneficial to physical health. The regular ‘trimming’ of hair, for instance, is widely recommended to people of all ages, genders and ethnicities as a means to maintain health<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>See: <http://hairecare.suite101.com/article.cfm/how-to-get-healthy-and-beautiful-hair>, last accessed 19 December 2010



Cutting as a material practice might really be the cutting edge of the problem. While cutting flesh, as mentioned above, inevitably causes the tissue to bleed, experience pain and – depending on the level of damage – be left scarred or destroyed, the former is most likely to physically benefit from a similar act. The oppositional symbolism of ‘cut’, then, suggests two material realms – flesh and non-flesh – locating hair in the latter.

Within the realm of flesh, cutting possesses an ultimately threatening quality; it is a harmful practice, powerful in terms of its life-taking connotation. In regard to hair, however, cutting is a recreational, life-giving practice which, though inflicting temporal material loss, does not necessarily cause permanent alteration of the body. Contrarily to the theme of vulnerability/mortality inscribed in flesh and represented by pain, bleeding and scarring, hair’s unaffectedness by this theme points out the need for an alternative metaphor explaining its malleability.

### **Problems with Hair as Fashion**

An opposite set of difficulties arises when we look at the conceptual consequences of the fashion metaphor. Although, as we have seen, there is the need to explain the share of its material space which remains unaffected by the logics of living organisms, there are some problems which evolve from its perception as an infinitely malleable, life-less piece of fabric. Even though the variety of ways in which hair can be processed suggests a certain proximity to other fabric-like materials, regarding hair as a lifeless, infinitely malleable item might be problematic in several ways.

First, this perspective is to disregard the mentioned organic quality of hair, which is materialized in the capacity to growth/regeneration. Hair may only be loosely attached to the space of physical pain, yet this does not render it infinitely malleable. Hair, as part of the body, might as well be damaged or broken, depending also on how it is processed and treated. Furthermore, whereas the tailoring of clothes does not change the materiality of the fabric, a haircut can

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slightly manipulate hair growth. We might also not forget about the consequences arising from the fashion paradigm of the look. As mentioned earlier, looks are systems of distinction and as such they become powerful in relation to their antagonistic space, which is the relation to what they are not.

In the example of the ‘natural’ look, this means that what might be classified as ‘natural’ can only be done so by comparison, in relation to its ‘non-natural’ other. This means that the creative potential of expression is far from unlimited. On the very contrary, our freedom of choice is somewhat confined by pre-established systems of meanings and representations which regiment the borders of acceptability and adequacy according. This shows the dialectic dynamics of hair as fashion. While the notion of malleability suggests infinite creative expression, this is starkly relativized by culturally authorized regimes of looks. The confining logics of social affiliation (among them are class, gender and ethnicity) does not allow for the whole of malleability’s potential to be realized, but there is a constant ‘policing’ of style creating what Foucault has termed docility. Docility is the degree or extent to which bodies have to be modified in order to be deemed socially acceptable. This varies on the level of gender, class and race and according to hegemonic standards of beauty.

These standards privilege a certain type of physiognomy as idealized materializations of beauty, which are not attainable by everyone. If the suggested beauty ideal is a white woman with straight, long hair, black women’s hair is significantly more docile than those of white women. What this – not so far fetched – example intends to show is that in order to talk about malleability, we also have to talk about cultural pressures associated with fashion dictates, dresscodes and hegemony. Celebrating hair’s potential as a means of expression – as a fashion perspective on hair suggests, is not enough if we want to understand the mechanisms by which we participate in the “supermarket of style” (Sweetman 1999). If we ignore the fact that self-expression is never free of cultural/social regulation and that there are material stakes involved in the politics of style, we might overly romanticize fashion as an arena of ‘anything goes’, which it is clearly not.

### **‘Good Hair’ in Flesh and Fashion**

In conclusion, the discursive potential of hair is only fully realized when both perspectives – flesh and fashion – are drawn together and collaborate. Only then can we draw a full picture of the potentials and constraints shaping the cultural field of hair. What the binary frameworks offers to us is an analytical tool according to which we can detect ‘sloping positions’ in hair discourse. Whenever either the realm of flesh or fashion comes to be particularly pronounced, the framework equips us with an analytical approach towards it, sketching out what kind of discursive imbalance is at work and what it tells us about its material and political implications a statement derives from. When we look at the central discursive themes of flesh and fashion (figure 4), they already hint at what notion of ‘good hair’ they facilitate. Given that a flesh argument is driven by the themes of Growth/Regeneration and Vulnerability/Mortality, its notion of ‘good’ is oriented towards sustaining the longevity of hair. On the very contrary, the logics of style and fashion work according to the themes of Malleability/Versatility and Docility/Hegemony, which means that it is by virtue of arbitrary, yet socially relevant regimes of taste and style that the notion of ‘good’ is governed.

Discursive Space	<b>Flesh</b>	<b>Fashion</b>
Potential	Growth/Regeneration	Malleability/Versatility
Constraint	Vulnerability/Mortality	Docility/Hegemony
<b>‘Good Hair’</b>	oriented towards health	oriented towards standards of beauty

**figure 4: Hair as Flesh vs. Fashion reconsidered**

As the central themes also suggest, both paradigms have liberating and constraining aspects, which also reverberate in their respective definitions of ‘good hair’. What is liberating about the flesh mantra ‘good hair is healthy hair’ is the negligible role of hegemonic standards of beauty in regard to the notion of ‘good hair’. From the perspective of health and naturalistic description, the power of a culturally imposed body ideal is somewhat relativized by the medical

argumentation of ‘healthy hair’. The question of traditionally privileged as opposed to marginalized bodies, then, is not one to be asked in regard to the notion of ‘good hair’. This means that in the flesh paradigm, hair is ‘allowed’ to be ‘untreated’, where in the fashion paradigm it is not.

What is constraining about this view is the rejection of fashion variety due to the detrimental side effects practices of hair modification may have on (psycho-somatic) health. The freedom of expression that drives the fashion paradigm is frowned upon as an infringement of the Growth/Regeneration theme. As a consequence, there is less flexibility and willingness to stylistic variation within a radical flesh paradigm of beauty, as whatever might infringe the ‘natural’ state of hair is regarded as ‘bad’.

In the realm of fashion, on the contrary, it is exactly the malleability and versatility which is embraced as liberating quality. Yet whereas the initial promise suggests fashion as a way to arrive at the very modality of expression one might wish to, it is by the rules of docility and restrictive standards of beauty that these wishes are mediated. In the light of docility, the *possibility* to modify one’s hair becomes a *need* to do so. One might be able to wear various hairstyles, but the logics of hegemonic beauty regimes radically delimit the freedom to choice and creativity. Hypothetically, we could of course exploit the whole landscape of physical versatility, but we might not choose to do so due to our fears of social sanctions.

Realistically, if we want our hair to be regarded as ‘good’ within a social community, it is likely that we restrict our performative potential to the arbitrary codes of expression that regulate the taste system. These codes are the reason why it is virtually impossible to reconcile unregimented versatility with ‘good hair’. As systems of distinction, style and taste rely on the rigid logics of beauty regimes in setting the agenda for ‘good hair’.

### **The Flesh/Fashion Framework in Use**

Looking back at the notion of identity in cultural studies, the Fashion/Flesh

framework seems able to account for the relation between the material and the cultural dimensions of hair. It highlights the connections between the two oppositional foci on hair's materiality and its corresponding epistemological positions of essentialism and anti-essentialism. It thereby offers a viable approach to hair as a matter of identity. As we can see in the two opposing notions of 'good hair' and 'bad hair', both of them offer various potentials and constraints, which are simultaneously *delimiting* and *empowering*. They offer two discursive extreme positions on 'good hair' resulting from two equally possible, yet inverse, spatial perceptions of the same bodily phenomenon. Most importantly, these notions of 'good hair' are *performed* in a social sphere; not only do they evolve from distinct spatial perceptions, but they also help produce them. They have material effects on individuals, naturalizing systems of representation, participating in setting the agenda for regimes of truth. In the flesh/fashion framework two seemingly oppositional notions of 'good hair' clash, representing different stakes in the struggle over meaning.

If we use the framework in terms strategic essentialism, which we do when we want to assess the liberating and empowering potential of hair in discourse, it is through the reciprocity of fashion and hair positions that humane versions of 'good hair' can be found. One perspective taken in isolation will always remain blind to certain material and cultural qualities of hair and often induces the condemnation of the 'other'. A notion of 'good hair' positioned at one of the oppositional ends of the hair continuum will not be able to account for this 'other' as equal, but is oriented towards a vertical relationship between 'good' and 'bad'. As change and learning always flourishes in milieus of ambivalence and uncertainty, attempting to reconcile the two discursive ends is the only possible pathway by which we might arrive at a truly liberating notion of 'good hair'. It simultaneously demands that we put both notions into perspective, and never arrive at a clear-cut position which ever entitles us to celebrate one's potentials and demonize the other one's constraints.

### **3. CAUGHT IN WESTERN IDEOLOGY: THE AFRICAN FOLLICLE BETWEEN BIOLOGY AND BEAUTY**

...We require a historical perspective on how many different strands – economic, political, psychological – have been woven into the rich texture of our nappy hair, such that issues of style are so highly charged as sensitive questions about our very ‘identity’. (Mercer: 1987: 33)

While the Flesh/Fashion framework developed in the previous chapter has attempted to ascertain the discursive potential of the materiality of hair, this section will look at how this potential has been actualized and normalized in the past. Along the lines of Kobena Mercer’s call for a historical perspective, I want to take a look at how the dominant ideologies of colonial beauty standards have been inscribed into and negotiated through black women’s hair. I want to look at the signifying practice of ‘good hair’ historically, discussing the relation between colonialist pseudo-scientific truth regimes, the establishment of racist aesthetic ideals, and the work of black hairstyle.

It is generally acknowledged that Eurocentric definitions of beauty have played a paramount role in colonial practices of dehumanization and devaluation. (Mercer 1987: 33, Hall 1997, Kelley 1997, Klesse 2000). As an integral part of colonial and postcolonial identity discourses, they have imposed white privilege and supremacy on the aesthetic spheres of taste and style: “whiteness was the measure of true beauty, condemning Europe’s Other to eternal ugliness” (Mercer 1987: 35-6). In short, beauty is a notion deeply entwined with politics and can thus never escape historical reference. As a consequence, if we want to understand the meaning of ‘good hair’ within the black community, we need to look at the referential dynamics of this phrase.

If we look at the meaning of ‘good hair’ in its everyday use, it mainly refers to black women’s hair which is “hair that looks ‘European’, straight, not too curly, not that kinky” (Mercer 1987: 35). It thereby conveys a gendered and raced notion of black aesthetics, which is referential to the formula ‘white hair is good hair’.

What ‘good hair’ immediately suggests is that black women can only attain beauty if they are able and willing to ‘improve’ their hair towards the aspired ideal of whiteness. Black women striving for ‘good hair’, then, are women who desperately strive for whitening, buying into the very aesthetic taxonomies whose inventors have enslaved and dehumanized them for centuries. As a corollary, ‘good hair’ is yet another strategy of white supremacy over the black body; it conveniently enslaves blackness on the level of aesthetic color codes, rendering the black body docile as ‘naturally’ ugly and poor. In the course of this section, I wish to problematize this idea of ‘good hair’ as tantamount to black enslavement. Even if it seems obvious that ‘good hair’ is an extension of the colonialist inferiorization logics reiterating the ‘white is beautiful’ mantra in an unmediated fashion, there are some major difficulties with this view once we apply the concept of performativity.

### **Beauty, Politics, and its Past**

‘Slave-hair’ and ‘nigger-hair’, two derogatory terms for quintessentially ‘bad hair’ immediately highlight how the contemporary language of black hairstyle is overtly referential to a colonial past. These references show how the colonial experience of enslavement has migrated to the symbolic universe of aesthetic norms where it has sedimented in the mantra ‘white is beautiful’. In the case of ‘nigger hair’, its pejorative reference to ‘coarse’ or ‘kinky’ hair seems to establish a clear-cut, unproblematic association to colonial regimes of beauty. When we look at it from the vantage point of performativity, however, this association turns out to be more complex and less straightforward as we might be tempted to believe at first glance. Even if we can clearly see that the idea of ‘ugliness’ conveyed in the word ‘nigger hair’ is mediated by reference to past aesthetic models (‘nigger hair’ implies a relation between ‘ugly’ and ‘nigger’), it is a reference that is made in contingency on changing cultural climates.

While the dominant received meaning of ‘nigger hair’ is widely associated with ‘ugliness’ (Mercer 1987: 35), this referential potential might change along the axes of time and space.<sup>5</sup> Cultural ‘climate change’, inevitably alters the referential

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<sup>5</sup> This applies to the term ‘nigger’ itself, where depending on one’s racial background, two oppositional referential potentials are activated. While ‘nigger’ used in a white

function and arrives at new meaning. From this point of view, it is problematic to see ‘good hair’ as a direct expression of the ‘whiteness’ regime. More accurately, it is by complex processes of mediation that meanings of ‘good hair’ are produced and reproduced.

This has two consequences for the further discussion of colonial history and hair. First, since the entanglements of politics and beauty are undeniable, it is necessary to look more closely at what was proposed in white regimes of beauty. More particularly, how was the discursive potential of hair (flesh/fashion) activated in the work of colonial representations of beauty and what did it suggest about the raced and gendered individual? This question is to look at the *roots* of the signifier ‘good hair’. Secondly, given that the supremacist taxonomy ‘white is beautiful’/‘black is ugly’ does not directly translate into the notion of ‘good hair’ but is always mediated through time and space, we have to ask how the complex relationship between the ‘whiteness’ regime and black hairstyle practices can be understood. In particular, what does it suggest about the black women’s hair and why is it problematic to conflate ‘whiteness’ and ‘good hair’? This set of questions is to trace the *routes* of the signifier ‘good hair’.

### **Colonizing the Follicle: craniometrical ‘proof’ and racial stigmatization**

From the vantage point of flesh, naturalistic discourses could easily translate genetic variations of the follicle into racist taxonomies of human worth. Alongside the slave trade, European scientific racism developed as a discipline which generated authorized ‘knowledge’ about the natural distinctions that were believed to exist between the ‘civilized’ and the ‘exotic’ body and mind. Among the methods in use, craniometrical ‘proof’ was regarded as a viable approach towards the relations between the skull and the human mental faculties (Shilling 2007: 77).

What we see in figure 1 is a classical craniometrical scheme which visualizes the received evolutionary order on the basis of pseudo-scientific racism along a clear-cut High/Superior - Low/Inferior logics. The visual grammar in this scheme

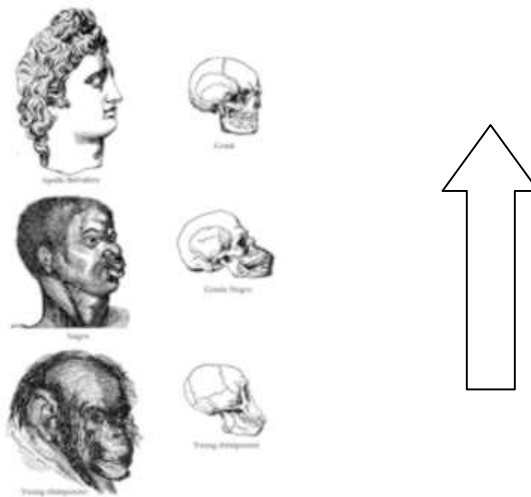
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context is invariably derogatory, ‘nigger’ in a black context is an adequate form of addressing, affirming social affiliation and closeness. We see this for instance in Nia Long’s statement: “You’re my nigger for real!” (*Good Hair* 2009).



exploits the metaphorical weight of ‘up’ and ‘down’ to support a hierarchy of human worth. In our western signification system ‘up’ has become a strong signifier standing in for ‘more’, ‘better’ or ‘rational’ (Lakoff/Johnson 2003:19). When we look at the three items in figure 1, their spatial organization points at the (legitimate) possessor of such characteristics: There is a vertical arrangement *up* from ape to mankind. This most literal *positioning of subjects* along the lines of the ‘up’ and ‘down’ logic creates a very effective conflation of physiognomic details and human worth. Associated with each developmental stage on this evolutionary ladder are different skin colors and hair textures (one could even say, hairstyles) which by means of their relation to the other items on the vertical line correlate with a different levels of ‘cultivation’.

From the bottom upwards, the physiognomies and hairstyles clearly ‘whiten’, constructing the black ‘Negro’ as somewhere in between the realm of nature and culture. On the top of it all is the light skinned and -haired European (represented by a Greek god-like physiognomy indicating ‘civilization’) who is literally *above* the black, woolly-haired black man.



**figure 5: the craniometrical classification of human worth**

Representations like these were highly influential means of cementing the myth of racial hierarchy in our cultural memory. They carry the allusive weight of craniometrical ‘research’ which purported to ‘proof’ a relation between the skull and the mental faculties in humans (Shilling 1997: 77). Among adherents of the

craniometrical method, well renowned anthropologist Paul Broca claimed in 1866 that

A prognathous (forward-jutting) face, more or less black color of the skin, woolly hair and intellectual and social inferiority are often associated, while more or less white skin, straight hair and an orthognathous (straight) face are the ordinary equipment of the highest groups in the human series... A group with black skin, woolly hair and prognathous face has never been able to raise itself spontaneously to civilization (cited in Gould 1981: 834)<sup>6</sup>.

The hierarchic simplicity suggested by the marriage of white supremacy and Darwinist ‘methodology’ was enticing since it reconfirmed the righteousness of the persisting ideological system. Craniometrical ‘precision’ served as an adequate tool in ‘measuring’ human worth according to the dichotomous agenda White-High/Black-Low. The authoritarian tone of anthropological and biological terminology somewhat facilitated the truth effects of this agenda. Via the use of ‘prognathous’ and ‘orthognathous’, Broca’s argument suggests neutrality, significance as well scientific expertise and routine. This aggregate of entitlement allows him to authorize the connection between human physiognomies and its cultural and social worth. It has to be contended that Broca’s work clearly emerged from a context in which essentialism (i.e. the notion that biology is directly expressive of an aesthetic/cultural worth) had long been naturalized and traditionalized. Yet Broca was one of the first to ‘proof’ it ‘scientifically’ in affirmation of a colonialist ideology. Craniometrical ‘evidence’ of black inferiority once again reiterated the Eurocentric white/black imaginary, by creating a ‘methodology’ that – by means of ideologically grounded speculation – reaffirmed what was already common sense. The truth effects resulting from this taxonomy are multifaceted, starting from the legitimization of aggression against the ‘barbaric’ masses (Shilling 1997: 77) to the naturalization of aesthetic codes.

In respect to regimes of beauty, the classification of bodies along the lines of the ‘evolutionary fittest’ constructed a dangerous link between racial and aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> Also discussed in Shilling (2003: 50-1) and Brush (2005: 123)

categories. In figure 1 and Broca's quote we can find an articulation of physiognomic characteristic and social/cultural potentials. Visually, this is achieved by the stereotypical 'Negro' figure, whose facial characteristics vary only slightly from the ape's, while the 'Greek' characteristics incorporates a version of human dignity and glory. In such illustrations, biological *and* aesthetic categories converge.

While the position of light skin and bright, curly hair on top of the craniometrical scale visualizes the 'natural' superiority of white body aesthetics, Broca's concoction of biological variables and racist assumptions draws its effectiveness from its appeal of academic 'respectability'. The 'scientific' articulation of 'more or less white skin' and 'straight hair' with the 'highest groups in the human series' is a discursive conflation with detrimental consequences for the aesthetic codification of black hair. It is a discourse of stigmatization, which constitutes the black follicle as genetic proof of aesthetic inferiority.

This discursive technique, which makes naturalistic use of the *hair as flesh* dimension, easily introduced Eurocentric racist 'facts' to popular discourse, where myths about 'other bodies' petrified the boundaries between the body beautiful and ugly. As a 'natural' attribute of the 'civilized' white European head, we see bright hair, which is 'not that kinky'. Conversely, what we see as naturally growing from the black man's head is what has been called 'nigger hair', woolly hair, hair which *is* kinky and coarse. This clear-cut dichotomy supplies us with a clear-cut racialized aesthetic system. In his essay on 'Modern Primitivism', Christian Klesse has collected some of the constituent dichotomies of this system. According to him

The increasingly racialized construction of an epistemology around the binaries modern/primitive, developed/non-developed, civilized/savage, rational/irrational, enlightened/magic, culture/nature [which] strengthened the conviction that Western identity is superior to that of all non-Western peoples and cultures (Klesse 2000: 33-4).

What makes this colonial taxonomy of human worth so powerful is that its impact was not confined to western thinking, but spread remarkably among white and black people alike, pushing the latter into conceiving of their own blackness in terms of primitive, non-developed, savage, irrational, magic and natural. When we look back at the definition of ‘good hair’ as “‘European’ looking, straight, not too curly, not that kinky” and see how it is being used *by* black women *in reference to* black women, we note that it is somewhat congruent with the values intrinsic to the social Darwinist binary taxonomy.

### **‘White Hair’ and ‘Good Hair’: An equation?**

The question of how this obvious stigmatization of the black body systematically pervaded and sickened the reality of black experience and self-esteem, and how it might be overcome has been central to the postcolonial project. As one of its most renowned minds Frantz Fanon has ascertained in his groundbreaking book *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952, the consequences of Eurocentric myths for black people’s lives, desires and ideals, are as wide-reaching as they are unprecedented. Most importantly, he senses a yearning for ‘whiteness’, or in Fanon’s own words, a “striving for lactification” (Fanon 2008: 29).

Fanon’s demonstration of how the stigmatization of the black body in the course of colonialism has led to the formulaic perception of ‘blackness as ugliness’ assumes a more or less direct translation of the superiority/inferiority dichotomy to the experience of black embodiment. The body is thus looked at in its entirety, in terms of materialized ‘blackness’. He thereby legitimately draws on the flesh facet of embodiment that we have seen as deciding in regard to vulnerable body parts in the previous chapter. In the case of skin, actually, where body modification is fairly restricted and where it involves effort and pain, the desire for whiteness is necessarily bound to the experience of deficiency. If we look back at the double discursiveness of hair that has been discussed in the previous chapter, this is, however, only one part of the picture, hair as flesh.

### **Good hair is white hair – the Flesh perspective**

Next to skin, hair is one of the central signifiers in racial discourse. If we reconsider its symbolic exploitation in the course of colonial taxonomy of human

worth, we can see how the African follicle came to be established as one of the central signifiers for ‘uncultivated’ ugliness. We see the pervasiveness of the white body as body beautiful when we look at how it has been set to use in black beauty discourse over time. At its very basis, there is the dominant version of the ‘good hair’ formula standing in for hair which looks ‘European’. Inherent in this formula is what Fanon has called the “weltanschauung of a colonized people” by which he refers to the experience of “impurity or a flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation” (Fanon 2008: 90). He thereby consistently argues that the experience of inferiority and inferiorization has become a constant in black existence. If we follow Fanon’s line of argument, this would mean to understand ‘good hair’ as a phrase of furthering black inferiorization by its confirmation.

Black women performing ‘good hairstyles’ consequentially buy into the very dichotomy that has been constructed as a means of their oppression, actualizing the notion of white supremacy, retrieving the memorized dichotomy. It is by the work of reference to these solidified, memorized assemblages that representations of ‘good hair’ normalize our notions of gender, race and beauty (Cheddie 2010). According to this view, black beauty discourses confirm the ubiquitous dominance of a white beauty regime by means of its very reference. The dominant reception of ‘good hair’ as hair which looks ‘European’ epitomizes such referential systems. From this perspective, even the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’ that came up during the 1960s is referential to white beauty by means of its very negation. It expresses the need for an assertion that black bodies are even capable of embodying beauty. It implies that up till the 60s, blackness had been a cultural category in need of improvement, in need of aspiration towards the idealistic white (haired) body. In Foucauldian terms, the ‘Black is Beautiful’ formula is referential of a system that up until then saw blackness as inevitably docile.

This idea of the black woman’s docile body is in keeping with Janice Cheddie’s argument that style is a part of our social disciplinary regime rather than a matter of free choice. It is, as Clarke defines it, an “active re-organization of objects and outlooks which produce a group” (Clarke 1976), yet this process is enabled and produced by the very norms which it re-organizes and actualizes (Cheddie 2010:

346). In other words, if the aesthetic code for ‘good hair’ is straight, European-like hair, this is exactly where new negotiations of its meanings depart.

### **‘Good hair’ beyond color codes – the Fashion perspective**

If we believe that the Foucauldian idea of style as a disciplinary regime can somehow be confined by the notion of resistance, we have to get back to the fashion argument and look at the work of malleability. As previously discussed, malleability is an aspect which distinguishes hair remarkably from the flesh logic, and stresses the potential for material alteration without permanent effects. As a consequence, the striving for the imperative of ‘good hair’ as “hair which is straight, not that kinky” conceptually departs from the imperative ‘white is beautiful’.

As opposed to the imposition of an almost unchangeable biological attribute such as skin color, the imposition of a certain hairstyle does not *necessarily* imply black inferiorization but allows for its reading as an arbitrary norm detached from the realm of whiteness. More precisely, long wavy hair within a black community might as well carry connotations of ‘trendy’, ‘extravagant’ or ‘powerful’, as it might carry ‘whiteness’. Even if ‘good hair’ as ‘straight’ hair has been born under the conditions of white supremacy, the rules of malleability empower black hair to enter the stage and incorporate ‘straightness’ into black hairstyles. As they introduce artificial straightness to their hair, black women perform the experience on their individual bodies; they *own* the experience and thereby make meaning of ‘good hair’ on their own rights. They are the ones to decide upon what to invest in ‘good hair’, what style to adopt, how long to spend in the hairdresser’s chair. From this perspective, any attempt to classify ‘good hair’ as ‘white hair’ or to assert straightening practices among black women as delivery to the white beauty model would be ignorant of these women’s unique experiences.

### **Cultivation, Naturalness and Black Hair History**

In the light of a colonial past, the discourse of black hair has moved between the extreme poles of fashion and flesh perspectives. Hair in performance, however, is inevitably a matter of both body and self-expression, fate and decision, experience and meaning. It is very likely that different understandings of hair can cause great

confusion, misunderstanding, and sometimes even feelings of resentment. This happened in hair history particularly in regard to two concepts that – even up until now – are used in very oppositional ways. These two concepts are *cultivation* and *naturalness*. When these terms are used in everyday hair discourse, they imply quite oppositional ideas. Within the arena of everyday hair discourse, this often leads to a point where negotiation fails and hair dispute escalates.

Mercer has pointed towards the double reference in the example of the Jamaican hairdresser who talks about “cultivating [hair] with a hot comb” until “the hair is all straight” (Mercer 1987: 38). One very strong effect of this metaphor is that it “recuperates the negative logic of white bias” (ibid.) in the context of which cultivation was all about lactification. Similar narratives conjured up by cultivation is the “taming of the bush” narrative (Kelley 1997: 340), a central device in colonial civilizing projects. The idea is that by the work of white civilizing techniques the raw and half-developed ‘savage’ could be elevated from the depths of wilderness to the realm of culture and humanity. Translated to the dimension of body aesthetics, this rendered black hair as the epitome of unsightly ‘wilderness’ which had to be ‘elevated’ to western standards of beauty.

The notions of ‘wilderness’ and ‘savagery’ as imagined spaces beyond the ‘cultivation territory’ are expressions of an essentialist imaginary of the superior and the inferior, the ugly. They are premised on the antagonism of an imagined space outside culture, framing ‘wilderness’ as the total absence of cultivation, as a place beyond all signification, while simultaneously constructing this place as ‘ugly’. In his essay on ‘modern primitivism’ Christian Klesse has demonstrated how this idea has been inverted (but not subverted!) by simply turning around the hierarchy of the imagined spaces. For modern primitivists, ‘wilderness’ and ‘savagery’ are utopian spaces that are destroyed by the raw and half-developed instruments of civilization. The mission is to re-establish the ‘bush’ by despising every technique that is thought to ‘tame’ it by cultivation, cherishing what is perceived as ‘god given’, ‘wild’ aspect of the human being. In hairstyle discourses, ‘cultivation’ can thus be constructed as desirable and damaging by the same line of argument, depending on whether it is the bush or the taming that is despised.

As both Kelley and Mercer have put into consideration, the colonial exploitation of the cultivation metaphor is just one side of the coin. From a constructionist perspective, some extent of ‘cultivation’ is always necessarily at play in any act of social inscription. As “nobody’s hair is ever just natural but is always shaped or reshaped by social convention and symbolic intervention” (Mercer 1987: 38), the work of cultivation exists where hair exists. This viewpoint forces us to abandon the idea of an a-cultural space and give up the notion of ‘wilderness’ as opposed to a place of cultivation. Instead, cultivation is ubiquitous, pervading every space of human existence. Consequentially, hair “merely provides a raw material for practices, procedures and ritual techniques of cultural writing and social inscription” (Mercer 1987: 38). When we look back at the Jamaican hairdressing example, we do not intuitively identify the straightening procedure as an act of lactification, but as a cultural practice whose complex meaning can only be ascertained by taking a look at the social, racial, gender and class dynamics that generate the customer’s individual motives to have her hair straightened.

One reason why one might consider seeing one’s hairdresser and have one’s hair straightened is the desire to ‘look natural’. This expression is closely connected with cultivation, and is deployed in similarly contradictory ways. At first glance, it might be awkward to think of black women using it in reference to hair that does not grow on their heads naturally. Having one’s hair processed in an exhausting and sometimes painful session to look ‘natural’ seems to be contradictory. On the other hand, it is not the materiality that is referred to in this discourse, but the normalized, standardized imagination of ‘naturalness’. Straightness, in this case, is what has become widely intelligible as ‘natural’; it has solidified a signifier representing the *experience* of looking ‘natural’. The relationship between naturalness and straightness is arbitrary, but as an historically grown signifier it is materially effective. As a matter of fact, some black women actually *experience* their hair as more natural if it has undergone chemical straightening, or other processes of *cultivation*.

In contrast to this perspective, we find another signifying layer which is connected to the notion of ‘modern primitivism’. This concept of naturalness embraces the



body in its 'natural' state by rejecting intense body and hair stylizing techniques. Along the lines of the anti-cultivation argument, it imagines a space beyond cultural pressures in which the natural resources of our body can be activated as aesthetic ideals. On the one hand, this idea is liberating, as it imagines a utopian sphere in which bodily freedom and individuality is promoted as the aesthetic imperative. When we look at black American hairstyle history, we can see an attempt to realize this imperative in the Afro look, which has also become known as the 'the natural' or the 'au naturel' look (Kelley 1997).

The Afro's 'naturalness' became a symbol of black resistance against western hegemony and white standards of beauty. The kind of naturalness that is achieved by the black American turn to Afrocentrism, however, is a re-construction of the natural, of the bush as it were. Afros are not brought afore naturally (which is imagined as the opposite of cultivation), but they are groomed with a pick, an Afro comb. As such, the Afro represents a cultivation strategy that is constructed as opposite to lactification, the yearning for a 'blacker' self. It politicized black identity by a reinvention of the black body epitomized by the 'Black Is Beautiful' slogan. In analogy to what we have seen in regard to cultivation, 'Black Is Beautiful' inverses the colonial color codes of black and white, while maintaining their vertical, hierarchic relationship.

Thus, while 'black' or 'primitive' come to be inscribed with new positive meaning, 'Black Is Beautiful' does not challenge a supremacist line of argumentation. It suggests that the only way to obtain real beauty is the radical rejection of all things white. This becomes problematic for black women once we look at the difficulties at play in distinguishing 'black' from 'white' hairstyles. What, after all may legitimately count as black hairstyle and what is to be classified as white, when it comes to the application of hair products on the black scalp? Is the use of straightening creams and lotions a practice of 'lactification' corrupting natural blackness? From the vantage point of 'Black Is Beautiful' this is definitely the case. Arguably, the need for black people to attain 'unnaturally' straight hair causes pressures within the black community, pressures to attain ideals that have not been developed in consideration of black hair texture.

On the other hand, there are black women's concrete and very real desires to attain the ideal of straight hair. Taking their desires seriously means to refrain from conflating black hair straightening processes and the need to be 'white'; their expressions for straightening, *perming* and *relaxing* are proof enough that black hairstyle cultures evolve in partial detachment from white dominant culture, in its own right. *Perm* and *relaxer* are genuinely 'black' products within the hair industry, and aptly point towards straightening practices as 'black approach' towards white dominant culture. It is neither the blind reiteration of the latter, nor the complete reinvention of new ways of thinking about hair.

Consequentially, straight hair in the black community is something altogether different than straight hair in the white community. To conflate the two would be to ignore the particular intra-racial dynamics generated by *achievement*, an aspect that is more prominent in black than in white hair straightening. The yearning for straightness might be a 'black thing', a practice which is meaningful primarily in respect to intra-racial power struggles. Whiteness might come in as a secondary variable, a force which once established a dominant idea of the beautiful, but which has been incorporated and transformed within black culture. While in the case of straight hair, the ideal is constructed along the white 'cultivation' myth, the Afro is located on the other side of the continuum, as the 'bush' whose taming is to be avoided.

To sum up, the discursive possibilities enabled by 'cultivation' and 'naturalness', which also bring afore other ideas like 'lactification' or 'primitivism' are powerful instruments in the negotiation of 'good hair'. Evolved in the milieu of racist Eurocentric anthropology, they have been incorporated and naturalized in black hair experience in various, contradictory ways and are constantly re-inscribed in representation. I have tried to argue that by virtue of their fluidity and contingency they are capable of both reflecting and rejecting supremacist notions of whiteness and blackness. Thus, they are performative categories which are constantly shifting depending on who uses them in which situational context.

#### 4. GOOD HAIR – A CULTURAL ANALYSIS

In the previous chapters, I have attempted to arrive at an understanding of black women's hair in regard to its material, discursive and performative potential over time. The US documentary *Good Hair* (2009) is yet another moment in the history of hair and black identity. As a media text whose context of origination is the black diasporan community in North America, it is a cultural artifact which talks about strongly regionalized experience. It represents a specific manifestation of the ubiquitous entanglements of hair and race, one that is rooted in the specific conditions of black women in the United States of America.

When I use *Good Hair* as a subject of cultural analysis, I am aware of such contextual constrictions. This is to mean that I regard *Good Hair* as only one among other possible contemporary examples of the representation of hair and identity that might serve for a thorough scrutiny of black identity politics and popular media discourse today. Due to the restricted scope of this study, I chose to limit my focus on *Good Hair* and its immediate discursive surroundings.

Why I am choosing *Good Hair* as the center of this study and what I mean by 'its immediate discursive surroundings' I shall explain in a moment. What I hope to achieve in the course of this analysis is a discussion of recent *trends* in the hair experiences of black US women, which is to identify structural consistencies and changes in politics of black hair and identity. The sample used in this analysis might take us further in understanding the stakes involved in the long 'good hair/bad hair debate'<sup>7</sup>, equipping us with insights necessary to liberate hairstyles from the exclusive logics of white hegemonic standards and celebrate the variety of beauty from a perspective of inclusion.

##### **Why *Good Hair* (2009)?**

Shooting a documentary movie and entitling it *Good Hair* pushed a lot of black women in a state of hilarity, enthusiasm and high expectation. Even before its release date on October 9, 2009, *Good Hair* was at the center of debate within a

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<sup>7</sup> This phrase has been used by the *YouTuber* BlackOnyx77 when she talks about what she expected from *Good Hair* (see chapter 4.3).

community of women who openly shared their high hopes in the movie online. As *YouTube* user BlackOnyx77 puts it “... we were so excited, like – oh my gosh – this good hair movie, yes, gonna put some things on blast.”<sup>8</sup> To many women like BlackOnyx77 herself, *Good Hair* promised to be something like an educational, liberating project, a movie that could bring about a change of perspective on a matter so important to many black US women.

A yearning for “that ‘wow-feeling’”<sup>9</sup> that *Good Hair* promised to many surfaces in much of its pre-release discussion. Around the date of its launch, *Good Hair* appeared on the agenda of most black US talk shows, among which *Oprah* and *Tyra* devoted whole panels to the movie. But this was only the beginning of the *Good Hair* debate, which has since continued among *YouTubers*, and which is still going on in late 2010.

### **Sample: Three channels**

Going back to the initial question ‘Why *Good Hair*?’ (and not some other example), the answer has clearly to do with the different channels through which the *Good Hair* discourse has been mediated. *Good Hair* traveled from the movie theater to talk shows and is presently stimulating digital discourse on *YouTube*. This multimedial career points to *Good Hair*’s significance to a number of black women in the United States and elsewhere<sup>10</sup>.

Apart from its controversial potential among its black female audiences, it is the very variety of discursive channels involved in the movie’s distribution and consumption that makes *Good Hair* so interesting to look at. It allows us to inspect different modes of representation, which promise to shed different lights on the text. By analyzing the movie and at its discussion in talk shows and online reviews, I want to optimize my view on the discursive spectrum of *Good Hair*, looking at the strategic, visual construction of ‘good hair’ as well as its relation to

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<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUhX00YwAkg>, last accessed 19 December 2010

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> For reactions from Canada, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEtAKcANh3E> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3638N6OV4Y&feature=related>, both last accessed 19 December 2010

the realm of the viewers. How is Chris Rock's approach towards 'good hair-bad hair' incorporated or challenged in studio and online debate? Getting in touch with the different contexts of consumption will help understand different layers of how the politics of black hair stylization has recently been negotiated within the community.

Good Hair – discourse channels			
<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Material/Media</i>	<i>Length</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Good Hair</i>	Film/Cinema, TV	96:00	9/10/2009
<i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i> (“Girl Talk About ‘Good’ Hair With Chris Rock”) <i>The Tyra Banks Show</i> (“What is Good Hair?”)	Talk Show/TV/ online	40:00	30/09/2009
		40:00	12/5/2009
<i>YouTube reviews</i>	visual/online		
<b>BlackOnyx77</b>		10:49	6/11/2009
Lyndaespratley		04:59	14/10/2009
<b>crownofHisglory</b>		03:02	18/12/2009
lovelyti2002		11:53	25/10/2009
<b>MrsRaena</b>		08:59	21/10/2009

**figure 6: Sample overview**

The table above (figure 6) gives an overview of the material included in my sample. Apart from the movie I selected *The Tyra Banks Show* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*<sup>11</sup> as two of the most popular talk shows in black American TV. Both of them dedicated entire panels to *Good Hair*, inviting Chris Rock for interviews and discussions. Furthermore, my sample includes five online videos that young *YouTubers* posted in response to *Good Hair*<sup>12</sup>. The various stakes are

<sup>11</sup> Henceforth, I will simply refer to them as Tyra Show, Oprah Show, or Tyra and Oprah. For reason of efficiency, I will use the hosts' first names throughout the analysis. As regards other guests and speakers, I will supply the reference that is given in the respective text.

<sup>12</sup> All primary source references as well as the images used are included in the bibliography section. All of the images included in this chapter are screenshots

manifest in different readings of the movie. How do talk show hosts, guests and *YouTubers* assess what *Good Hair* has to offer for the black community.

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taken from the media text of the respective section. If not indicated otherwise, direct quotations refer to the primary source text.

#### 4.1. GOOD HAIR (2009)

*Hair* is a 96 minutes long ‘documentary comedy’ directed by Jeff Stilson and co-produced by Chris Rock, who is the central narrator leading through the movie. After its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2009, it was released in selected US cinemas by October 9, 2009, drawing revenues of well above \$4 million dollars.<sup>13</sup>

Structurally speaking, I will take into consideration that *Good Hair* is a Hollywood movie and as such made for consumption in the context of one-directional projection on the cinematic screen. It is targeted at a mass audience that is willing to spend money (and sometimes also remarkable traveling time<sup>14</sup>) in exchange for a cinematic experience, or, most recently, for watching the movie on DVD. Going to the cinema is a social event, which means that the role of social interaction before, during and after the movie might be equally important as watching the movie itself. Arguably, sharing one’s expectations and impressions is part of the consumption process, facilitating the work of meaning making (Gillespie 1995: 56). In conversations cinematic experiences are negotiated directly in (unmediated) peer-to-peer relationships, before discussion might travel to other communicative platforms.

The focus of the following analysis is on the discursive strategies that are used to constitute the idea of ‘good hair’. First of all, I will look at what the movie claims to promise, what techniques it uses to suggest its importance to black American women. In order to do so, I will turn to visual strategies which construct hairstyle as a phenomenon between the spheres of commodity culture and intimacy, using Chris Rock’s daughter Lola as a figurehead. On the basis of these findings, I will turn towards the speaking position as a power tool which facilitates a dominant reading of aesthetic codes. The work of speaking positions, power and authority produces a notion of black women’s desire, which might be scrutinized according

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<sup>13</sup> See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1213585/>, last accessed 19 December 2010.

<sup>14</sup> As the movie was only shown in select theaters, Canadian *YouTuber* silentchic “had to travel so far just to see this movie“, but “it was worth it“: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEtAKcANh3E>, last accessed 19 December 2010.

to its relation to the flesh/fashion paradigm. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, these paradigms are apt to facilitate both essentialist and anti-essentialist discourses of beauty and hair, depending on whether they use a hierarchic notion of cultivation/primitivism or not. In what follows I attempt to look at how essentialist and anti-essentialist, flesh and fashion arguments come to be combined in *Good Hair* by approaching the movie along the lines of the following, oppositional questions.

Flesh: Does the movie construct naturalist lines of argument, i.e. is hairstyling constructed as a matter of body modification and physical health? Is hair experience articulated with experiences of physical pain, squalor, or terror? Does the movie emphasize unmodified, healthy hair as an aesthetic ideal?

Fashion: Does the movie introduce a fashion line of argument, i.e. is hairstyling constructed as a matter of decoration and self-expression? Is hair experience articulated with experiences of social, gender or racial pressures? Does the movie emphasize modified (i.e. straight, permed, weaved) hair as an aesthetic ideal?

By looking at the central themes in *Good Hair*, I will try to tackle these questions. What I expect to find is a concoction of several discursive layers, which both contradict and mutually constitute each other. There will be terror and modification, pressures and pleasure. Yet there will also be absences. If, for instance, straightened hair is the only kind of black hair represented, what does this suggest about the role of ‘natural’ hairstyles within present-day America? In the end it will be the absences, gaps and blanks that are the most indicative of the movie’s political valency, as they teach us a lot about the movie’s strategies of power and status ascription within the black hair community.

### **Hair between public glamour and private drama**

A black woman in the early Hollywood days: She gives you a deep teasing look before she slowly turns her face from the camera, revealing an elaborate hairdo which is in perfect harmony with the soft background music and the fancy film noir atmosphere. There are other competitors to join the hairstyle battle; in proud



and regal postures they show off their long, flowing curls, delicate perms, smiling and self-assured.

They know that their laborious accomplishments will be rewarded, as amidst a group of black men in fancy suits, a woman is handed the golden award (figure 7). Her body is glowing as she modestly beams at her benefactor. She wears a dark dress which pronounces her light skin, highlighting the rest of her radiating body. Is this a black or a white woman? As the light, shining epicenter of black male attention, she seems to represent a dominant notion of white power (Foster 2003). Yet, her physiognomy and hairstyle remain ambiguous.



**figure 7: The glamorous past: winning a hair award and some black men's attention**

The black wavy hair, adorned by a white flower, might point to her darker origins. Is it then by virtue of her transition from black to white culture that this lady has earned the price for beauty? Note how the price is awarded by a black man; how the lady is surrounded by enthused admirers of the same race. There seems to be an agreement on what they admire her for. They fully apprehend of this woman's beauty, whose head is not crowned by a wild and nappy Afro, but by a neatly set perm, combed and sprayed into place.

As another catwalk model turns, so does the movie. Turning from black-and-white to colored, leaping from past to present, it exposes us to even more lavish hairstyles on models and fashion divas, dancers and celebrities flirtatiously flicking their hair at the camera. One instance is the woman in figure 8, whose

remarkably smooth and silky hair is consciously lit in low key, emphasizing its straightness. Its blackness contrasts the light brown skin of her face and naked body, rendering her flicking head the most natural gesture in the world.

Even though the woman looks joyful and beaming we note that there have been changes since the old Hollywood days. There is no sign of male affirmation, no need for modesty or reservation. Even if we know that this woman has admirers, we also know that they have paled into insignificance. It is the woman's head who owns the totality of the screen and who owns awareness of her beauty. She does not wait to receive an award, but flicking her hair at the camera is just tantamount to it. She anticipates the appreciative look of her invisible audience and instinctively knows that her efforts to achieve natural beauty have paid off; they simply must pay off in a community whose desires are oriented towards the powerful and invisible marker of whiteness (Dyer 1997).



**figure 8: The glamorous present: flicking ‘good hair’ at the camera**

What these first impressions from *Good Hair* suggest is that black women's hairstyle culture in the US is deeply rooted in the logics of consumer culture and commerce. The self-asserted smiles on the faces of hairstyle queens express pride in the black woman's 'American dream'; a dream full of glamour and glory, a dream that has evolved in the stardust of Hollywood beauty and brightness. It suggests that 'good hair' is a matter of stardom and status, success and riches.

Then the scene fades out, rapidly switching to a more private note, as we see a freeze image of two young girls who are introduced by the narrator like this.

Chris Rock:                      These are my daughters, Lola and Zahra, the most beautiful girls in the world. And even though I tell them that they're beautiful every single day, sometime it's just not good enough. Just yesterday Lola came into the house crying, and said 'Daddy, how come I don't have good hair?' I wonder how she came up with that idea.



**figure 9: Inviting us in: Chris Rock's daughters in their domestic sphere**



**figure 10: Lola Rock**

The man who is speaking to us is Chris Rock the narrator, yet most importantly, he is also Chris Rock the ‘daddy’. By putting this very private part of his identity on display, showing his daughters in their everyday domestic environment, Chris Rock seems to be opening up to the viewer, seeking for appreciation and sympathy for his role as a caring father.

It is a world of childhood, innocence and playfulness that is conjured up in a series of private photographs which show Lola and Zahra posing and smiling at the viewer (see fig. 9 and 10). But as the narrator will point out in a moment, there is an imminent threat to this world of childhood play. There are external pressures that the narrator/father feels he cannot control, confessing that his efforts are ‘just not good enough’. He feels the overpowering social force that will inevitably push his daughters out of their paradisiac state.

These pressures will submit Lola and Zahra to imposed standards of normality and beauty, which are not reconcilable with what grows on them naturally. Lola may be still young but she is already aware of this reality. She does not ask her daddy about the meaning of ‘good hair’, as she already *knows* it, as well as she knows that she does not have it. The only question that seems to bother her is as to why she does not have it. And as Chris Rock implies in response, there is a (concrete) *idea* which is at stake in Lola’s life, an idea whose implication on Lola’s self-perception might have something to do with the fact that beauty seems to be more strongly associated with whiteness than with blackness. In the realm of consumer culture and ‘good hair’ as a commodity, what we see is long, free-flowing hair; hair that is flickable, hair that is definitely straighter than the coarse locks that Lola feels growing from her own scalp.

What Lola in Rock’s account experiences is an existential conflict between the kind of hair that people around her call ‘good’ and the kind of hair that her body produces. She is therefore an important narrative figure, highlighting the pervasiveness of a racialized beauty regime in the US in which the most inculpable members of society, namely children, are systematically trained to embrace unattainable beauty standards. Lola’s story is so powerful because it is exemplary of black womanhood, and the ‘hair journeys’ most of them go through

in the course of their lives. It thus highlights the urgency of hair issues and issues of embodiment in general, pointing toward its social, racial, and economic dimensions. Her desperate question “How come I don’t have good hair?” forces us to look at the entanglements of the public and the private sphere; the macrocosm of consumer culture and commercialized beauty, and its most intimate manifestations in the microcosm of the individual’s identity struggle.

The Lola persona stands in for innocence, desire for belonging and racialized otherness, three central variables at play in the making of gender and racial identity. By incorporating these three aspects Lola’s naturally ‘bad’ hair is experienced as proof of otherness. What her white friends have she does not have. She thus learns that black children lack something in the society she lives in; there are rules according to which her body becomes racialized as other. These rules effectively teach her that the equation ‘good hair is straight hair’ is valid and true. Striving for the true and meaningful, Lola finds she cannot keep up with other kids’ ‘natural’ beauty. Her crying is an expression of despair, asking her daddy for an explanation of her insufficiency. There is a significant pause accompanied by a fading black screen and dying music before the movie’s title is blended in.

### **What *Good Hair* promises to black women**

If we understand Lola’s desire and despair as exemplary of the black female identity struggle in a predominantly white society like the US, it does not come as a surprise to see the Lola-sequence hit home as a stirrer of hopes and expectations among black American women. It is not far-fetched to scent some educational potential in Chris Rock’s decided promise to get to the core of the ‘good hair’ idea, unraveling the source of his daughter’s collision with hegemonic standards of beauty. A star comedian like Chris Rock seriously willing to delve deeply into the ghastly entanglements of black beauty and identity; this is likely to enthuse even the more settled adherents of the black feminist struggle. But what is at stake in Rock’s initial key statement? What exactly does he promise to his daughter, and, maybe even as importantly, to other of black women? Arguably, his “wondering how [Lola] came up with *that idea*” is a promise to teach us something about meaning, ideology, and its inscription on black women’s bodies.

This is to ask about the origins of ‘good hair’, and why it might have gained power over black women’s hairstyle decisions.

It thus promises a critical perspective at the cultural, social and personal variables (re)producing standards of beauty and facilitating Lola’s despair of otherness. It is a promise to disentangle the racialized, gendered discourse of hair in the US and critically ascertain how and why the quest for ‘good hair’ pervades so many facets of black people’s lives. It is a promise to find out about its empowering and its detrimental effects, finding possible pathways towards overcoming its pressures and constraints. It is thus to invite diversity and variety in terms of alternative approaches towards black hair and beauty.

As we will find out in the course of the following examples, this array of promises, which caused high expectations among black female viewers, could only partly be kept. There is no doubt that *Good Hair* emphasizes the aspects of hair business and consumption as a main arena of hairstyle negotiation, while it leaves less space to the impact of social and political history, and the struggle for cultural diversity. It hardly touches on changing hairstyle trends over time, and the words ‘emancipation’ and ‘women’s rights’ never appear in the movie. Instead, Rock’s eagerness to stress the fiscal dimension of black hair is visible in the meticulous detail in which he portrays black celebrity hairstyle culture, introduces economic aspects and global business relations. The phrase ‘good hair is good business’ is a dominant driver throughout the movie, emphasizing the role of hair as capital, economically and socially.

Chris Rock spends remarkable time on demonstrating how ‘people outside our race’ come to benefit from black women’s willingness to spend enormous sums of money on hairstyle products. At the hairstyle competition he points to the apparent economic and racial imbalances of hair business, learning that “most of black hair money is made by Asians” (Rock) and white people. Also, he looks at some of the even more grotesque aspects of the industry, such as the Indian-American hair trade dynamics that have been established to meet the black demand for ‘human hair’. Chris Rock travels to Chennai to shown in rich detail how traders collect hair from temples, where it had been sacrificed in the course

of tonsure rituals. The contrasts between Indian and US ways of life converge in a meeting in Los Angeles where the freshly imported goods hit the classy grounds of Beverly Hills. Rounding off the subject of the intercultural dynamics of hair economics, Chris Rock stages a comical attempt to sell black hair on the Californian streets, only to be instructed that “this hair is not worth anything”.

### **Speaking up: Celebrity versus ordinary discourse**

Stylistically, *Good Hair* follows the red thread of Chris Rock’s hair journey by thematically structured interview fragments. This means that celebrity comments lead through the entire movie, causing the effect of immediacy and direct reactivity to Rock’s findings. It also means that most of the stars interviewed appear more often than once throughout the movie. This technique generates a ‘leadership’ effect. By virtue of their entitlement to react and comment on Chris Rock’s statements, the stars are empowered to tell us what they *know* about women, hair issues, and most of all, *good hair*. They thus hold a more powerful position than other interviewees, a role model function within the community, speaking up and showing us the way.

There are a number of women, but also some men who hold this celebrity speaking position in *Good Hair*. They are introduced to the viewer by showing their names at the bottom of the screen (including titles or affiliations). This is not the only technique applied to distinguish them from the ‘ordinary’ protagonists, such as random hairdressers and customers. Adding to the latter’s anonymity, random people are filmed in everyday environments, i.e. while they perform their jobs, wait for a haircut, or sit in class to discuss their job perspectives after graduation. This does not apply to the star interviewees, most of whom are shot against a neutral studio background.

The contrast between ‘leaders’ and ‘ordinary’ protagonists certainly encourages a truth effect; while the ‘ordinary’ people are constructed as living under certain conditions, the former speak from an elevated, seemingly neutral position (compare figures 11 and 12). Even though stars and ordinary people alike talk about their personal experiences as well as job-related issues, star utterances gain

a more prominent weight than the often more situational and less deliberate utterances of ordinary people.

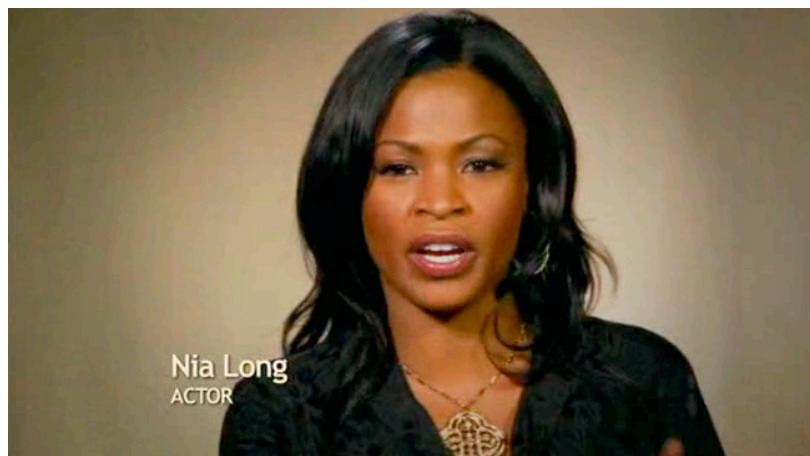
This has also to do with the narrator's role which facilitates a class distinction between the interviewees. In celebrity interviews, Rock is the absent listener whose attention is focused on the star, and who rarely comments on what has been said. Moreover, celebrity comments need not be introduced by its preceding interview questions but are presented as autonomous units. This type of editing is not used when it comes to the utterances of ordinary people, which are always stimulated by Chris Rock's inquiry.

What adds to the narrator's power within ordinary environments is Rock's acquisition of physical space. While he freely moves around in barbershops, laboratories, factory buildings and hair salons, he remains seated in front of his celebrity interviewees. In the case of the former, he is thus framed as the exploring comedian inquisitor who is in control and entitled to draw his own conclusions, whereas from his vantage point of the seated listener he hands over definitory power to the star. When celebrities speak up, they do so in front of a neutral studio background, which highlights their presence and steers all attention towards them. Most obviously, this effect is not attained when it comes to Rock's explorations of the 'field' (fig. 12, 13).

Summing up, this leaves us with a twofold, class-specific narrative space, which is mostly realized in the way Chris Rock acquires places and spaces. There is the narrative space of the star persona, who is granted definitory power by virtue of her (or his) authority within the black community. This power is granted via a seated, attentive narrator, offering undivided audience attention. Within the narrative space of the ordinary, the narrator is entitled to move around freely, as well as he is the one to evoke and frame his interviewees' statements. This hierarchy of speaking positions which pervades the whole movie exerts very interesting effects on the representation of class, race and gender. Within the celebrity space, as shall be shown in a moment, the notion of 'good hair' is mainly negotiated from the fashion perspective, a stardom perspective which facilitates the straight hair paradigm and which leaves little space to the negotiation of



‘natural’ hair. When it comes to exploring how this straight hair ideal is realized, however, the movie encourages us to make meaning of ordinary women’s hairstyle practices in the flesh paradigm. Within the ‘field’ we are shown how women treat (or abuse) their bodies in order to attain what is supposed to be ‘good’ for them. The framing of hair issues in terms of sanitary discourse, as we shall see, is a powerful discursive instrument classifying women’s desires for straightness as pathological. In what follows I will first look at ‘good hair’ in the celebrity space and how it deploys and reifies the fashion paradigm. In this discourse, the agenda is set on what is generally perceived as desirable. I then proceed to ordinary space and how it participates in a sanitary discourse on hairstyling procedures and products.



**figure 11: celebrity space: Nia Long**



**figure 12: ordinary space: Chris Rock explores a random US hair salon**

### **Fashion and fame: Defining ‘good hair’**

The movie’s first attempt to define ‘good hair’ is made immediately after Lola’s story has been told and the title has faded into a black screen. It is provided by one of the more frequently appearing stars, Nia Long. She opens the ‘good hair’ debate with the following words:

Nia Long: Well, there is always a sort of pressure within the black community like, oh, if you have good hair you’re prettier or better than the brown-skinned girl that wears the Afro or the dreads or the natural hairstyle ... The lighter the brighter the better, and that’s what causes great dissention within the black community and with black women.

As we see in this quote, Nia Long does not feel the need to provide the audience with an explicit explanation of ‘good hair’. This indicates that the phrase is already known by the target group, signifying what we have found earlier as “hair that looks ‘European’, straight, not too curly, not that kinky” (Mercer 1987: 35). From her perspective as the leader, Nia Long identifies this notion of ‘good hair’ as a central desire of black womanhood. She rhetorically constructs an aesthetic ideal – the lighter the brighter the better – that can be contrasted against the less prestigious hairstyle category of Afro/dread/natural. In this account, black hair discourse is described as the yearning for improvement and for cultivation. When she points towards the “pressure within the black community” she suggests it as a force within the obscure space of the ‘black community’, and thereby as something external to her personal sphere of agency, something which naturally seethes among ‘black women’, inevitably, uncontrollably. Yet ‘good hair’ is also implied as something that black women negotiate among themselves, within their community. She does not look for scapegoats within the hair industry, fashion business, or white capitalism that she might accuse of women’s subordination. The “great dissention” caused by the straightness paradigm is rather suggested as a black women’s in-group phenomenon of power ascription. “The lighter, the

brighter, the better” are labels *used by* black women to construct a notion of beauty. This is what Nia Long seems to criticize in her statement; that ‘good hair’ has become a matter of class distinction in black women’s communities, that hairstyles mark black women according to the cultivation logics of ‘natural’/inferior/ugly versus ‘cultivated’/superior/beautiful. Is Nia Long, then, rejecting the ‘cultivation’ notion of beauty? Is she arguing against a dichotomous beauty system which favors the straightness ideal over ‘natural’ hairstyles? Does she consequentially suggest abandoning our association of ‘good’ with straight and ‘bad’ with nappy?

If we further scrutinize her statements in connection with the way her body is visualized, this can hardly be the case. What we hear when we listen to Nia Long is a woman who rejects the material pressures put on black women to attain unrealistic ideals of beauty. On the other hand, what we see is a woman who by virtue of her long flowing hair incorporates this very ideal of beauty. In a sense, Nia Long reproduces the stakes that have systematically led to the dichotomous perception of beauty she critically addresses, willingly taking her seat at the top of the naturalized hierarchy. What she thus signals is the power to attain ‘beauty’ by means of status and money, yet most importantly, she demonstrates that achieving straight hair is something enjoyable, something attractive, and something that needs to be done.

Arguably, then, the notions of ‘lightness’ and ‘brightness’ that she identifies as the main causes of the ‘great dissention’ within the black community, hold certain benefits for those who like Nia Long are capable of attaining them. Having clear-cut ideas about the ‘good’ the ‘bad’ and the ‘ugly’ does not only set enormous pressures on those who want to succeed, but we might not forget that there always *is* a way to succeed. Where ‘good hair’ is available as a concrete gestalt, there is the promise to be rewarded for realizing it in a satisfactory way. This reward is shown to the viewer in Nia Long’s hair, which is an overly successful example of hair in that it has transformed from ‘bad’ to ‘good’, from nappy to straight.

The requirement to transform, which Nia Long implies as the driving force in black hair discourse, assumes a fashion paradigm of beauty. By virtue of her powerful speaking position, she thereby naturalizes the fashion paradigm,

reconfirming it as the common sense notion of beauty. While Nia Long talks about the negative impacts of the straight hair ideal, then, her own hair proofs the status quo of hair regimes; her straight, long flowing weave embodies attractiveness, the ‘celebrity factor’. It points to the adequacy of straight hair as a *natural* fashion item, an item of decoration whose acceptance can be assumed among a majority of black women.

This impression becomes more dominant when we look at the number of celebrities appearing in *Good Hair*, who, just like Nia Long, perform straight hair as natural hair. While most of them are willing to talk about hair-related struggles, none of them seems to experience these struggles as reason enough to develop alternative ideas of ‘good hair’. One reason for this can be found in the ubiquitous presence of medialized images of black hair beauty, which seems to be straight beauty. As Tracy Thoms describes her uneasiness triggered by popular media images, impeding her decision to ‘go natural’: “You know, look in the black hair box. And its like, all the hair are straight. It was a hard, like, decision in the beginning. I said, no, I’m gonna be strong against all the forces trying to get me to straighten my hair” (Thoms). As this example shows, media images are powerful, educational resources. They teach us what is ‘on’ in fashion and society, making us aware of recent trends, of what seems to be generally, universally coded as beautiful. At the end of the day, it is the image of the long-haired, smiling star which reproduces the notion of black beauty, articulating ‘straightness’ with social, cultural and economic capital.

The importance of straight hair as a signifier of power and belonging thus travels via certain media into our notion of self-esteem and agency. As Sheila Bridges, one of the stars who suffers from alopecia, concludes: “So I think the reason hair is so important is because our self-esteem is wrapped up in it. It’s like a type of currency for us” (Bridges). This is also reified by the appearance of most of the celebrities presented in *Good Hair*. They adhere to the principle of malleability and change that sets the agenda for a straight-haired definition of beauty. Resulting from this, as Vanessa Bell Calloway tells us in another star interview snippet, black girls and women may dream about becoming ‘that girl’ on the magazine cover, who is straight-haired and glaring of joy. Straightening is the

precipitous pathway towards this joyful state, towards forgetting about the harsh reality of kinky hair and its status associations.

Bell  
Calloway:

You know you look at the magazines and you wanna be that girl, you know, you wanna be that girl. And you have this fantasy where you think if they straighten it out then all of a sudden it's gonna grow and it's gonna really move and it's gonna really flow and I'm gonna have this hair. Well, you never had the hair to begin with, but you don't know that, you know (my emphases).

Even though 'straightened out' hair as naturally growing, flowing and moving from a black scalp necessarily remains a fantasy, it is in this ephemeral state of pleasure that black women can feel like one of their favorite celebrities on the magazine cover. It is *their own* feelings of joy and excitement which are at stake here, their *own* positive experiences at 'moments of straightness' that need to be taken seriously. Even if, as Calloway implies, straight hair dreams must disintegrate once we look back at the body physical, which "never had the hair to begin with", people *invest* in these fantasies as part of their everyday life routines. The double meaning of 'investment' as referring to the deployment of fiscal as well as symbolic stakes suggests that 'hair dreams' are far from innocent, but that they are tightly interlinked with socio-economic forces. Desires such as Calloway's "you wanna be that girl" are more than mere phantasms, but they are translated to the productive logics of capitalism, where they are negotiated within the structures of demand and supply. But how does Chris Rock conclude on such relations of demand and supply and the complex notion of women's hair investment?

One of the central questions in *Good Hair* that is conjured up as early as in the Lola sequence is why black women invest so much energy in straight hair

fantasies if they are never fully attainable, and more so if they also tend to marginalize black hair in its natural state. This is a question that has haunted black hair theory since the late 1980s (Mercer 1987) and that has remained a core concern in more recent publications (Patton 2006). While black feminist scholars address this question with a look on historical, socio-economic dynamics, Chris Rock's focus in *Good Hair* is on the players of the hair industry, namely the producers, distributors and consumers of hairstyle products. While this perspective supplies us with a basic understanding of business relations and economic structures, there is little space for sociological explanations of black women's hair fantasies as a powerful moment within the cycle of production and consumption.

*Good Hair* offers countless opportunities to emphasize that the dimensions of experience, desire and consumption are mutually constituent. One such opportunity first appears in an interview with Bernard Bronner, host of the Bronner Brothers hair show in Atlanta, who is asked about the extraordinary success of black hair business: "All I know is that we spend a ton of money on our hair. No matter what, we gonna look good. We gonna look good. Now, that's the bottom line, we gonna look good, regardless". In this short explanation, the promise to 'look good' is the point where demand and request meet, both economically and socially. It is not a promise made by Bernard Bronner himself but it is the central promise made by his products. As such it is based on the overarching capitalist promise that desires can be reified in commodities, that hair dreams can be fulfilled by transformation into fiscal capital; that by means of monetary investment we can 'buy ourselves' into the social realm of beauty and acceptance.

Another powerful instance illustrating the entanglements of hair expenses and social status is given in an ordinary hair salon scene, when a hairdresser explains the working women's need for straight hair. The latter, in this account, is not only a matter of status but a matter of 'naturalness'. The term natural as referring to a highly artificial hairstyle practice demonstrates its incorporation and normalization in black women's taste cultures. As argued in the previous chapter, this term represents straightness as an attribute of cultivation among black

women. Because of its rootedness in a fashion common sense of hair, ‘natural’ is not oriented towards the body in its natural state, but it refers to the natural living conditions of a black woman in the United States. The concept of naturalness as straightness exists in contingency on the corporate world in which the working lady has her hair straightened to in order to “look as natural as possible”, as the hairdresser confirms. Straightness, though necessarily excluding a ‘Black is Beautiful’ ideal, is not coterminous with ‘whiteness’, or the devaluation of blackness. Conversely, ‘naturalness’ as used in this way is a reference to the kind of black beauty ideal which reframes and reinterprets white values from a black diasporic position. From this position, it is the logic of capitalism, not primarily racism that beauty ideals are negotiated and read as more or less powerful.

This is further epitomized in celebrity talk about the *weave*<sup>15</sup>. While Raven Simoné proudly presents her moveable weave by saying “I paid a lot of money for this”, adding that “this is an investment”, Melyssa Ford is eager to equate financial power with the freedom to ‘change one’s mind’ in the following conversation:

Melyssa Ford:	I’m famous for switching out my weave once every month cause I get bored.
Chris Rock:	Is it 18.000 dollars for the year?
Melyssa Ford:	Yeah, about that... I change my mind a lot

A similar effect is achieved in Calloway’s statement when she proudly draws on black women’s capacity to change: “Give me two days, baby, what you want? Long, short, black, blue, green, little fan on the side? What hair do you look at? Give me a picture, give me two days, I got you” (Calloway). In all of these examples, it is monetary power by which the freedom of change is realized. Investment, then, is not the power to purchase hair products for their own sake (or

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<sup>15</sup>Weaves are (human or synthetic) hair pieces which are applied to the scalp by means of braiding, bonding or hair fusion. See: <http://www.brownskin.net/hairweaves.html>, last accessed 19 December 2010

for the sake of Bernard Bronner, who nevertheless effectively profits from the purchase), but for the sake of gaining social power and agency via hair products. Bronner's mantra 'we gonna look good, regardless' can be read as an expression of the will to power, which in capitalism equals investment. 'Looking good', as it is suggested in capitalism, is a project bestowing black women with a sense of self-esteem and pride, yet only by means of their devotion, their willingness to spend 'tons of money' on their hair.

When we thus contend that money is the currency in which the social level of hair is negotiated within the fashion paradigm, we have to note that Rock's slogan 'good hair is good money' focuses on aspects of the macro-political structure – the 'big players' of the hair industry – and ignores the socio-economic dynamics of everyday struggles. It is not interested in how, micro-politically, social power is negotiated via *hair investment*, and that the willingness to spend is encouraged by the equation of hair and status. Pointing at alarming sales numbers might – but does not necessarily – help explain the role of 'good hair' as an identity strategy in capitalism, but does not acknowledge the fact that social discourses constantly *reify* straight hair as something naturally beautiful and thus something *precious* to many black women. Calloway's fantasy of 'being that girl' on the magazine cover, who is a black girl with long flowing hair, is not her personal concoction but a desire that she shares with other black people in her community.

### **The price of maintaining a woman: male voices on black women's hair**

What has been discussed so far reverberates the movie's overall presumption that 'good hair' is a black women's issue, and that consequentially black women are the main participants in struggles over hair. In what follows I will challenge this view by arguing that while black women's bodies are definitely the *sites* of such struggles, such sites are inhabited by male as well as female voices. Black women, as we will find in *Good Hair*, are not the discursive owners of their hair issues, but their experiences are often negotiated from an external point of view. Chris Rock invites a number of male celebrities and some ordinary men to demonstrate this, deploying the narrative technique of overt gender-bias, which, however comically, constructs black women's hair as something beyond 'our'



understanding. The pronoun ‘our’ here essentially refers to anyone outside the black femininity box, particularly to black men, who helplessly attempt to unravel their women’s absurd quest for straight hair.

The discursive strategy of male solidarity constructs black femininity as an enigmatic phenomenon whose meaning – though powerfully affecting men – can never be ascertained by them. By being granted Chris Rock’s pity, black men – particularly black ‘ordinary men’ – come to be represented as the economic and social victims of the black hair enigma. Though unable to understand their women’s hair, they nevertheless suffer from the dreadful consequences of elaborate hairstyles. After all, as the head of the family, it is a black man’s duty to “find money upon the rock so that [his woman] can be pleased by getting her hair done”, says Scott Julion, visually labeled as celebrity stylist. In this quote, black women’s hairstyles are subject to male spending power, constructing the notion of investment as an essentially male practice. The allocation of capital to the male power sphere effectively deconstructs hairstyle as a feminine status symbol by restructuring it as the *male* part of the heterosexual pact.

As such, women’s hairstyles come to be represented as male property, which, in analogy to other kinds of property need constant maintenance by the owner. Chris Rock’s expression of pity for men who feel pressured to pay for their women’s hairstyles is a powerful affirmation of this hair-as-property agenda. This is the case in one of the hair salon scenes, when Chris Rock joins some ordinary men who sit in line to wait for their women to get their hair done (figure 13).

Chris Rock:           Have you guys ever been pressured into, you know,  
                                  giving a woman some money because of an  
                                  expensive weave?

Man 1:                 Mother and daughter.

Chris Rock:           Mother *and* daughter? So you spending...weaves...

Man 1:                 (sighs)

Chris Rock:           Is a weave a hurt in your pocket?

Man 1:                 (sighs)



**figure 13: ordinary black men as ‘good hair’ victims**

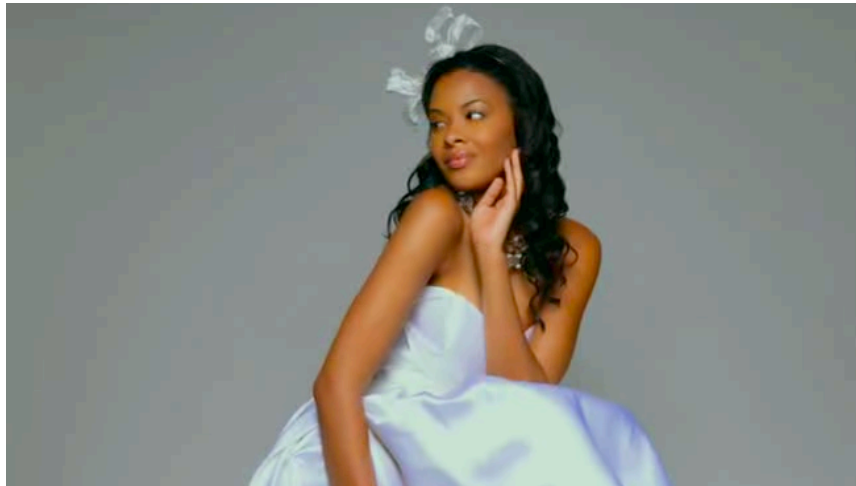
We see a row of ordinary men, contritely, yet patiently, waiting their turns to disburse their women’s hair expenses. Chris Rock’s initial question, which is addressed at all of the men, is uttered in a soft and careful tone, signaling understanding and solidarity with the expected response. The man on the right reacts, confirming the narrator’s intuition. What we see is an expression of concern and receded spirits in all men’s faces. They are represented as the prior victims of women’s costly fetishes that need to be enabled in order to fulfill their hetero-male promise. Pushed towards the end of the hair salon’s corner, they are forced to cope with the expenses caused by their mothers and daughters. We get the impression that by means of their uncontrollable addiction to straightness they embody a burden to men, a “hurt in your pocket”, as Chris Rock puts it. Simultaneously, however, this strategy reinforces the notion of women as dependent on male investors. It is not themselves who pay for their fetishes, but they are immovable objects whose worth depends on the spending power of a male stakeholder willing to invest into their maintenance.

The metaphor of women as immovable, unreactive objects is not too far-fetched as shall turn out some moments later. “The price of maintaining a woman”, says ‘music executive’ and celebrity speaker Andre Harrell, “is like real estate in New York City. It’s sky-rocketing... One trip to the hairdresser or the weaveologist can leave you bankrupt.” This dramatic comparison of real estate and black women’s hairstyles conjures up a connection between the materiality of hair and the

allegedly male sphere of spending power. As the 'you' undoubtedly refers to the male investor, hair is represented as something that pertains to the male sphere of responsibility and power. The bankruptcy metaphor helps facilitate two facets of this power; first, it affirms hair as male property, and second, it constructs hair as subjected to the incalculable forces of women's overreaching styling demands. Their impact on men's "pockets" is thereby envisioned as a stock market crash whose randomness might threaten men's investment plans.

Although straight hair is thereby allegedly a black man's burden, it is a burden implied as necessary at other points in the movie. After all, it is only by means of investment that men can enable women's straight-haired beauty, and this is something heatedly proclaimed by many black men. Among them Andre Harrell once again stands out as an advocate of 'good hair' in the fashion paradigm. In his first utterance, which immediately follows Calloway's aforementioned fantasy statement, black women's hair is made accessible to male desire: "When you look at a woman's hair it's a fantasy come true if they can really pull that off. So for me hair is well important" (Harrell).

Similarly to the construction of hair as immovable real estate, straight hair comes to be functionalized a spectacle ready for objectification by the male gaze. In this quote, looking is a practice associated with the active, male viewer, while 'pulling that off' is a woman's successful fulfillment of the male desire via straightening. In this gender matrix we see how the work of consumerism's blatant imperative – buy commodities and you be happy – is actualized on the personal level of taste and desire.



**figures 14 and 15: Andre Harrell and his ‘good hair’ fantasy**

Harrell’s tastes and desires might be constructions fostered by capitalist beauty discourse, but at the same time they are very *real* and *authentic* in Harrell’s own life world. They set the basis for a matrix of distinction according to which black women’s attractiveness can be identified. What he thereby generates is a cross-gender network of demands and incentives that can be understood in terms of a hegemonic regulating force. His statement extends the promise of consumer culture and the fashion paradigm according to which you can be good if you invest, and if you use your malleability in a successful way. Once you ‘pull it off’ you will be granted status and respectability, and consequentially be happy.

When Harrell starts to speak we see two freeze images of black straight-haired celebrities posing as princesses. One of them is dressed in white and wears a

white ribbon in her long and softly curled ebony hair (figure 14). This leaves us with a very concrete sense of what kind of womanhood might be able to ‘pull it off’. It is not the African queen, but the lactified Hollywood fairy tale princess that is suggested as the ideal manifestation of transformed black womanhood.

In Harrell’s fantasies, then, the hegemonic discourse of Eurocentric beauty comes to be visually reaffirmed. Harrell’s celebrity status, which identifies him as an important representative of ‘black men’ is a powerful facilitator of this reality effect. By virtue of his label Harrell is constructed to suggest something about the universality of male desire, something that might be imagined as the core of black masculinity and its ideas about ideal femininity. In this discourse, straight hair seems to be an integral part as the quintessence of desirability and sexiness.

The male voices discussed so far, though dismissing straight hair as an undecipherable ‘black women thing’ forcing men into financial and emotional chaos, have affirmed the fashion paradigm of hair. Understanding straight hair as expensive property or as spectacle catering to the male viewer are notions reifying male superiority while confirming straight hair as ‘good hair’. There are, however, moments where straight hair becomes the subject of anger and resentment. Most strikingly, one such moment occurs when Chris Rock tackles the subject of ‘weave touching’. As some weave-wearing women affirm, touching the weave is clearly taboo. From the way this sequence is edited – there are quick changes between male and female celebrity snippets – the notion of the weave as a territory outside male control is clearly challenged. Melyssa Ford’s demand, “it’s decoration...just leave it alone” is effectively counteracted by Ice-T’s heated claim, “I don’t care if you got fake titties, I wanna at least be able to squeeze ‘em. There just can’t be no off limits to no parts of your body. If it’s fake, cool, but I wanna touch anyway”. Later in this scene, Chris Rock asks in a celebrity interview, “But how close can you get with somebody if you can’t touch the hair?”, which later on induces him to bluntly confront some barber shop customers with the inquiry, “Do you feel a level of intimacy with a white woman that you cannot feel with the black woman?”

Chris Rock's conclusion that black women's weave issues might drive some black men into favoring other, naturally straight-haired races, is daring, as we see from the heated reactions by the barber shop community. However, while one ordinary man feels free to exclaim "Hell yeah, I speak up myself!" the rest of the discussion is dubbed by a funky jazz tune, coding the visual level of aroused gestures and comments as playful, friendly chaos. Chris Rock is the benevolent comedian, whose question, as shocking it might have seemed at the beginning, pales into insignificance. Nevertheless, this discourse helps disqualify the weave as an insufficient means of attaining beauty. Notably, this does not mean that Chris Rock turns to natural black hairstyles as an alternative. By his barber shop question he does not only suggest straight hair as the only hair imaginable, but he also offers an essentialist framework of black and white femininity which works according to the ideology of lactification. In it, the black woman's weave is a complex-ridden imitation of white 'natural' hair, which due to its unrestricted free flowing beauty allows for uninhibited intimacy between man and woman. In this discourse, the weave is abolished as the symbol of black women's enslavement, while the ideological legacy leading to the straight hair paradigm is cherished. By dismissing the weave as fake, there is no scenario of redemption left; like back in the colonial days, the black woman is subjected to eternal ugliness, while whiteness is the solution to be embraced.

There is another line of argument which, from a male perspective, denigrates the symbolic potential of the weave as source of beauty.

Ice-T: I's always bothered by women that had [a weave] and used it as a power thing. It's kind of like if I'm wearing somebody else's jewelry but I'm flexing it on you. That's kinda fake, so if you got a wig on but you flexing your hair like I'm supposed to give you points for that hair. I'm not giving you those points. I give you points for your ass, I give you points for your legs, your skin, but you don't get points for that. But you whipping it at me like.

Even if Ice-T's 'rating system' of black women is questionable as such, his dismissal of wigs and weaves as unauthentic deconstructs their potential to be experienced as real and authentic for some black women. Just like the act of wearing somebody else's jewelry, straight hair is conceived as slack imitation or forgery of *real* social power embodied by masculinity. The weave is thereby read as *failing* attempt to gain social power and influence, as it can be cast off as unauthentic and not belonging to the legitimate sphere of the woman's body. Quite contrarily to Harrell's hair fantasy then, Ice-T's devaluation of the weave suggests that fake hair can never be a 'power thing', pointing out that it is always 'the pimp' and its classification system that will hold the supremacist power over hair.

All of these examples demonstrate how black women's hair issues come to be negotiated externally, from the perspective of masculinity. Nia Long's initial statement that hairstyle pressures evolve 'within the black community' is thus to be taken seriously in regard to both men and women. As the Harrell hair fantasies have shown, the pressure to 'straighten it out' might be as much exerted by hetero-male discourses of desire as by women's own claims to social power. Also, when we look back at the equation of financial and social status, which is an equation enforced by capitalism, the intricate hairstyles of stars like Melyssa Ford and Nia Long clearly reflect such a social status. From a masculine perspective, however, this status is reinterpreted as belonging to the male sphere of investment, objectifying women to (expensive) facilities in need of maintenance. Overall, the empowering facets of straight hair for black women are rather denied than celebrated, incorporating it as a costly spectacle, whose negative consequences are to be endured by the black man. The latter is constructed as a good-willed investor, whose spending power is exploited by the insatiable demands of women, who, in return, define their hair as an off-limits zone, depriving the man of his deserved intimacy. This leaves the narrator with the need to leave the obscure realms of black hair logics and to seek refuge in the promise of white women's straightness.

What the ubiquity of male voices in *Good Hair* so aptly demonstrates is that the abstract principles of capitalism and consumer culture come to be incorporated

and activated in the private spheres of desire and taste. This emphasizes the complexity of the stakes and culpabilities involved in black women's 'pressures'. After all, it might be multinational business corporations which are interested in facilitating notions of desire that lead to soaring sales numbers. Their contribution to a costly standard of beauty is made via advertisement. Yet once we take seriously that the financial and the social worlds overlap, and that consequently, advertising is mediated by everyday life practice, we have to contend that it is not by the 'big players' that notions of desire and desirability are established. Equally importantly, consumerist logics sediment in discourse of taste and desire, where they come to be experienced as *real*, where they come to be incorporated in people's everyday truth regimes.

What we see happen in the narrator's ignorance of the dimension of desire is the trivialization of women's hair experiences as costly and fake fetishes. The notion of *investment* is never critically reflected in its double meaning of financial and social privilege, but it is primarily rendered as tantamount to the male enslavement by their women's hair issues. Further, by emphasizing the relation between an essentially 'black' willingness to spend tons of money on hair products and an essentially 'white' or 'Asian' industry that profits from it, Chris Rock constructs a colonial scenario which suggests the black *man*'s enslavement to non-black economies. Conclusively, black men are in the position of double enslavement; as the head of the family, they are responsible for their women's hair issues to be resolved. As the members of a white hegemony, they also participate on the lower social scale, suffering from a dominant white capitalist regime.

### **Deep in the Flesh: 'Good Hair' as Pain and Addiction**

Leaving the socio-historical dimension of the phrase 'good hair' untouched, Chris Rock's interest in the *players* scapegoats 'the industry' as culpable of all 'good hair' misery. What is suggested is that 'hair business' and 'the media' are the major forces pushing women into consumption and men into financial devastation. In this argument, there is a mono-directional relation between production and consumption. The latter is not seen as a driver to, but as a direct



consequence of the former, dismissing hairstyle consumption as an act of blind submission to the (white, Asian) capitalist dictate.

Desires, then, come to be understood as reactions to this dictate and not as the facilitators of certain supply and demand structures. This necessarily downgrades women's experiences of hair as a powerful social signifier and dismisses hairstyle as delivery to 'the business'. As it is a delivery of the black body to a 'white' and 'Asian' production system, Chris Rock implies, what we face is the repetition of colonialist logics. In this sense, hair business is yet another instance of black enslavement in the age of capitalism. It enslaves men to the constant maintenance of their women, and it enslaves women to the destruction of their bodies and minds via detrimental hairstyle products and sickening fetishes.

We have now arrived at a line of argument, which, though diametrical to Rock's own unquestioned desire for straight hair, is prominently represented in *Good Hair*. While fashion has been the dominant discursive tool introducing us to the notion of 'good hair' via celebrity talk (see above), flesh is important when it comes to showing *how* the straight hair ideal is realized. This is an interesting turn in the movie's agenda, critically exposing us to the potential side effects of intricate hairstyle procedures which involve aggressive chemicals, and cause pain. Other than the turn to straight hair as social empowerment, this perspective would enable Chris Rock to look beyond the straight hair paradigm and come up with alternative perspectives on black beauty that are more oriented towards a flesh approach,

This, however, is not the case when it comes to the deployment of the flesh rationale throughout the movie. There is an exhaustive discussion on perms and weaves as the two major hairstyle techniques favored by black women, which has two strong effects. First, it enforces the exclusion of 'natural hair talk', which might allow us to take a look at the diverse repertoire of other hairstyles available in the black hair community. Secondly, it creates an impression of hairstyle addiction as an illness innate to the subject position of black femininity.

The connection between perms, weaves and health is achieved via para-scientific and sanitary discourse, which pronounces the risks caused by the application of chemical substances to the human body. What comes to be highlighted, then, is the detrimental effect of sodium hydroxide, a substance often included in straightening creams, which causes the partial destruction of the hair protein and its texture. Perms often involves an extent of pain that comes to be described as “the most excruciating burn” (T-Pain). As an anonymous ordinary woman in a hairdresser’s chair explains: “You’re on fire, literally. You know my hair, it was just burning. The sensation was just terrible. Immediately I just began to cry, it was horrible.”

The idea that black women know about the painful side effects of perms but seem nevertheless willing or even enthusiastic to regularly undergo the procedure, lends itself to the discourse of addiction, in which the hairstyle is the drug physically and mentally enslaving the woman’s body. These accounts underline the black body in pain and squalor as it undergoes the process of straightening. Women’s will to straightness is thereby powerfully re-constructed as a symptom of their addiction, reinterpreting hairstyle *choices* as hairstyle *urges*, relentlessly driving women into acts of self-aggression. This also reverberates in the representation of the black woman desperately looking for a ‘nap antidote’, as Chris Rock puts it. In their quest against nappy hair, as is further suggested, they might eventually find themselves hooked ‘on the creamy crack’, a phrase that the narrator learns from a young ordinary woman during a bus ride. In analogy to the creamy crack metaphor, weaves are constructed as yet another materialization of the black female propensity to addiction.

Chris Rock: People don’t realize how much money is in this. It just seems that your clientele is more hooked to this than say cocaine.

Hairdresser: Well, I tell you, once they start they won’t go back. They won’t go back.

Chris Rock: Like, she’s been getting weaves for ten years. If she had a drug habit she’d have been to rehab by now. You know, even a bad drug addict got...

Hairdresser: (yes)

Chris Rock: ... periods of sobriety... The weave is gonna put you in situations that you don't wanna be in... You gonna date men that you don't wanna date...cause you gotta pay the money on this weave.

As it shows in Chris Rock's first sentence, black women's urge to 'good hair' is not only represented as a symptom of a collective psycho-somatic disorder, but it is once again closely articulated to the male power sphere of investment. The idea that perm and weave addiction is inevitably dependent on a male investor, and that, further, women are willing to date men 'that you don't wanna date' just to get their hair done is tantamount to constructing black women as destitute subjects fully delivered to their addiction. Wearing straight hair, in this discourse, is not a matter of choice and determination but an act of despair deprived of any female independence and pride. The relationship between black women and investment is the point where flesh and fashion paradigm converge in a patriarchal notion of dependence. In their illness (flesh), caused by capitalism's fatal promises of beauty, they turn to costly fetishes (fashion) in need to be compensated by the male investor.

The material and psychological aggressiveness of weaves and perms comes to be further epitomized in para-scientific discourse evolving in a laboratory conversation between Chris Rock and 'Professor Berry', whose partial anonymity does not infringe his expertise as a chemist able to demonstrate the perm effect via experiment. As we can see in figure 16, both of them stand in front of a periodic table, wearing white overalls, protective goggles and gloves, three items that conjure up a somewhat exaggerated notion of 'scientificness'. In spite of the comedic effect this representation generates, there is the scientific authenticity of 'Professor Berry', whose whiteness stands out as another signifier of a Eurocentric naturalist tradition, evoking seriousness and meticulousness. In two experiments, 'Professor Berry' shows the damaging effect of sodium hydroxide to aluminum cans and on some chicken. The fractured texture of the chicken skin as well as the dissolving cans are displayed in close-up as proof of perm's powerful threat to the organic, vulnerable body.



**figure 16: para-scientific flesh discourse on perm**

The ‘scientific’ space in which Chris Rock encounters the perm effect adds to the notion of hairstyle products as adversary to the human body. The naturalistic appeal in this scene creates the chemical substance as a dangerous and harmful substance which might cause permanent damage to the body. That Chris Rock suddenly visits a white chemist when all of his other interviewees are black, arguably enhances the truth effect of the laboratory, which is a traditional white male space. Thus, discourse gains a more serious note, facilitating an authoritarian, instructive character stressing the aspect of physical vulnerability.

Pain and squalor are constructed as the logical epicenter of the perm hairstyle, which, as well as the weave, might lead to black female and male enslavement via addiction. Both perms and weaves are very intricate procedures which inflict a considerable extent of hair alteration and are therefore a suitable milieu for constructions along the lines of the flesh paradigm. Yet even though this is done in *Good Hair*, it is not done so by redefining ‘nappy’ hair as beautiful, but with a straight focus on the aspect of vulnerability and physical/mental disorder.

The lack of a flesh perspective which encourages the notion of natural hair as beautiful hair is particularly visible in a scene where some students discuss their job perspectives after graduation. As we can see in figure 17, three out of five wear straight hairstyles, there is one natural hairstyle, and the



**figure 17: Students weighing their job perspectives without ‘good hair’**

speaker’s hair is in braids. The unfolding conversation is edited in a way that we only get to hear two out of five opinions, both affirming the role of straight hairstyles within the corporate world. What we get exposed to are the following discussion elements:

Chris                      Do you think you have a chance to get a good job with  
Rock:                      natural hair or you gonna need a weave to get a good job?

Girl 1:                      Even though I think your Afro is kind of cute (looks at girl  
to her left), if somebody came into my office with like an  
Afro way out here and a suit that really seems out of place.  
*It’s like a contradiction*, so I would kind of second guess.

Girl 2:                      If I was going to say some new law firm and you wanted to,  
you know, join, and I’m like, okay, you look really nice and  
I’m understanding what you’re saying, but I can’t get past  
the fact that you gonna be sitting with big executives and  
all that, and it’s like, they’re not really gonna take you  
seriously for the fact that you just don’t look too put  
together.

Figure 17 is a screenshot taken at the moment when girl 1 utters the italicized words, circumscribing the meaning of ‘contradiction’ by an up/down movement

with her hands. In this gesture the vertical imagination of class/race distinctions are actualized, epitomizing the way hairstyles are still effectively deployed as indicators of such distinctions. While we have seen the dominance of the fashion paradigm at other parts of the movie, one might wonder about the role of the Afro haired girl, who is evidently invited to join but not capable or willing to challenge her straight-haired friends' claims.

Apparently, as this kind of editing suggests, there is nothing left to say on the relationship between black hair and serious career perspectives. The silent presence of an Afro haired girl signals confirmation, creating the impression that there is no reconciliation of important business partners and black looks that seem to be 'out of place'. When we look at the way *Good Hair* is negotiated on *YouTube*, we find this scene to be a central reason for the movie's relative failure to win 'natural' audiences (see chapter 4.3). The more empowering, liberating dimension of the flesh paradigm is just not addressed as a possible solution to what had been earlier represented as physical and mental enslavement via perms and weaves. As a result, this pushes us back to the beginning, starting the vicious circle of 'good hair' argumentation anew by using fashion for the definition of beauty, and using flesh for the illustration of its detrimental results.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Even in the light of Chris Rock's initial mission statement which seems to leave him concerned about his daughters' personal fates as black girls in America, it is the *external* world of commerce and business structures that Chris Rock is more interested in than in the *internal* world of black women's hair stories. The 'public' world of riches, stardom and glamour seems to have more to offer for a movie whose main purpose is to entertain a heterogeneous audience. *Good Hair* signals this purpose by the way it is edited; there are short sequences and quickly moving camera angles accompanied by ubiquitous music and marked sound effects. One of the most frequent sounds guiding us through the movie is the clicking noise of a cash register. On the visual level, we get exposed to the colorful spectacles of hairstyle performances, we see a number of well renowned black celebrities, and we are introduced to several ordinary men and women talking about and working on hair in the United States.

But what does the analysis of this movie suggest in terms of the flesh/fashion framework of hair? Arguably, the mixture of flesh and fashion exposed in *Good Hair* caters to the view that simultaneously objectifies and denigrates straight hair as desirable and detrimental. From the perspective of fashion, we learn that straightened hair is an important and powerful signifier of status among black women. There is an affirmation of hair as decoration, as malleable material in this argument. What is suggested in black women's talk about their versatile, flexible hairstyles is changeability as an expression of social power. The potential to change, however, is closely interlinked with financial capital, which is taken away from the female power sphere by constructing it as quintessentially masculine. Nevertheless, the female will to straightened hair corresponds with the dominant representation of male desire. The fantasy of long flowing hair is not particularly gendered, but pertains to both men and women.

One part of the fashion paradigm which – though present in the Lola-promise – is not critically acknowledged is the entanglement of social pressures with their material consequences. Arguably, this is the point where the narrator uses the pathologizing discourse of flesh to comically frame ideological and physical pressures as illnesses. In diagnosing 'creamy crack' addiction, and by showing the effect of sodium hydroxide in para-serious laboratory experiments, Chris Rock uses a health discourse on the body physical and psychological. This reinforces a reinterpretation of straightening practices as acts of self-aggression and masochism, without offering an alternative to the straight hair ideal. What remains is the accusation of 'consumer culture', commerce and business as the ubiquitous forces putting constraints on black women's bodies, submitting them to blind and passive consumption. Although desires as well as consumer choices, as we have seen in various examples, evolve within the private sphere, they are constructed as the one-directional result of commerce and business. Both black men and women are enslaved, the latter by virtue of their 'creamy crack' and weave addictions, the former in their role as the stakeholders of risky and unpredictable investment in such addictions. What is the conclusion developed from this representation of a somewhat grotesque black hair vicious circle? We might find it when we look at what Chris Rock teaches his daughters upon the return from his hair journey: "So

what do I tell my daughters? I tell ‘em that the stuff on top of their heads is nowhere near as important as the stuff that is inside of their heads.” If this is the corollary of Chris Rock’s initial hair question, it might be conclusively read as a statement of resignation. After all, what *Good Hair* proclaimed to attempt at the beginning was to come up with an explanation of the *idea* that came to be known and powerfully constructed as ‘good hair’. While the remarkable significance of black hair had been effectively demonstrated throughout the movie, Chris Rock arrives at a point where he eventually dismisses the subject as *unimportant*. This is surprising as it is somewhat at odds with his promise to take black hair seriously as a pressuring subject, abolishing the idea of hair trouble from the moralizing perspective of trivialization.



#### 4.2. GOOD HAIR ON TV: OPRAH AND TYRA

Even before *Good Hair* was launched in select US cinemas on October 9 2009, it had become the heated subject of media discourse, most prominently of black American talk show formats. Chris Rock was brought to the center of attention in his double role as TV star and black American father. Due to this twofold role ascription he could both be embraced as a representative of ‘black culture’ in America as well as a celebrity whose social status and influence could raise the movie’s topic to the public agenda. Whether or not he managed to generate an adequate portrayal of ‘good hair’ issues in the US, his promotional efforts are undeniable. “I watched [Chris Rock] on *Oprah*, I watched him on *The View*, I watched him on *Wendy Williams*, I watched him on *Tyra*, and I watched him on *Mo’nique*”,<sup>16</sup> says BlackOnyx77, one of the *YouTubers* posting her review of *Good Hair* online (see chapter 4.3). In what follows I wish to ascertain the role of talk show discourse as an important mediator of black women’s hair and their identities in the US in two examples. Even though it would have been rewarding to look at the entirety of the various media texts evolving in the context of *Good Hair*, the material restrictions of this study suggest otherwise. I therefore decided to narrow down my focus on the two most well-known examples in black talk show culture, *Oprah* and *Tyra*.

Arguably, *Oprah* and *Tyra* have played a significant role in the promotion and in the overall negotiation of *Good Hair* and its central topic. By means of their own celebrity status, evaluation of Chris Rock’s performance and their interactions with talk show guests their main hosts take an important role in rendering black hair and identity as an issue of wide public interest.

Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt have provided a useful approach towards talk shows as social discursive spaces. They define the talk shows as a “community where everyone belongs” (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 4), and where ordinary and lay discourse is celebrated side by side with expertise and celebrity culture. The negligible extent of editing, as well as the presence of a lively studio audience, as they further argue, add to the impression of immediacy and authenticity of this specific discourse (ibid: 39). Furthermore, there is the powerful persona of the

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<sup>16</sup> Also see chapter 4.3.

host who, though she might embody multiple roles, always exerts a certain degree of control over the speakers. Taking these characteristics into consideration, Livingstone and Lunt arrive at an understanding of talk shows as liminal social spaces. They are liminal by their virtue of establishing connections between the contradictions of experience and authority, placing together representatives of high and low social status. Here is a quote which pinpoints this central argument on talk shows:

This social space [of the talk show] has the potential for both the reproduction of existing beliefs, representations and practices and the transformation of traditional social forms through the construction of a public sphere which mediates between established power (via argument and accountability) and everyday experience (via story-telling). (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 173).

Livingstone and Lunt have also pointed out that talk show space is gendered. Not only is the notion of ‘gossip’ constructed as feminine sort of discourse, but there is also a focus on ‘women’s issues’ and the attraction of female audiences (ibid: 46). In *Oprah* and *Tyra*, both hosts are constructed as archetypal representatives of ‘black women in the USA’, a category whose truthfulness is powerfully reaffirmed in discourse on ‘our hair’ as black women’s hair.

Oprah and Tyra both incorporate the notion of successful black womanhood in the US and thus exert a vital leadership role within the black community. They might be thus regarded as ‘organic intellectuals’, a Gramscian term which has been mobilized in cultural studies to denote influential class organizers regulating intellectual and moral life (Storey 2006: 64). Other than Chris Rock, who in spite of his authority in black discourse is limited to an external perspective on black womanhood, Oprah and Tyra suggest to embody this very category, reifying its persistence and its truthfulness in their reaction to Rock’s position. That Chris Rock is invited to both formats to speak as an expert on black woman’s hair might be read as an act of gratitude for the fact that “the comedian goes where few men have dared before”<sup>17</sup> but it also highlights his influence within the definitory space

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<sup>17</sup> See: <http://www.oprah.com/showinfo/Girl-Talk-About-Good-Hair-with-Chris-Rock>, last accessed on December 19 2010

of black women's talk show discourse. It positions him as male equivalent vis-à-vis the powerful personae of Oprah and Tyra, who are both willing to listen to his concept of black femininity and to embed it in the feminized space of talk show discourse. In so doing, both women perform a quite antagonistic, problematic role in terms of their function as organic intellectuals. After all, In *Good Hair*, Oprah and Tyra come to be mentioned among the most powerful representatives of the dominant straight hairstyle culture. This is hardly deniable when we take a look at their official web pages, where both solidly adhere to the 'anti-nap' principle<sup>18</sup>. At the same time, however, both hosts assert their solidarity with women who decide to 'go natural' and reject the straight hair regime. Arguably, there is a tension within their leadership function which they attempt to resolve in quite different ways.

In my first example, which is an *Oprah Show* episode entitled "Girl Talk About 'Good' Hair with Chris Rock", I will look at the way Chris Rock's perspective is approached, embraced or challenged by Oprah shortly prior to the movie's release. In contrast to that, the second example demonstrates how the movie has stirred up talk show debate, focusing on a *Tyra Show* episode which was aired some months prior to the movie's release. Whereas the *Oprah* episode exemplifies the movie's negotiation in its promotional phase, centering on celebrity 'girl talk', *The Tyra Show* illustrates how the movie's subject matter has been mobilized on its own right for black women's 'ordinary' debate. We can thereby trace how Chris Rock's central Lola-promise (see 4.1) has been traveled to talk show culture in two different ways, reviewing moments of its incorporation and resistance throughout expanding discussions.

### **"What's the Ordeal?" *Good Hair* on *The Oprah Show***

Among the talk shows that have invited Chris Rock for an exclusive interview Oprah might stand out as the most famous one. The episode's title 'Girl Talk About 'Good' Hair with Chris Rock'<sup>19</sup> promises two things; first that the panel is all about women's issues, and secondly that it is fully devoted to the central star,

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<sup>18</sup> See: [http://www.oprah.com/oprah\\_show.html](http://www.oprah.com/oprah_show.html) on Oprah and <http://tyrashow.warnerbros.com/> on Tyra, both last accessed 19 December 2010.

Chris Rock, who is granted the freedom to talk about black women's desires. However, as the inverted comma framing the word 'good' suggests the issue at stake might be due to further investigation and negotiation. When we look at the way Chris Rock's contribution to the *Oprah Show* is framed, he can be argued to hold a powerful position. By virtue of his double role as star and black man he is allowed to effectively exploit the talk show infrastructure, which privileges an antagonistic mix of "everyday expertise" (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 160). As a black celebrity and film narrator he embodies both 'the common black experience' and 'black hair expertise', moving between the oppositional spaces of the private and the professional man.

It is in the very first moments of the show that Oprah first forces Chris Rock into a position of defense. After introducing him as "one of the funniest people I know on the planet earth" welcoming him with an amicable hug, Oprah opens the floor for dispute: "Alright, I saw *Good Hair*; you're trying to call us out!" Even though Chris Rock's outraged "no!" is cast off by a rejecting gesture, accompanied by the distinct exclamation "yes you are! You are trying to call us out", Oprah does not tell us what exactly is implied in her accusation. Instead of starting off conversation about the movie's contents, she proudly draws Rock's attention to her own (straightened) hair: "I knew this is a hair show, so I decided to wear my own hair". As Chris Rock does not believe her, speculating that "you got a little extra piece right here though", Oprah demonstrates the 'realness' of her hair by bending forward, inviting Rock to touch her scalp.

In her hair demonstration Oprah sends a schizophrenic message to her black female audiences. On the one hand she rejects Rock's generalized conclusions about hairstyle techniques. On the other hand, however, she reinforces the straight hair regime by framing it as a task attainable a black woman. It is attainable, however, only under certain conditions as Oprah admits later on in the show: "I've had the same hairdresser for 24 years. That's why I still have my hair". The enthusiastic audience applause followed by Chris Rock's response that "your hairdresser should get a Nobel peace price for that" is particularly interesting when we look at Oprah's hairstyle from a flesh/fashion perspective. Arguably, her hairstyle powerfully reconciles the two oppositional notions of 'naturalness' that we have come across. There is the ideal of straightness represented by her long,

full mane, yet this straightness seems to be achieved without the work of artifice. This allows Oprah to incorporate a hybrid notion of ‘good hair’ in which fashion and flesh ideals converge in a double-bind message. Her look expresses solidarity with dominant notions of black US beauty while the lack of ‘fakeness’ to achieve it signifies black authenticity in the flesh paradigm.

That Oprah possesses the power to attain straight, full and long flowing hair without artifice dismantles Rock’s assumption that straight hairstyles, though unquestionably the black beauty ideal, are inevitably bound to fakeness and simulation. The *mélange* of versatility (fashion) and natural growth (flesh) strikes Rock as something hitherto unimaginable in the black hair universe. His amazement and the consequential call for a ‘Nobel peace price’ reverberates the central claim of the flesh/fashion framework; that it is only by means of balance that we can come up with a truly empowering notion of ‘good hair’. Whether or not this is realized in Oprah’s straightened hair might be doubted, but by demonstrating that the simultaneity of the black follicle and dominant beauty ideal are possible she clearly disrupts Rock’s imagination of full flowing hair as bound to artifice. Instead of challenging straight beauty, then, she challenges the idea that it is attainable only by the limited passageways that Rock portrays in the movie. That this act of resistance against Rock’s propositions is decipherable only from a ‘black’ experiential horizon is something that is immediately contended by Oprah, when she turns to her audiences:

Oprah:                   Ok, so all of the white people are like, what is the deal? By the end of this show and certainly after you see Chris’s movie you know what the deal is. Chris is here to tackle a subject that might surprise a lot of you. He is here to talk about hair in an effort to understand African American women better and our obsession with our hair. Now for years, you know, I’ve had people all over the country, all over the world come to this show, and at the end of the show often I say, you know, there’s a commonality in the human experience, we’re all the same in so many ways, except our hair [addressing Chris Rock] and

you wanted to take this on...

In this quote, Oprah presents Rock's project in a light quite different from the initial accusatory tone, highlighting its significance to the black US community. By identifying hair as the only exception from the 'commonality' of human experience she emphasizes the follicle's role as a marker of difference. Rock's intention to approach the racialization of 'good hair' is certainly something that Oprah acknowledges. It also supplies Rock with the opportunity to tell the Lola story as proof of his own experiential closeness to black women's hair issues.

By consciously addressing a white audience which might not be able to 'read' Oprah's and Rock's initial hair dispute Oprah makes the subject accessible to a diverse audience. Furthermore, she encourages white audiences to establish relations between their own hair experiences and the ones presented in the movie. Even though Oprah suggests that *Good Hair* has stimulated interracial hair discourse among her production team, inducing white women to openly address black hairstyles issues, this new openness could be effectively used by black women to learn about white hair trouble: "So what I realized from when I was talking to one of my producers who happens to be white, and I was looking at her and said 'you know what I realized? I realize that none of you has your own hair color!'" (Oprah).

'Hair color obsession' among white women might be the closest equivalent to the perm hairstyle, as it also involves the application of (detrimental) substances to the scalp. It can thus be mobilized as an adequate indicator of the commonalities in white and black hair struggle, framing it as an overall 'female' subject. Like the perm hairstyle to white people, the cultural significance of 'hair color obsession' may not be entirely decipherable by many black women.

Identifying this 'weak spot' in white hairstyle culture inevitably causes an egalitarian effect. It stresses the notion that all women's hair is docile, that black women do not have to feel pressured by the idea that they are alone in their quest for 'good hair' and in their pressure to attain an acceptable standard of beauty. Dismantling the notion white (women's privilege by contending that the submission to beauty regimes is a cross-racial phenomenon might sound initially

liberating. Looking at how representatives of seemingly ‘superior’ races struggle for social acceptance encourages women’s solidarity along the slogan ‘a problem shared is a problem halved’. Yet does this focus on the universality of women’s pressures help to reconstruct a notion of beauty which might challenge suffering? Arguably, it does the reverse by further normalizing suffering as a collective female experience. The essentialist belief in pressure as gendered experience is not only powerful in its including ‘community’ function but also in its capacity to exclude those women who opt against pressure and in favor of alternative hairstyle conceptions.

That female solidarity is not to be conceived as the solution to black women’s hair pressures but rather as a starting point from which to arrive at counter-hegemonic hairstyle strategies comes more pronounced when Solange Knowles, Oprah’s second and last guest in this episode, enters the stage. As celebrity actress associated with dominant beauty standards Solange had made headlines by cutting off her hair and wearing a ‘natural’ look.

This step, which had drawn remarkable public attention, was used by Solange as an opportunity to identify ‘good hair’ as a ‘bondage’ which black women actively put on themselves. In acclaiming this step, Oprah stresses her own opinion on hairstyle as an ‘ordeal’ to black women.

Oprah:                    You talk about free from the bondage that black women sometimes put on themselves. Did you feel sort of enslaved to it? It is an ordeal, you know, when I opened my school in South Africa the first rule I had was that every girl has to have her hair braided. And we have braiders there all the time to keep the girls in their natural state of hair because I did not want those girls waking up every morning thinking about what am I going to do with my hair and trying to perm the hair themselves and straighten the hair themselves, cause it is an ordeal.

In Oprah’s notion of ordeal, variety comes to be represented as an adversary which can only be counteracted by the benevolent reinforcement of uniformity. In

Oprah's account the establishment of a 'braiding regime' is suggested as a humanitarian act designed to liberate the students from the ordeal of choice. This construction of choice as constraint, which might be overcome by a restrictive regime seems somewhat paradoxical, yet along the lines of the fashion concept it can conclusively be disentangled. What is highlighted in Oprah's account is that choice does not equal freedom, but that by choice black women are pushed to negotiate their social worth via hairstyle. Hegemony and its little sister, docility, are the leading principles in this race for status and acceptance. By cutting her hair off, Solange automatically stigmatizes herself as unwilling to further participate in this race. The strong public arousal caused by the decision to 'go natural' indicates that such a step is still widely regarded as radical.

Solange's natural look signifies two things. On the one hand it stands in for the rejection of the mainstream black hair ordeal which keeps women docile in their quest for 'good hair'. In that sense it signifies liberation from the burden of beauty standards, or as Oprah concludes: "so you are free now". On the other hand, it marks Solange as 'outlaw' who no longer participates in a part of the collective 'black experience'. By the same token that she has gained freedom from choice, moreover, Solange has also been excluded from the dominant *rewarding* system which measures hair in terms of straightness. That such a dominant system exists has been amply shown in Harrell's and Calloway's hair fantasies, as well as by Chris Rock's fascination with Oprah's real, long flowing hair. Striving for effortless beauty in the fashion paradigm, as pointed out in these examples, is a worthwhile endeavor. This is even contended by Solange herself when she remarks that "in life you go through different phases. This is the phase where I'm like, I can't deal with it. Not to say, three years later I'm not gonna want that straight hair down to my behind again" (Solange).

Summing up her own wish for black hairstyle politics, Oprah eventually concludes: "So we should be able to have the choice". In this utterance echoes a quite different understanding of choice than we have encountered before in her schoolgirl example. What she expresses here is the hope for choice without pressure, which conjures up the utopian idea of hairstyle beyond hierarchization. When we look at Oprah's own hairstyle choices, however, we might note that the social rewards gained from pertaining a straight ideal are stronger than her actual



will for choice. Even though she provides us with glimpses into her own ‘hair history’, which present her with various hairstyles, she generally appears on TV with ‘better’ (straightened) hair. Additionally, in contrast to Solange she avidly refuses contemplation about going ‘natural’ herself. This becomes obvious when a white woman in the audience refers to Oprah’s status as an organic intellectual who “may be empowered to change the culture” by cutting her hair off. During this comment we see Oprah dismissively shaking her head, later pointing out that she does not have “the head for it”.

Oprah thereby elegantly evades the main difficulty at stake. The conflation of straightness (fashion) and black authenticity (flesh) constructs Oprah’s hairstyle as hybrid concoction that might be perceived as powerful and problematic at the same time. On the one hand we have seen how her hairstyle deconstructs Rock’s equation of straightness and fakeness. In this sense she undermines Rock’s expectation that straightened hair goes hand in hand with ‘extra pieces’, demonstrating that there might be more variety in black hairstyle culture than he was previously aware of. On the other hand, the double naturalness that Oprah performs is problematic for the concept of choice that she claims to embrace. While using the infrastructure of a dominant straightness ideal in order to acquire social status Oprah simultaneously denies her affiliation to this infrastructure by supporting the idea of ‘going natural’. When it comes to performing the act of going natural herself, however, her support turns out to be a lip service intended to support others, like Solange, in their agenda. Oprah herself does not intend to ‘change culture’. Her refusal to perform the kind of choice that she proclaims as integral to the abolishment of hair ordeal eventually reinforces the idea that powerful black femininity in the USA goes hand in hand with straight hair.

### **“I think they are lower class”: *Good Hair* on *The Tyra Show***

Like Oprah Winfrey, Tyra Banks invited Chris Rock in for exclusive hair talk, but she also hosted another panel on the question “What is Good Hair?”, which was aired two some months prior to the movie’s release, drawing on some of its contents as a starting point for the discussion of ordinary women’s experiences with the phenomenon of ‘good hair’. Other than in *Oprah*, whose main focus is on Chris Rock and Oprah herself, then, Tyra invites a number of ordinary women with highly diverging perspectives on the topic. Additionally, two women

identified as experts by means of visual labeling are seated in the audience and frequently comment on what has just been said.

Spending a comparatively small quantity of time on the movie itself, *Tyra* takes on the fact that “Chris Rock actually spent two years of his life making a movie about [‘good hair’]” as an indicator of the topic’s relevance within the black community. Also, Tyra mobilizes the Lola theme to stress the subject’s association with upbringing and education, allowing the discussion to move to mother-daughter relationships and cross-generational conflicts within a working class context. This approach opens up a discursive sphere quite different from *Good Hair*’s focus on celebrity culture and consumption.

What has previously been argued about Oprah’s hybrid position between dominant culture and solidarity with ‘natural’ hairstyles can also be claimed in regard to Tyra Banks and her status as US fashion icon and TV star. Without much doubt, she remains an ambiguous figure in black hairstyle culture, even if in the context of her talk show episode on “What is Good Hair?” she seems to take a clear stance as an adherent to ‘natural’ hair culture. As an introductory note she explains: “My hair is in cornrows because I’m about to let you in on a controversial subject that not a lot of people know about”. While the relation between cornrows and the controversial nature of the subject is not further elaborated, Tyra’s need to explain her hairstyle choice points towards the unusualness of wearing cornrows on TV. Cornrows are highlighted as a marker of difference whose class associations do not harmonize with Tyra’s own status within US culture. The way Tyra explains her performance once more epitomizes the conflict between affiliation to dominant culture and solidarity with ‘natural’ culture. By means of explaining herself Tyra performs two diametrical acts: On a superficial rhetoric level she expresses her solidarity with ‘natural’ hairstyle culture, pointing to her contribution to the abolishment of straightening ordeals by virtue of her own hairstyle choice. On a deep level, however, she marks this hairstyle choice as unusual, repeating the dominant system of representation. Cornrows, she implies, is not the usual hairstyle worn by black women of social and cultural significance. This induces the repetition of cornrows as low class marker.



**figure 18: Tyra highlighting her cornrows at the beginning of the show**

By virtue of her new ‘natural’ self, Tyra takes the role of a benevolent judge whose moral verdict is oriented towards a flesh paradigm of hair. She thus draws on Rock’s legacy to emphasize the psychologically and physically detrimental effect of ‘artificial’ hairstyles. This is especially effective in the case of very young girls who come to be asked about their hairstyle experiences and talk about ‘good hair’.

Most noticeable is a scene in which five year old Malia proclaims that “when I see people with nappy hair I think they are lower class”. This utterance is shown twice throughout the show to remind us that the pressure for ‘good hair’ starts in childhood. Right after this utterance, a six year old girl named Shaniyah puts on a blonde ‘Hannah Montana’ wig. When asked why she brought it along, Shaniyah responds: “I think that people like me better when I have my Hannah Montana wig on because my hair is long and pretty.” In Shaniyah’s wig performance we find a somewhat grotesque extension of the Lola conflict in which the struggle for acceptance materializes in the appearance of Hannah Montana’s blondness. Worn on Shaniyah’s black body it represents an effective marker of whiteness as power and beauty.

Lola and Shaniyah share their experiential horizon in their knowledge that whiteness equals power and beauty. Yet while Lola remains at the level of crisis, Shaniyah has found a provisional strategy to overcome ‘otherness’ and express her submission to a dominant beauty ideal.



**figure 19: Shaniyah performing whiteness**

What her performance so powerfully highlights is the persistent reality of whiteness as power, which usually remains unnoticed. As Richard Dyer puts it: “Whites must be seen to be white, yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen” (Dyer 1997: 45). In Shaniyah’s embrace of her Hannah Montana wig, however, whiteness as power becomes highly visible and thereby tangible.

Switching back to the studio debate, Tyra tries to ascertain the source for the girls’ shocking hair performances by confronting their mothers. Addressing Malia’s mother, Tyra inquires:

Tyra:            When you look at children that have hair that is coarse or... what does that make you think?

Shante:        Like me, when I was growing up, a low class and poor.

Tyra:            And your daughter was the one that said that kinkier hair is low class. Thus she got that from her mum.

As Malia’s articulation of ‘kinkiness’ and ‘lower class’ clearly echo her mother’s agenda the origin of ‘good hair’ issues seems to be in the maternal sphere of upbringing. Consequentially, Tyra spends most of her time on teaching her guests how to perform their children’s hair in a more socially acceptable way. In the case of Michelle, whose daughter first received a perm at the age of three because “two and a half years old [her hair] started to get nappy” Tyra just concludes, “to me that seems, like, not healthy, mentally and physically for the child”.

What Tyra clearly does not acknowledge in this comment is the experiential background of Michelle's obvious *need* to straighten her daughter's hair. Arguably, there are pressures which exceed the power sphere of domestic territory and which are anchored within the black 'cultural psyche'. This is at least what Ayana Bird, one of the 'experts' remarks. Pointing towards the entanglements of black social history and the meaning of 'good hair' body she concludes that more than anything else, the term used to be a 'survival term':



**figure 20: Ayana Bird calling for education**

Ayana Bird:

It's a generational thing: you have a lot of older women and men, especially men, who cry when their daughters cut off their hair. My grandmother was, like, 'we worked so hard so that we didn't have to look like that, why would you do that to yourself?' ... It wasn't just beauty, it was 'you're not gonna get a job, you're not gonna walk in this room ... if your hair isn't straight and conforming to mainstream society'. For a lot of them it's an almost fear thing when they see their children going natural.

In Bird's account, the parental perspective on 'bad hair' as of fear of status loss comes to be pronounced. Arguably, once we look at 'good hair' over time and see hair issues as a matter of inter-generational conflict, mothers' desires to perm their

daughters' hair are reconstructed as paradoxical expression of love and hope. Perm, in Chris Rock's term, is the 'antidote' against social failure. It is the agent securing beauty and success within an environment that today's mothers have *experienced* as hostile to 'kinky' hair.



**figure 21: Malia: “I think they are lower class”**

As Shante avidly explains: “I decided at 11 years old I’d have a baby outside of my race so she had better hair... I was teased, called ‘nappy head’, ‘bald headed’...” (Shante). As within Shante’s social childhood environment ‘nappiness’ was tantamount to a stigma, unanimously signifying low social status, her quest for offspring outside of her race is a way of taking responsibility for a ‘better future’. This endeavor proved successful; Malia’s hair, as Tyra remarks, is “poofy, but it still has a wave to it and in the black community that’s considered better” (Banks).

Bird’s approach towards challenging the social pressures associated with black women’s hair is has to do with inter-generational education. Young people, she demands, have to “teach the older generation you have been brainwashed to think that this is the only way you have to look.” This idea, though acknowledging the fact that mothers exert significant influence on their children’s hair ideals, emphasizes the need for younger women to dismantle the relationship between hairstyle and status ascription. By knowing that “these concepts were embedded in our cultural psyche and it never went away, we were never like unbrainwashed

if you will once slavery was removed” black women might be empowered to reconceptualize ‘good hair’ as the type of hair they have.

### **Conclusive Thoughts**

What we have seen in the course of the preceding chapter is how two black US talk show hosts struggle to find a middle ground between their own incorporation in dominant mainstream culture and the attempt to liberate ordinary black women from the yoke of hairstyle pressures. While Oprah conjures up a utopian call for ‘choice’ against the ‘ordeal’ of black hair she simultaneously performs a straight look whose role model function within the black community is actively evaded.

In the Tyra Show episode the central host chooses a different strategy by consciously performing a braided look which immediately conjures up the notion of sympathy for ‘natural’ hair culture and its central emancipatory mission. This first impression is somewhat relativized when we see the central ambivalence at stake in the debate, as her body bears the visible marks of white consumer culture worn with an attitude of black organic sisterhood. Whereas in *Good Hair* we actually see her as a representative of dominant black US culture, as an icon of ‘straightened beauty’, this famous image is in clear opposition to her hairstyle in the Tyra Show. Throughout the show, Tyra stages herself as moral instance whose verdict against irresponsible upbringing and bad hair practice ignores the interrelations between working class struggles and her own contribution to the stakes involved.

By means of emphasizing the dimension of history and cross-generational conflict, Bird’s contribution highlights another dimension of upbringing and motherhood, which is more focused on the potential to learn from younger women’s decision against straight hair supremacy. This perspective restructures educational responsibility by means of looking at the motivational backgrounds of working class pressures. Arguably, we have to look beyond the superficial level of mothers performing a painful and potentially harmful chemical procedure on her daughters’ heads in order to understand it as an act of love and hope for their daughters’ future. In order to challenge a future which *necessarily* inflicts the

ordeal of perm and weave, however, Bird suggests that the choice for natural hair is a realistic option.



#### 4.3. GOOD HAIR ON YOUTUBE

Finally, I will use some moments in the ongoing debate on *YouTube*, where *Good Hair* has become a heated topic among zealous web 2.0 users. In comparison to the institutionalized discursive sphere of the talk show, online discourse promises its users to voice their opinions unrestrictedly. Since *YouTube* offers a highly reactive, multimodal platform, ‘passive’ reception more often than not is only part of the *YouTubers’* activities. Members of the community are enabled to create their own videos, and react to what they just watched by means of commenting, rating or posting a video response.

Among the countless *YouTube* reviews available on *Good Hair*, I selected five videos provided by young black US women who talk about the movie’s propositions in quite diverse ways. The discursive ground taken by these commentaries promises to shed further light on how *Good Hair* has been and still is negotiated within the black community. Other than the two talk show hosts who might be biased due to their amicable relationship with Rock, individual reviewers hardly feel any obligation towards the makers of *Good Hair*. Apart from Blackonyx77, who raises the ratings because it is a ‘black film’, none of the reviewers engage in performances of ‘fandom’. Quite contrarily, most of the reviews seem to be motivated by the need to highlight discrepancies between young black women’s experiences and the way these experiences come to portrayed in the movie. They once again raise the question what the ‘good hair/bad hair’ debate is really about, and whether *Good Hair* is actually conducive to understanding black womanhood today.

When we look for commonalities between the five reviews, the first thing to notice is that four out of five women feel entertained by Rock’s endeavors. Only crownofHisglory rejects the overall agenda of the movie, arguing that “I don’t need another black man complaining about my hair.” All other reviews start by emphasizing the movie’s overall entertainment value; as lyndaespratley remarks: “It was one of those definite ‘laugh out loud’ movies where everybody in the theater just ... cracking up.” What four out of five women thus put into perspective is the fact that *Good Hair* was originally marketed as comedic documentary starred by ‘funny man’ Chris Rock.

What crown of glory suggests, however, is that the documentary's central issue might be too serious to approach it like Rock does; humorously and with a tinge of essentialist condescension which induces even Oprah to argue "You are trying to call us out!". It might be too much asked for a comedian like Chris Rock to remain focused on the serious implications of the topic, yet when we look back at the Lola promise this is exactly where his interest in 'good hair' seems to be grounded. The obvious conflict conjured up by the demand to deliver something fun and serious at the same time plays into much of the *Good Hair* debate on *YouTube*.

That most of the reviewers felt 'entertained', after all, does not imply that they were not disappointed with the overall take on the subject. None of the reviewers who appreciated the movie's entertainment value were fully satisfied by Chris Rock's approach. One obvious reason for this can be found in the discrepancy between the movie's most enthusiastic target group and the type of women introduced by Chris Rock. As already suggested, all of the five reviewers emphasize their connection to the 'natural' hairstyle community, while almost all of the women appearing on *Good Hair* wear straight-haired looks. With an avid eye on Stilton's choice of Hollywood actresses MrsRaena remarks:

MrsRaena:	Maybe it's just me being critical, but I noticed that most of the actresses that he used were fair skin actresses, or actresses that looked a certain way. It was kind of interesting... I didn't see the spectrum of black women that he could have used within Hollywood, and I felt like there were not that many natural representatives
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According to MrsRaena intriguing observation the movie's preference for straight-haired Hollywood actresses represents an agenda rather than a portrayal of black women's celebrity culture today. Arguably, there are celebrities who have opted against straight hair looks and would have been diversified,

complicated and maybe enriched the movie's overall approach to the subject. As MrsRaena points out leaving the audience with a one-dimensional Hollywood discourse of straightness might even be a distortion of present day hairstyle culture. MrsRaena is not the only reviewer deploring the lack of variety.

The call for more 'naturalness' in the flesh paradigm reverberates in all the reviews. From lovelyti2002's perspective, 'natural' hair was "not portrayed in the best light" (lovelyti2002) and should have been discussed more. Even more radically, crownofHisglory contends:

crownofHisglory:           The natural hair sisters looked like they were touched mentally... The overall message of the film continued to perpetuate the idea that you and I are inferior. And as we loop through the journals and review the words that were said to us growing up, externally, internally in the family, out of the family, we certainly didn't need Chris Rock to add to the pain

Among the entirety of utterances analyzed in the sample this might be the harshest critique. In crownofHisglory's account Chris Rock represents yet another impetus in the overall history of black women's enslavement to unattainable standards of beauty. He thereby stands in for the concept of misrepresentation along the lines of black inferiority. What is perpetuated by his choice of 'lactified' celebrities is the notion of white supremacy tantamount to the experience of 'pain'. What is left out of the picture in crownofHisglory's attack is the idea that black women's straightness is also governed by choice.

From a flesh/fashion perspective, this means that the liberating side of the fashion paradigm is ignored. As we have seen, the promise of versatility and malleability does not only work as a means of oppression via male fantasy but also as a catalyst for female desire outside the sphere of celebrity culture. When crownofHisglory associates dominant systems of hairstyle performance with the notion of black 'inferiority' she not only attacks 'organic intellectuals' like Tyra

Banks, but she also attacks the single working mum whose dream of a new weave helps her endure the drudgery of everyday life. What resonates within crownofHisglory's account is the wish that such drudgery be eventually be banned from women's lives. In the light of the existing pressures, however, this might not be done by means of condescension. The idea that *Good Hair* simply perpetuates the idea "that you and I are inferior" stands in direct opposition to Rock's ignorance of 'natural' hair as a viable alternative to dominant hairstyles. The potentially liberating share of the fashion paradigm is thereby cast off without any second guess.

In contrast to crownofHisglory, other accounts stress the potential that the movie possessed but allegedly did not fully enact. Interestingly, MrsRaena, BlackOnyx77 and lovelyti2002 all mention the schoolgirl scene (figure 17) in which prospective graduate students share their thoughts about the relations of hair and career perspectives. From a 'natural' perspective, this sequence seems to epitomize the movie's 'straightness' agenda, as we see the 'kinky' girl suffer in silence. MrsRaena thus observes that "the natural sister in that scene she didn't even have a voice. And if she had a voice it was edited out of the movie. I thought that was quite... interesting" (MrsRaena). The Afro girl's silent presence in *Good Hair*, then, represents the subject position whose experiential world is willingly ignored. What would she have said if she had gained a voice during the conversation? This seems to be the question that bothers BlackOnyx when she identifies the schoolgirl sequence as the key passage at which Chris Rock could have been "dug deeper".

BlackOnyx77: This situation like I said with the high school students and the one girl with natural hair and them just saying these things, like these stereotypes of what they thought or their feelings about natural hair in the corporate world, it not being deemed as professional, just having this young lady just, you know, just not really be attacked but be scrutinized for her natural hair and not be able to speak up! I felt as if like that in itself was an opportunity for Chris Rock and everyone to speak up and educate us, you know, show the different sides of it.

In this quote, *Good Hair* is blamed for missing out on a realistic chance to portray black hair issues in a light that would do justice to the call for variety. Arguably, the absence of ‘natural’ thought throughout the movie might encourage readings along the line of crownofHisglory’s impression that *Good Hair* perpetuates a concept of black womanhood as enslaved to mainstream culture and deprived of all agency. What would have helped, lyndaespratley remarks, would have been to show the “options that I have for, you know being natural, like what is ... we’re just talking about relaxers, I just wished... he showed a variety of ... everything that’s out there... the different ways that black women wear their hair” (lyndaespratley).

Lyndaespratley’s call for the display of options, which arguably was not followed by *Good Hair*, emphasizes the aspect of education and learning as a requirement for choice and, thereby, change. As lyndaespratley implies, it can only be by learning about our options that we might be willing to embrace them. In *Good Hair* the student’s ‘kinky’ Afro look is not represented as a viable option next to the straight-haired mane. On the contrary, its articulation as failure in professional life can persist unchallenged. This, however, does not go unnoticed in ‘natural’ women’s reviews who question the arbitrary relation between hairstyle issues and social life.

lovelyti2002: .I just think it's crazy that people can't get a job, that people can't get to certain schools, I just don't understand what this whole hair thing is. It's ridiculous. To me, what does my hair have to do with my intellect? What does my hair have to do with me being able to do the job? If I can do the job just as good as my next man why am I not given that position?

Along the lines of performativity desire for straightness is generated by the subject's congruity with a naturalized setting. As the relationship between the subject and its naturalized setting is contingent the potential for change lies within our capacity to question the adequacy of the contingent structures. Questioning the contingent structures of hairstyle as an expression of social worth, lovelyti2002 performs difference in a well-established system of signification. The idea that hairstyle practices and social worth are deeply entwined, after all, has been naturalized over the course of human history. The relation between these dimensions has been suggested in countless flesh/naturalist and fashion discourses on hair. Along the claim that materiality/spatiality is always made meaningful in the work of representation, there simply must be a connection between soft, curly hair texture and the idea of cultural superiority.

From lovelyti2002's perspective, this connection comes to be dismantled as erring when she claims not to understand the connection between the self (qualification) and the body (hair). That she does not *understand* does not say she does not *know*. Like Lola and Shaniyah, lovelyti2002 most likely grew up in an environment full of invisible markers of whiteness which taught her that, most of the time, looking like white people is more advantageous (McIntosh 1988, Dyer 1997). What lovelyti2002 arguably does not *understand* is why she should allow the notion of 'good hair' to participate in negotiations about her self. Other than Broca in his treatise on human worth (Gould 1981, see chapter 3), lovelyti2002 questions the relationship between 'kinkiness' and the human faculties, asking "what does my hair have to do with my intellect?" (lovelyti2002). She thus denaturalizes what

had been naturalized over the course of human history as the most obvious of all connections.

## 5. WE SHALL OVERCOMB...? FINAL THOUGHTS

What remains when we reconsider the different views on ‘good hair’ and ‘bad hair’ in their interconnectedness with social and political struggles in US black women’s identities? What we have encountered in *Good Hair* is the claim that straight hair is still a marker of ‘successful womanhood’, a claim that reverberates in Tyra Bank’s and Oprah Winfrey’s looks. But why is this?

This is the question which has plagued black feminism for decades and which has been asked by Chris Rock’s daughter Lola to encourage her fathers endeavors in *Good Hair*. At the end of his hair journey he does not seem to have arrived at a satisfactory answer to this question. From the vantage point of my theoretical framework of hair as liminal phenomenon between flesh and fashion (chapter 2) we might argue that *Good Hair* does not come up with a balanced portrayal of black women’s hair. By idealizing ‘good hair’ as straight hair (fashion) and simultaneously dramatizing its detrimental effects from a flesh perspective it retains a view on black women as inevitably ‘enslaved’ to dominant culture. In the light of such hopelessness the only way out is escape: When Chris Rock decides to tell his daughters that the stuff on top of their heads is nowhere near as important as the stuff that is inside of their heads the issue of ‘good hair’ is simply deferred. Not only does this conclusion shatter the movie’s initial promise to take seriously what seems to be an integral struggle of black womanhood in the US, it also depletes the movie of its very basis. Furthermore, it ignores the fact that body and hair *are* subject to constant performance and representation, whether or not we think about the discourse powers unleashed by historical, social and cultural pressures, or not.

Yet how does Chris Rock’s escapist conclusion by which he dismisses body discourse as trivial echo in talk show discourse?

When we turn to Oprah and Tyra, neither of them seems to acknowledge the fact that their status as ‘organic intellectuals’ contributes to the reproduction of dominant straightness ideals. Whereas Oprah eagerly points to the ordeal of straightening when she talks about her far away South African school project, she



does not show any interest in taking the consequences for her own look. Oprah's entanglements with consumer culture, stardom and dominant power suggest otherwise. Even though this does not seem to apply to Tyra, who willingly engages in 'bad' hairstyle performance, seemingly demonstrating her sympathy for black beauty, the liberating effect of such a strategy can arguably be doubted. In her effort to educate black working class mothers about the adversary of perms and weaves she follows a similar strategy as Chris Rock when he identifies the 'big players' and 'the industry' as the scapegoats of black hair misery. This time, the accused are working class mothers who in an effort to grant their daughters success in a straight-haired society, turn to chemical perms or intricate weaves. Even if Tyra's approach is focused on the embeddedness of 'good hair' in everyday US culture it does not do much to understand the complex relationship between dominant ideals and women's struggles for acceptance. The need for choice that both Tyra and Oprah so proclaims seems to dissolve in the light of their own entanglements in celebrity culture and straight expectations. As a matter of fact, Tyra's ephemeral cornrow hairstyle, which, as she explains, was intended to challenge mainstream ideals of beauty, turns out to be a chimera. At the end of the day we find her turn back to her 'natural' look – in the fashion paradigm. What 'good hair' talk in Oprah and Tyra suggests is that hegemonic ideals are not to be dismantled overnight, and not by isolated acts of resistance. The reluctance of 'straight' women to 'go natural' further suggests has to do with what Tyra's expert Bird has termed "an almost fear thing". Arguably, hairstyle alteration goes hand in hand with unwanted associations. For some, revolt and upheaval against mainstream hairstyle culture seems almost like an assault on the ancestors who fought for the privilege of 'lactification'. As a matter of fact if whiteness signifies power, striving for white hair seems only to be a logical consequence. As long as straightness along the lines of Nia Long, Melyssa Ford and Tyra Banks signifies 'successful black femininity', perms and weaves will be the means by which the road to success can be taken. The struggle for straightness continues.

According to the Butler's notion of performativity, however, this struggle may not be imagined without the work of rupture and distortion caused by alternative discourses. Arguably, we find such attempts online among a 'natural' *YouTube* community, whose attempts to make *Good Hair* mean show an altogether different version of black hair struggles. Other than in the movie the central desire

reverberating within the five accounts of young black women is the abolishment of ‘good hair’ as a currency of social acceptance. While Chris Rock addresses this desire in his Lola promise, the lack of hairstyle variety presented in the movie causes the *YouTube* community to unanimously attest Rock’s failure to ‘educate’ us about the fallacy of the straightness regime. Some of the utterances seek to abolish beauty in the fashion paradigm, downplaying the liberating aspects of the fashion concept, *Good Hair*’s disappointing achievement is mobilized as a starting point against which to contrast one’s stakes as ‘natural’ women in the US. Even though the dominant meaning of ‘successful black women’ might still be associated with the need to straighten one’s hair, the five women suggest that there might be room for some disturbance via denaturalization. When one *YouTuber* simply asks herself “what does my hair have to do with my intellect?” she does not challenge the fact that socially, this connection is being made. Within her individual power sphere, however, her doubt about this connection’s accuracy might enhance the freedom to imagine herself outside of dominant systems of representation. It is an act of detachment from truth, and thus, as a step towards liberation from a clear-cut concept of beauty.

In the course of analyzing ‘good hair’ versus ‘bad hair’ in three different media discourses we have encountered several conceptions of hair all of which are highly referential to a colonial past, whose impact on black women’s hairstyle options today diverge. First, Chris Rock’s hair journey between Hollywood and ordinary culture has suggested a notion of ‘good hair’ that seems to privilege a view on black hair as spectacle, yet also hair as pain. In it, the discourse of ‘lactified’ womanhood as power strongly reverberates.

Also within talk show discourse we find the repetition of dominant fashion ideals suggested in Oprah’s and Tyra’s ambivalent notion of ‘good hair’. While they seem to challenge the hegemonic meaning by expressing their sympathy with alternative, ‘natural’ hairstyle choices, they do not attempt to naturalize such choices by incorporating them into their own star personae image. Most obviously Tyra’s cornrow hairstyle which initially appears to achieve this is an ephemeral endeavor. In the various stories of working class women and their daughters we have seen that ‘going natural’ is still stigmatized as an act of social relegation and

devaluation. While the craniometrical taxonomy of human worth has used and abused flesh discourse in to cement the relationship between ‘good hair’ and black worth into our minds, black women have appropriated and modified the concept of white privilege to their need to overcome suppression. In their experiential world, perm and weave are hairstyle choices which are able to deplete their bodies from the stigma of craniometrical proof. Fashion’s versatility and malleability are embraced as passageways towards the freedom from black ugliness.

In opposition to this scenario, which applies a notion of cultivation according to the colonial ‘taming of the bush’ principle, we have come across a quite different understanding of choice and freedom in young women’s reviews of *Good Hair*. In their discourses, they construct hairstyle choices not as a matter of freedom *from* an ordeal, but the freedom *to* decide whether to undergo intricate weave procedures or not. What they thereby attempt to activate is hair in terms of Grossberg’s notion of ‘productive culture’ (1998: 105), as a signifier whose overall entanglement with structures of oppression does not render it completely unaffected by bottom-up endeavors to challenge its dominant meaning.

Undoubtedly, the quest for alternatives to the straightness paradigm is an attempt to overcome historical inevitability, and therefore does not go without the risk of stigmatization. Oprah’s refusal to ‘go natural’ might be seen as hypocrite, yet her fear of status loss by virtue of hairstyle change is well founded in dominant culture. Reconsidering the claim that the body in representation goes hand in hand with truth and material effects, we have to contend that these effects are what is most precious to us. Only by embracing what we know and what we have we can gain a sense of orientation and stability. Abolishing the straightness paradigm ‘productive culture’ demands from us to relativize what we know and what we have, and embrace ambivalence.

From the perspective of a working class mum whose ideological and material *investment* in the straightness paradigm is experienced as a joyful and meaningful activity, ‘productive culture’ does not sound particularly enticing. Performing destabilization, doubt and fearlessness does not seem to be feasible strategies today. At the end of the day, for most of the black women we have encountered in

this study, it is all about stability and the freedom to move within the limits of dominant culture. Whether this culture can be changed by young black women's attempts to perform 'productive culture' remains to be questionable. What young *YouTubers*' takes on *Good Hair* suggest is that there is still room for hope. Even if Chris Rock missed out on his promise to educate us about white privilege and its need to be dismantled, this is what encourages young black girls to spread their hair message themselves: As *YouTuber* crownofHisglory suggests, "you don't have to fight it, you just have to learn it".

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## Figures

figure 7: hair between the body's interior and exterior, Jc on 25 August 2010, online on: [http://thenaturalhaven.blogspot.com/2010\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://thenaturalhaven.blogspot.com/2010_08_01_archive.html), last accessed 19 December 2010

figure 8: naturalistic discourse on hair, extract from Reeta, R. (1993:173)

figure 9: fashion discourse on hair. Hype Hair 2009, online on: <http://www.hypehair.com/article/2/HAIR-CARE.html>, last accessed 19 December 2010

figure 10: Hair as Flesh vs. Fashion reconsidered,

figure 11: the craniometrical classification of human worth, Zanker, J. 17 November 2003, online on:

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Screenshots from *Good Hair* (all rights reserved)

figure 7: The glamorous past: winning a hair award and some black men's attention (00:0:33)

figure 12: Sample overview

figure 8: The glamorous present: flicking "good hair" at the camera (00:01:09)

figure 9: Inviting us in: Chris Rock's daughters in their domestic sphere  
(00:01:22)

figure 10: Lola Rock (00:01:31)

figure 11: celebrity space: Nia Long (00:01:50)

figure 12: ordinary space: Chris Rock explores a random US hair salon (00:24:25)

figure 13: ordinary black men as "good hair" victims (01:12:13)

figures 14 and 15: Andre Harrell and his "good hair" fantasy (00:03:07)

figure 16: para-scientific flesh discourse on perm (00:22:52)

figure 17: Students weighing their job perspectives without "good hair"  
(01:06:14)

Screenshots from *The Tyra Banks Show* (all rights reserved):

figure 18: Tyra highlighting her cornrows at the beginning of the show (00:04)

figure 19: Shaniyah performing whiteness (11:04)

figure 20: Ayana Bird calling for education (19:32)

figure 21: Malia: "I think they are lower class" (11:00)

## 7. APPENDIX

### ABSTRACT

Im Rahmen vorliegender Diplomarbeit findet die Verhandlung von Frisuren Schwarzer Amerikanerinnen anhand einer Cultural Studies Analyse des Medientextes *Good Hair* (2009) statt. Zentrales Augenmerk ist gerichtet auf die Diskussion der Identität bestimmenden Strukturkategorien Geschlecht und Hautfarbe aus Sicht der Postkolonialen Theorie und des Black Feminism. Anhand eines im ersten Teil der Arbeit entwickelten Theoriekonzeptes entlang dieser Forschungstraditionen werden Frisurdiskurse rund um die Begriffe „Good Hair“ und „Bad Hair“ analysiert. Wie die Analyse drei verschiedener Mediendiskurse zeigt, stehen diese Begriffe nicht nur im Epizentrum der Verhandlung Schwarzer Macht und Weiblichkeit, sondern sie weisen auch klare Referenzen zu eurozentrischen Schönheitsidealen auf. Mein Forschungsinteresse gilt der Hinterfragung eines solchen ästhetischen Selbstverständnisses unter Schwarzen Frauen, die in einer weißen Mehrheitsgesellschaft wie den USA leben.

Der erste Teil dieser Arbeit (Kapitel 1-2) umfasst zwei theoretische Schwerpunkte. Einerseits soll ein Identitätskonzept diskutiert werden, das geeignet ist, von einem Cultural Studies Standpunkt aus das Phänomen des Haares zu beschreiben. Judith Butlers Begriff des *Performativen* (Butler 1993) wird hierfür als sinnvolles Instrument zur Analyse der Prozesshaftigkeit und Verschränktheit von Identitätskategorien erachtet. Die ihm eingeschriebenen Dynamiken der „Repetition und Differenz“ konzipieren den Schönheitsdiskurs als gesellschaftliche Macht, die gleichzeitig historisch kontingent und wandelbar ist. In der diskursiven Aneignung Eurozentristischer Schönheitsbegriffe werden Bedeutungsmuster adaptiert und modifiziert um sie mit der individuellen Erfahrungswelt in Einklang zu bringen. Diese Perspektive auf Medienaneignung als dynamisch, bruchstückhaft und subjektbezogen erlaubt die Infragestellung dominanter Representationsmuster und wirft die Frage nach dem Subjekt als aktivem Agenten diskursiver Macht auf. Kapitel 1 erörtert die zentralen Identitätskonzepte die dieser Frage zu Grunde liegen, und welche sich der Relation zwischen Körperlichkeit und Bedeutungstiftung zu widmen.

Im zweiten Kapitel wird entlang dieses Fragenkomplexes ein kulturtheoretisches Modell entwickelt, das geeignet ist, die materielle und kulturelle Komplexität der Frisur als Bedeutungsproduzent zu erfassen und für eine spätere Medienanalyse brauchbar zu machen. Auf Basis der Annahme, dass kulturelle Bedeutungszuschreibung innerhalb eines kontingenten Rahmens und in Hinblick auf die Materialität ihres Gegenstandes passiert, wird das Haar hinsichtlich seiner materiellen Doppelposition zwischen Körperteil und Modeaccessoire untersucht. Diskursiv bewegt sich das Haar damit innerhalb eines Spektrums, das von „Flesh“ bis „Fashion“ reicht.

In Kapitel 3 soll die kolonialgeschichtliche Wirkungsmacht dieses Diskursapparats veranschaulicht werden. Im Kontext sozialdarwinistischer Naturalismuskurse wurde die Macht des Haares als Körperteil („Flesh“) genutzt um Verbindungen zwischen Haartextur und sozialen Wertmaßstäben zu schaffen, während sich im Laufe der Frisurgeschichte Schwarzer Amerikanerinnen postkoloniale Verquickungen Eurozentrischer und alternativer Orientierungsmodelle für „Good Hair“ entwickelt haben.

In Kapitel 4 wird der Frage nachgegangen, wie sich dieses Vermächtnis in rezenten Mediendiskursen rund um die Dokumentation *Good Hair* bemerkbar macht. Ein dreidimensionaler Analysefokus auf Film, Talk Show und online Diskurse zeigt verschiedene Facetten möglicher Verhandlungsspielräume des Haares auf. Die vorläufige (!) Unterscheidung zwischen „Flesh“ und „Fashion“ Diskursen, die systematisch zum Einsatz kommt, erlaubt es dabei, oppositionelle Schönheitskonzepte in Hinblick auf die ihnen zugrunde liegenden Erfahrungsstrukturen Schwarzer Amerikanerinnen zu erläutern. Sowohl in der Aneignung dominanter Bedeutungsstrukturen („Fashion“), als auch in der Entwicklung alternativer Ansätze („Flesh“) können sich Frauen als mächtig erleben. Im Mittelfeld zwischen „Flesh“ und „Fashion“ bewegen sich Diskurse der Infragestellung essentialistischer Schönheitskonzepte. Tendenzen zu einer solchen Losschreibung von Herrschaftsdiskursen werden im moderaten, auf Diversität ausgerichteten „Flesh“ Diskurs einiger *YouTube*-Userinnen geortet. Diese greifen in Ablehnung starker Kontingenzen zwischen Haar und sozialen Wertmaßstäben die Frage der Rekonstruktion Schwarzer weiblicher Macht auf.

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### **WISSENSCHAFTLICHE TÄTIGKEITEN**

- September 2010: 'Die Lara-Formel', Konferenzbeitrag zur Fachtagung "The Future and Reality of Gaming" (F.R.O.G.)
- "The Lara-Formula. Textual Ambiguity and Commercial Success", Beitrag zum Konferenzband der F.R.O.G. 2010 (in Arbeit)

### **AKADEMISCHE INTERESSEN**

- Cultural Studies & Visual Culture
- Game Studies & Design
- Postcolonial Theory & Whiteness Studies