

Hair Narratives: Discourse Within African American Hair Care Practices and its Connection to Identity

By Kaira Mercer-Jones

A thesis submitted to the Department of Comparative Cultural Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In Anthropology

Chief of Committee: Dr. Susan Rasmussen

Committee Member: Dr. Rachel A Quinn

Committee Member: Dr. Linda Reed

University of Houston

December 2021

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my mother who was the first person to ever do my hair and spark the idea for my thesis topic. I thank you so much for the love and support in anything I put my mind to, and I cannot stress the happiness our bond brings me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first would like to thank the professors on my thesis committee, as they were all integral to my final project. I wish to show my appreciation for my thesis committee chair, Dr. Susan Rasmussen, for guiding my project and offering academic help in many circumstances. I want to thank co-committee member Dr. Linda Reed for offering incredible sources and guidance outside of the Anthropological discipline and assisting in helping me think outside of the box. I wish to extend a special thanks to Dr. Rachel A Quinn, who has helped me organize my project, work out deadlines, and critically analyze within the anthropological and women and gender studies discipline. Her guidance was so incredibly crucial during the course of my work to push me to complete my thesis. I would like to thank my family and friends, especially Demondre Peak and Khalid Bowens for being with me in every step as I have worked through this thesis. I especially would like to thank my fellow graduate student Manuel Rodriguez for supporting me in classes, writing, and just being a great friend to pursue my degree with. Finally, I could not do this entire thesis without the fantastic stylists who agreed to take part in my research. I want to thank those women for helping me in the interviews, doing my hair, and being a crucial part for my work.

Abstract

This research explores the language surrounding African American women's hair practices and choices and how it reflects their own cultural identity. The focus is on the commonalities between hair choices and what it reveals about the culture surrounding African American women's hairdressing communities in Houston, Texas and surrounding areas. Through a cognitive anthropological lens, it looks at the meanings and symbols used in hairdressing for African American women to understand the interactive meanings between wearers and their social environment. Cognitive anthropology as an overarching theoretical framework links human thought and physical and ideational cultural aspects together (Strauss & Quinn, 1997). This is important for analysis of linguistic discourses, interactions and narratives surrounding African American women's hair. The methodology consisted of surveys via social media accounts for general ideals about African American women's hair, interviews with African American hair stylists and their clients, and video media. The goal was to better understand the importance of hair dressing in African American culture, especially among women, and how it ultimately influences their way of life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Abstract	
I.	Chapter 1: Introduction.....	7
II.	Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	10
	Historical Context.....	10
	Symbolism, Embodiment, and Beauty/Barbershop	
	Studies.....	18
III.	Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and	
	Methodology.....	26
IV.	Chapter 4: Let’s Talk Hair.....	33
V.	Chapter 5: Conclusions.....	48
	References.....	51

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	Woman in Office.....	14
Figure 2.	Choir Member Clapping.....	14
Figure 3.	Human Hair Wig with Lace Closure.....	16
Figure 4.	Knotless Box Braids.....	17
Figure 5.	Butterfly Faux Locs.....	17

Introduction

Hair dressing provides and yields important insight into aspects surrounding culture. When hair is brought into conversation, concepts such as cultural identity and belonging, symbolism, and ideology come into play. For African Americans, hair care is a significant cultural practice that forms relationships, communities, entrepreneurship, creativity, and a sense of self. Zora Neale Hurston in *Characteristics of Negro Expression* (1934) explains “The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression. Perhaps his ideas of ornament does no attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creators.” Here, she references African American speech during that time and how they embellished their words. The “will to adorn” mentioned by Hurston is a characteristic applicable to the discussion of hair dressing for African American women. The practice of embellishing and beautifying the hair is an outward expression of African American women’s cultural identity; it reflects a way of life.

The practice of keeping their hair done up is a part of this will to embellish and satisfy an inner sense of self. Anthony Synnott in *Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair* (1987) emphasizes, “hair not only symbolizes the self but, in a very real sense, it is the self since it grows from and is part of the physical human body...Furthermore, all the variations of hair in all the zones of the body are or may be symbolic, i.e. they have values and meanings imputed to them. These values may change over time but, at any given time, they are important.” In this research I explore the language surrounding African American women’s hair practices and choices and how it reflects their own identity. I am interested in the relationship between hair choices and what they might reveal about the culture surrounding African American women’s

hairdressing communities. The goal is to better understand the importance of hair dressing in African American communities in relation to culture, ethnicity and gender.

I specifically explore the interaction surrounding hair care practices for African American women through personal hair narratives of how their own practices came to be. These narratives revealed not only the customs behind hair care for African American women, but also the way African American women's own hair "journey" influences their sense of self and social predicament. The language surrounding African American women's hairdressing involves interactive and negotiated meanings between the women and the people around those women who impose their own meanings. This research provides more knowledge of the interactive and dynamic relationship hair has with African American women's identities.

The language surrounding African American women, their hair care and styles offer insight into ideas within and outside the community. The language has influenced aspects like what are "acceptable" hairstyles in professional settings, policing of hairstyles in school dress codes, and the "good" hair / "bad" hair conversation. Tabora Johnson and Teiahsha Bankhead define concepts of "good hair" within the African American community as hair that is "closer in texture to that of people European descent."(2014:90) They explain that there are consequences that impact African American women's lives socially, economically and politically as a result of the language used to differentiate what is considered "good hair" from "bad hair" i.e. kinky and coily hair textures predominantly found amongst Black women. From the terms used for hair styles and practices to defining what certain styles mean for the women who wear them, the way hair is talked about has various cultural identifiers and meanings behind it.

For this research, I explore some of the language and narratives about African American women and their hair care practices. The language surrounding African American women's

hairdressing involves interactive meanings between the women and the people around those women who impose their own. I want to research more of this interactive relationship hair has with African American women's identities. The questions this research seek to answer are as follows:

1. What specific phrases, terms, and ideas are revealed in the language when African American women's hair is in conversation?
2. What commonalities come about when Black women are talking about Black hair?
3. How do these commonalities connect to cultural identity for Black Women?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Historical Context

The practice of hair dressing within the African American community can be traced back to times before American slavery on the continent of Africa. According to Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman, in African cultures generally “the way one wears one’s hair may also reflect one’s status, gender, ethnic origin, leadership role, personal taste or place in one’s cycle of life.” (2000:56) Infants and toddlers were often shaved bald except a tuft of hair left at the crown of their head. A cross cultural example is offered among Muslims in Tuareg communities of rural Niger. In their community, a tuft left on the head of an infant and/or toddler was meant to enable the Prophet Mohammed to lift the child up into paradise if the child died (Rasmussen, 1997.) Young women posing themselves eligible for marriage would often adorn themselves with ornaments and finery that were in possession of their family, including gold trinkets and ornaments in their hair: “Various combinations of braids, plaits (often with shells, beads, or strips of material woven in), shaved areas, and areas cut to different lengths to make patterns adorned the heads of people, creating a stunning effect” (White & White, 1995:51). Using the right oils and combs to accomplish their styles, the practice would take hours, sometimes days to finish certain hairstyles. Back during those times, typically only those who were mourning or “mad” did not do their hair.

The first documented large kidnapping and enslavement of African people occurred in 1444 when Portuguese customs collector Lançarote de Freitas went to Gorée Island of West Africa (Atwood, 2012). As more and more African people across the continent were captured for

enslavement by European countries like Portugal, Spain, and Great Britain, the hairstyles adorned by the enslaved Africans were one of the characteristics noticed by the Europeans. The Africans in the British mainland colonies were allowed to keep their hairstyles as they pleased; however, the shaving or cropping of hair was used as a punishment for both men and women, thereby transforming meaning. This was significant because generally African cultures valued the grooming and styling of hair as a part of social tradition and rituals.

Hair care routines and styles were altered as the African people were taken to the New World. Africans brought over as slaves started to lack the time and tools, like the African pick or comb, to keep their hairstyles, and this resulted in matted and tangled hair. Some women tied up their hair in cloth headwraps to keep it up. Despite this change in practice and rituals, depictions of runaway slaves in advertisements still proved their hairstyles to be elaborate and served as mediums for cultural messages. The understandings and interpretations of these cultural messages were proven to be difficult as the depictions of the Africans' hairstyles from painting and advertisements were made by their owners. (White & White, 1995:51) More broadly, this historical point implies the need for interpretations of African-influenced hairstyles from the perspectives of the people who create and wear them and to be cautious regarding meanings in relation to power and oppression historically.

In the eighteenth century, physical attributes of African Americans like skin color, facial structure, and hair texture were freighted with negative connotations. Settlers often referred to African American's hair derogatorily as "wool" to differentiate from their own hair, which settlers viewed as superior to their captives. According to Byrd and Tharps (2001), once slavery was abolished in the 19th century the practice of grooming the hair into elaborate and symbolic designs in Africa had transitioned to styles that imitated American settlers' that were adapted for

African American hair. Discovered by accident, African Americans came up with a mixture of lye soap and potatoes that straightened the texture of their hair. Lye soap was used primarily for clothes, but when used to get dirt from their hair they noticed it also kept their texture straighter than before.

Tracy Owens Patton (2006) notes that this adoption of straighter hair and European hairstyles by African Americans at the time was associated with many factors. During slavery, hair style determined their kind of work with women field slaves wearing wrapped hair in cloths and rags and the men in straw hats and short cropped hair. Slaves working directly with European Americans often styled their hair similarly to their owners. Working so closely to them, those African Americans had greater access to better quality clothes, food, education, and freedom upon their master's death. Straightened hair was first a symbol of freedom as lighter complexion slaves tried to "pass" with more European features to bounty hunters. With these descriptions in mind, Patton notes "adopting many White European traits was essential to survival." (2006:29) This idea of adopting European traits was one that prevailed and is still in the discussion around hairstyling and hairdressing in African American communities. For example, in a study conducted by Laurie Rudman and Meghan McLean (2016) they measured Black men and women's reactions to photos presented to them of famous African American celebrities with curly, natural hairstyles and smooth, straight hairstyles. Their results overall revealed a preference for smooth, straight hair by most participants. These results resonate with the previous notion regarding adopting European traits by African American people, especially because in contrast tightly coiled hair textures has been distinctly tied to blackness. (Banks, 2000)

At the start of the 20th century, marketing for hair products started to gear towards the African American communities. In the late 1800s to early 1900s, Madam CJ Walker developed hair care products that were accompanied by a hot comb used for straightening. This was regarded as one of the first hair products developed, manufactured by, and sold to African Americans. Her influence had significant economic impact for African American women; her products and hair schools offered economic freedom for African American women who became stylists and sellers of her products during a time when they had little opportunity to work outside of the home. Walker's entrance into the hair industry was largely impactful for Black women economically and for African American women's hair care in the 20th century especially as they were excluded from both. Garrett Morgan invented the hair straightener in 1909, further popularizing the "press and curl" method. This method involved heating up a hot comb or straightener and applying hair grease to help the hair straighten.

Straightened hair was becoming a preferred style to signify middle- class status. General ideas of the time were that African American women were taught to forego their "natural" hair styles and adopt straight hair styles to get ahead professionally (see Figure 1, 2). There was also talk within African American communities that African American women were rejecting their hair because it was considered ugly and dirty; a concept that was earlier established from the same ideology of adopting European traits for acceptance. One of the first documented political statements regarding hair care practices was by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey, who became a US Black nationalist, who professed "Don't remove the kinks from your hair! Remove them from your brain!" (Patton, 2006:29) African American women, however, did not believe their hair was ugly, but that straightening was a modern style.



© This image copyright, The Black Academy of Arts and Letters

Figure 1. Photograph of a Black woman with curled, straightened hair. Fort Worth, 1977

Figure 2. Photograph by Brad Vinson of a choir member clapping during performance with straight hair. Dallas, 2011

The 1960s and 70s popularized the Afro hairstyle and/or “natural” hair. “The shift to calling oneself Black and being proud of it translated into a style that proudly hearkened back to Africa.” (Byrd and Tharps, 2001) The Afro and/or “natural hair” went from being characterized by African Americans as “bad” hair due to the tight curls to “good” hair because it was “free” of chemicals and processing to alter the texture of the hair. “In the United States, ‘good hair’ was considered to be hair that was wavy or straight in texture, soft to the touch, had the ability to grow long, and required minimal intervention by way of treatment or products to be considered beautiful.” (Johnson et al., 2017) The transition in ideas surrounding what was “good” and “bad” hair was also associated with the freedom and civil rights movement of the 1960’s; adapting “natural” hairstyles grew to be a political demonstration of social rebellion. African Americans adapted more “natural” hairstyles during a time when they were fighting for their own equal rights in a country that oppressed them. This coincided with the political climate, its impact on African American people, and the use of hair as a symbol.

The 1980s introduced another chemical treatment called a perm that allowed the hair to curl permanently into looser, glossy curls, which was called a Jerry Curl. This style was done on men and women. The 1990s involved more hair extension hairstyles that offered women more versatility and variety for their hair.

Present day’s hair care and styles in African American communities involve various, different practices and systems. The use of social media applications has made the transmission of new hair practices easily accessible and imitated. Popular styles worn by African American women today are wig systems and sewn-in extensions (see Figure 3) that imitate real hair lines and texture, braids, twists, and locs using synthetic hair to achieve longer lengths, and hair styled using the hair in its normal state more commonly referred to as “natural hair.” African American

women have also taken to simply cutting off all their hair in “fade” bald style typically worn by African American men. Today’s styles are largely based on individual preference and access to the proper resources to achieve them.



Figure 3. Human Hair wig with lace closure piece. Houston, 2020

A few of the popular hairstyles today are typically achieved with added synthetic or human hair. One popular style is called knotless box braids. To achieve this style, the hair is divided into square- sections and synthetic hair that is similar in texture and color to the wearer’s hair is added by braiding. The hair is braided at the base of each square section and the synthetic hair is integrated into the strands of the braid until it reaches the end (See Figure 4.) The style can be braided to be short or long in length depending on preference. Butterfly faux locs are another popular style worn today(See Figure 5.) The hair is similarly separated into box shaped sections and the real hair of the wearer is braided at the base. Using a crochet hair needle, curly synthetic hair is placed on the needle’s hook and pushed under the base of the braid through to

the other side. The synthetic hair is then wrapped around the braid until it is no longer seen. This style typically only goes to the length of the person's hair. If they desire longer length, hair has to be braided into the natural braid first, like knotless box braids, and then wrapped with the curly



hair.

Figure 4. Knotless box braids. Houston, 2021

Figure 5. Butterfly faux locs. Houston, 2020.

Historically, African American hair has been politicized so much so that today it has been incorporated into law. The CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act) is a bill drafted and sponsored by California State Senator Holly Mitchell that “prohibits discrimination based on a person's hair texture or hairstyle if that style or texture is commonly associated with a particular race or national origin. Specifically, the bill prohibits this type of discrimination against those participating in federally assisted programs, housing programs, public accommodations, and employment.” (2020) The bill aims to eliminate race-based hair discrimination in the workplace, schools, and other public areas of interaction. The bill was passed in the House of Representatives on September 21, 2020, but not in the Senate. The bill has been reintroduced in Congress in March 2021. On July 3, 2019, California became the

first state to ban hair discrimination in the United States with Virginia becoming the first southern state to ban hair discrimination in July 2020. As of November 2021, 11 states in total (California, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, Colorado, Washington, Maryland, Connecticut, New Mexico, Delaware, and Nebraska) have banned hair discrimination based on hair texture and style. It has been filed or pre-filed in 17 more states, and seven cities have passed it as a law within those states that have filed or pre-filed. According to Dove's CROWN research study involving 1017 African American women and 1050 non-Black women ages 25-64, 80% of the African American women sample agreed that they needed to change their hair's natural state in order to fit into their sales or office workplace setting.

Symbolism, Embodiment, and Beauty-Barbershop Studies

Hair Symbolism

Symbolism as it pertains to hair is essential in this thesis in order to understand hair as a tool for African American women's expression of identity, class, social status, and other identifiers of cultural experience. Edmund Leach is a great start. In his pioneering study (Leach, 1958) he brings up a theoretical viewpoint useful for understanding symbolism cross-culturally, especially pertaining to hair. In *Magical Hair* he states, "When people belong to the same culture, they share between themselves various mutually understood systems of communication. Every member of such a culture will attribute the same meaning to any particular item of culturally defined 'ritual'...The extent to which our own private emotions in such circumstances are also experienced by others is something about which we can only guess." (1958:148) He argues here about the dichotomy of what he calls the public and private sectors of the symbolic system; some are communicated outwardly and involves a common symbolic language, while some symbols evoke emotion internally and may not be shared or common, but only guessed.

Jeannette Marie Mageo (1994) in “*Hair Do’s and Don’ts: Hair Symbolism and Sexual History in Samoa*” uses Leach’s focal argument from *Magical Hair* as a start to converse about the changing hairstyles in Samoan culture through time as indicators of changing in their female sex roles. She discusses symbolism in the history of changing hair styles and the significance it has for gender roles and gender politics over the course of time in Samoa.

Anthony Synnott in *Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair* (1987) emphasizes, “hair not only symbolizes the self but, in a very real sense, it is the self since it grows from and is part of the physical human body...Furthermore, all the variations of hair in all the zones of the body are or may be symbolic, i.e. they have values and meanings imputed to them. These values may change over time but, at any given time, they are important.” Synnott underlines the idea that hair when used as a symbol not only marks emblems of self but hold value and translations in other forms of culture. Though these values change over time, hair is still important as an identifier. Using Anthony Synnott’s ideology regarding symbols, De-Valera N.Y.M Botchway (2018) adds to this idea of changing symbols when he studied symbolism between locked hair and the Boboshanti Order of Rastafari. He notes, “despite the fact that values and meanings attached to hair may change as time goes on, they are, however significant at any given time. Moreover, some values and meanings may be common to all, but others may be unique to specific communities.” (2018:24) He explains that hair symbolism is also fashion driven, making it fluid and not always fixed. With this ideology, it complements understanding of African American women today and their hairstyle choices. Although historically, certain hairstyles like the Afro or straightened hair translated meanings like rebellion or assimilation, hairstyle choices today change rapidly and often are influenced by fads. They also may not have the same meanings as they did previously in history.

There are also ideas of hair symbolism and its impact on self-image, self-esteem, and attachment. Wendy Ashley and Jodi Constantine Brown used a program involving “hair therapy” to assess its usefulness in attachment and self-esteem in African American foster youth. They use hair in their research noting it as a part of a more culturally competent aspect of their “tHAIRapy” for African American foster youth. They emphasize, “While hair is transculturally significant, it represents a sociopolitical statement, a reflection of internal psychological states, and a microcosm of how Black females view the world culturally, socially, politically, and historically. (2015: 592) This article in particular is more specific to the African American demographic, but also explores more additionally how hair is a symbolic tool in the “private sector” mentioned before.

Embodiment

Body analysis is also useful for understanding the topic of hair choices and embodiment because of the way gender and the body can be interwoven in our understandings of how they are treated in a social system. Micaela Leonardo and Roger Lancaster in *The Gender Sexuality Reader* make this point clear: “Ethnographic research shows that human beings articulate extraordinarily varied notions of sexuality- of gendered, sexual bodies- and that these understandings are intricately interwoven within dense cultural fabric...Metamorphoses in sexual and gender relations have always been inseparably linked to political, economic, and cultural changes.” (1997:1) The way the gendered body is seen in any culture opens an understanding of other cultural systems. Other scholars like Emily Martin (1992) also speak to this idea of understanding the body as a focal point for analysis and argues that it needs to be seen in a particular context to have a better understanding.

Cultural studies involving the body and African American culture give insight into thoughts of how the body is theorized and politicized within the culture. One of the historical caricatures that is used frequently in Black body literature is the “mammy” caricature from the Jim Crow era. The “mammy” character is a self-sacrificing, heavy weight Black woman who happily answers to Caucasians at every whim. Though it was a media representation of Black women in the Antebellum South, it was a stereotype that prevailed before the formation of the character itself. She was depicted as the commander of the household, not the man, and accompanied with dark skin and wrapped kinky textured hair. “Mammy” was a character that worked against the societal norms that the man was the head of the household and leader in the home. The caricature was developed as a defense of slavery to prove enslaved women to be “happily obedient.” The character was seen as proof that Black women did not have the fragile and beautiful qualities like White women and were not valued in the society. (Riggs,1987.)

Recent examples of similar imagery are those of popular food brands like Aunt Jemima’s pancake and breakfast brand and Uncle Ben’s rice brand. Both food companies, especially Quaker Oats who owns Aunt Jemima’s product line, have come under recent scrutiny for such images as marketing for their products. Cornell University professor Riché Richardson criticized the logo in an op-ed piece to be an “outgrowth of Old South plantation nostalgia and romance grounded in an idea about ‘mammy,’ a devoted and submissive servant.” (2015) This image is useful in setting the stereotypical understanding of the African American woman’s body in popular racist culture historically and the ideas surrounding why certain skin tones and hair textures were in and out of style. Lots of literature use the caricature as a historic starting point to understand trends of attractiveness and how Black women navigated the choices of their body.

An article that explores the relationship between weight and the deviant Black women by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafonant presents about the history of the image of “the strong Black woman,” its implications, and how that affects eating habits and the genesis of disorders. She explains as one possible explanation, “Because the strong Black woman discourse is upheld both within and outside of the Black community, there is very little resonance for any African American woman who acknowledges or desires to speak about her weaknesses, pains, and frustrations.” (2003:115) She further explains in a clinical study that African American women within and outside the community were less likely to admit when overworked and overwhelmed and engage in other self-medicated behaviors to cope like overeating. She notes from a symbolic approach to the body and weight, overweight Black women can be seen as literally carrying the weight of the world on their body. Since overweight Black women are not stigmatized in their community, this behavior falls under the radar. She concludes that Black women and their individual choices need to be studied quantitatively and qualitatively to better understand their body size and shape and their attempt at combating oppressive realities through their bodies. This article particularly is relevant to the general topic because it links the Black woman’s body to a cultural identity associated with them: the strong Black woman.

Kristin Denis Rowe (2019) touches on African American women, hair, and embodiment in her study that explored cinematic moments of Black women on screen removing their wigs or “weave”/ hair extensions during intimate moments of an “emotional breakthrough.” She uses popular shows and movies like *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Being Mary Jane* and *Beyond the Lights* to illustrate the un-doing of African American women’s hairstyles on screen as an intimate moment in everyday lives of Black women. She further describes the idea of embodiment and references public and private symbols regarding these intimate hair moments

on-screen: “Unstyled hair is meant to be private—hair that is matted, tangled, unstyled, or dry is not fit to be seen. Styled hair that is properly twisted, pressed, constructed, and placed is more presentable for public viewing.” (2019:23) These cinematic moments of Black women taking off their wigs and extensions show a private moment for many Black women that is made public by presenting it on-screen for public viewing. She goes on to clarify,” For me, it makes sense that discussions around hair and beauty would be tangled up in this conversation—as these issues are also wrapped up in how the body experiences things within a larger structural/sociohistorical context. I maintain that hair, beauty, and sexuality are linked because they are all ‘embodied’ and ‘felt’ in particular ways.” (2019:24)

Beauty/ Barbershop Studies

In many barber and beauty shop studies, an important aspect to note is the entrepreneurial characteristic. Historically, African American women especially, were pushed towards domestic work and eventually gravitated towards entrepreneurship during the great depression with the decline of the labor market. Adia Harvey in *Becoming Entrepreneurs : Intersections of Race, Class and Gender at the Black Beauty Salon*, notes that “labor market disadvantage, economic depression, and racial discrimination made entrepreneurship in the hair industry highly appealing for African American women during this time.” (2005: 792) Further, it was not uncommon for White barbers and beauticians to refuse work on Black patrons due to racial segregation. Harvey enlightens that some women of the time gravitated towards entrepreneurship in the hair industry because it was one of the few niches where they were in demand and specifically by other Black women who “perceived that maintaining a well-groomed appearance was a necessity for securing employment.” (2005:792) It is implied from this idea that a well-groomed appearance

was essential for their survival. It is evident that without such an appearance, it was difficult to gain employment and provide for themselves due to the societal “norms” set on by their White counterparts.

Other studies show the relationships and treatment of the beauty or barbershop as a “safe haven” for patrons to interact, form relationships and share ideas. David Shabazz in his ethnographic study in an African American barbershop hones in on the idea that the space is a cultural forum. He explains, “The grooming extended beyond personal appearance.... The customers come in and they engage each other and the barbers in controversial topics which question the thinking and verbal wit of the other.” (2016:309) Bryan Keith Alexander also notes barbershops as a cultural space where African American men commune with each other through bonding and the exchange of information. (2003) Conversations and exchanges between stylist and customer are essential for group acceptance within the African American community according to Geneva Smitherman (2000).

Outside of the social interactions between stylists and customers, African Americans view beauty shops as safe havens for African American women because of the emphasis placed on Black women’s hair to be aesthetically pleasing. Rowe (2019) mentions in her article that some women feel “exposed” without their hair “done” and that there is a level of interpersonal intimacy and vulnerability in showing up to the salon with their hair matted, tangled and un-styled. She references Robin M. Boylorn and her writing about beauty shops as a “sacred all woman space for bonding.” Boylorn believes that the intimacy and relationships come from the vulnerability of exposing un-styled hair in that space, “At the shop’ we were sisters, even when we were strangers, because being without a done ‘do was like being naked. Between our sing-alongs and gossip, no one noticed what our ‘before’ hair looked like. The salon was a meeting

place, the great equalizer—like church but without the judgement.” (2017:283) The salon was an important cultural space from the mentioned literature regarding hair and symbolism. I consider the “safe space” aspect of the salon space when considering the interactions in today’s hair appointments, but due to the protocols in reference to the CDC guidelines for the recent pandemic did not conduct study in a salon/beauty shop.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Framework

The overarching theory pertinent to understanding the topic is cognitive anthropology. Cognitive anthropology references symbolic and interpretive anthropology which says that culture lies in symbols which transmit meaning and are shared (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1970). These symbols help define people's interpretations of their world around them and the goal of this is to analyze how people give meanings to their reality and how this is expressed by their cultural symbols. In conjunction with symbolic and interpretive anthropological theory, I used semiotics and Sign theory originally proposed by Charles S Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure. The theories broadly concern themselves with how signs mediate meaningful relationships in human minds. The last theory used in this research is Edgar Schein's organizational culture which explains that basic assumptions shape values and the values shape practices and behavior, which is what we visibly see (Schein, 1984).

Symbolic and Interpretive Anthropological Theory

Some of symbolic and interpretive anthropology's principal features lie in the treatment of meanings and its relationship with culture. Clifford Geertz was one anthropologist who described culture as a system of meanings that are publicly expressed. As understood by cognitive anthropologists Claudia Strauss and Naomi Quinn, Geertz described studying culture as reading a text in understanding meanings and the importance of the "actor's point of view." (Strauss and Quinn, 1997) It's clear the cultural environment of the person is important in understanding the cultural text or language particularly in hair dressing practices today. Symbolic and interpretive anthropology is important to my data because physical artifacts like

hairstyles and styling tools do not convey interpretation. It's also important to note, that without the meanings and feelings behind visual artifacts, the communication of what they are to convey can be misinterpreted. The strengths of cognitive theory as an overarching concept are the emphasis on understanding socio-structural aspects in relation to meanings as well as interpretive and communicative aspects.

Scholar Edmund Leach (1958) theorized a dichotomy of public and private sectors of the symbolic system. He explains public symbolic behavior as a “means of communication”; the symbol is a tool of communication between the person and their audience. It's assumed through this mutual understanding of the public symbol; the person and the audience share a common symbolic language. Without “a common set of conventions as to what the different elements in the language mean”, there is a miscommunication between both parties. He describes this broadly as culture (Leach,1958:148). The essence of the private symbolic sector is its “psychological power to arouse emotion and alter the state of the individual.” There is a sort of emotional content for the individual that is sparked by the symbol that the audience can only guess at the true meaning. Scholar Gananath Obeyesekere adds “that public body symbols may become articulated with deep personal significance for certain individuals.....while Leach is right that the primary function of public symbols is communicative rather than psychological, individuals may borrow public symbols to conceptualize and express private complexes.” (Obeyesekere, 1984 as cited in Mageo, 1994) This insight is important theoretically to conceptualize hair choices individually and how they intersect publicly within a cultural system.

In connection with the understanding of symbols and meanings, Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure's theory on semiotics and signs are important additions to the understanding of the subject. Scholars Peirce and Saussure are credited as founding theorists of

sign theory and Milton Singer is credited for coining “semiotic anthropology” using foundational principles of Peirce and Saussure’s work. Generally, semiotic anthropology explores the role language and other systems of signs are implemented in everyday life for humans, ways we interact with each other, and understanding power distribution.

Though both theorists aimed to develop general theories in relation to signs, Charles S. Peirce created Sign Theory as a three-part relationship between what he calls the sign (he also calls this representamen, representation, or ground), the object, and the interpretant. The sign is the signifying element that is a “mind formulation to represent the object” (Bau Macedo, 2018). The sign is a *sign vehicle* that involves all the characteristics that make it a signifying element, but it is not the sign itself that signifies on its own. The object is the aspect that is being signified and the interpretant is the meaning given by the working relationship between the object and the sign. “This sign vehicle communicates something by virtue of creating a connection between an object (whatever the sign stands for) and an interpretant (the idea or mental representation now created in our minds).” (Mertz, 2007) Each element works in relationship with the other providing understanding or meaning.

In conjunction with symbolic and interpretative anthropology, I use Sherry Ortner’s Practice Theory which in its main concept analyzes the relationship between established cultural systems and how people function within them. Practice Theory, she explains, restores “the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) action;.... it seeks to explain the relationship(s) that obtain between human action, on the one hand, and some global entity which we may call ‘the system’ on the other.” (Ortner, 1984, 2006) It is not a theory that is strictly defined, but rather an approach in conjunction with other theories.

Practice theory focuses on the influence of the structure on the people, but also the people influencing the social/cultural structure.

Though Sherry Ortner was a bit critical of Clifford Geertz', her approach in conjunction with his understanding that culture can be embodied by the actors in the cultural system is useful for understanding the relationship between African American hair, the socialized environment it is set in, and the symbols and meanings that are related to hairdressing. Language and routines in African American hairdressing communities are influenced by "the system" which is the person's environment, i.e. namely workplace, school and politics. It's embodied and expressed via the vehicle of hair.

Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein's formal definition of Organizational Culture is "the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." (1985) Some key aspects discussed with organizational culture are assumptions, emotions, leadership, and visible artifacts.

There are certain assumptions of what it means to be a part of the organization and unconsciously "determine how group members perceive, think and feel." (Schein, 1984) Within a social structure or community like hair salons or even the African American community itself, some assumptions lie in the role of a hairdresser, client, and their interactions. There are certain rules of what it is to be each individual character and the role each played in reference to the group. The leadership aspect will be useful especially in my methodology. My work with

hairstylists as informants was intentional because the assumption of their role is that they are experts or have a working knowledge of the field.

In summary, social and symbolic meanings are crucial for the understanding of Black women's hair care practices because it provides a deeper understanding of the culture behind it, why routines are done, and certain words used within the community. In using the organizational culture theory as a way of understanding the community and the way it functions, it shifts into understanding deeper meanings of symbols surrounding Black hair from the informants/participants of the “organization” or community.

Methodology

During a three and a half month stretch, I implemented various methods of collecting field data to understand the relationship between African American women’s hair, identity, and belonging, and language. My primary tool of data collection involved semi-formal interviews with eight African American women hairstylists who specialized in hair styles primarily worn by African American women. Of my eight interviewees, five women were in their mid to late 20s, three were in their 30s , and one was over the age of 50. They all self-identified as African American.

These interviews were no longer than an hour in length, one to two interviews per stylist, and were conducted virtually or at their establishment where they typically serviced clients. If the interview was through video chat, it was conducted through Microsoft Teams application. The few in-person interviews with stylists were conducted during a hair appointment with a client or with me in the chair getting my hair styled. Before each interview, each participant signed written consent forms electronically through DocuSign or in person if applicable and each interview was audio recorded. I also took notes during each interview. Once each interview was

complete, I transcribed them, highlighted important themes that referred to the research questions, and coded them by the recurring themes.

I discovered my candidates primarily through social media hashtags and snowball sampling. Typical hashtags I searched were either the names of hairstyles with the location of Houston (ex: **#HoustonBoxBraids #HoustonSewIn #HoustonCrochetHair**) or **#HoustonHairstylist**. It was important to utilize this tool in finding stylists because it is a substantial device used by entrepreneurs to promote their work, especially during the recent pandemic. With that in mind, the nature of the Black hair industry is entrepreneurial; so social media today is a valuable instrument to have their work promoted. I also joined Facebook hair care groups for African American women and stylists and made posts regarding the nature of my research to attract participants. I found a few of my interviewees through informal conversations with other African American women and asking who their stylist was. Most times, the stylist had their business listed on social media where I was able to contact them and also see their showcased work.

I supplemented my interviews with an online survey posted to my social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. The survey asked participants to list words that come to mind when they think of African American women and hair. I utilized this tool to collect general ideas surrounding African American women's hair from people in and out of the African American hair community. There were no requirements to participate in the online survey.

Lastly, I made use of social media to collect a record of images, videos and user posts pertaining to African American women's hair. This was valuable for a broader understanding of ideas pertaining to African American women's hair, how it is talked about, and how it is presented and showcased. The images and videos were especially useful to gain more insight

into the variety of hairstyles primarily done, trending hairstyles, how styles are achieved and reactions to hairstyles via comments and interactions under the posts. To collect these images and videos I followed hairstylists, hair care brand pages, and scrolled through the explore page of Instagram and clicked various hair-related hashtags to find more images.

Chapter 4: Let's Talk Hair

Survey

As detailed in Chapter 3, I conducted a Microsoft pages survey inviting participants to list words and/or phrases that come to mind when they think of African American women's hair. The demographic for the survey was not limited and was distributed through Facebook and Twitter social media platforms and word of mouth. It was open for any participants to answer for two months, and 63 contributors answered in various phrases and words. About 78% of the participants identified as female and 88% identified as Black or African American.

Thirty three out of 63 participants mentioned "beautiful" when considering African American women's hair and "beautiful" was the most written word. The second most common word was "natural"; it was mentioned 30 times out of the 63 responses. "Natural" in today's terms when referencing African American hair means hair that is free of chemicals or treatment systems that might alter the true pattern of the wearer's hair. It is not a particular style, but rather how the hair is treated or managed. These two words were also two of the main coded themes that came about from the interviews with the stylists.

Other answers talked about hair texture by listing descriptive words often associated with African American hair: coils, puffs, curls, afro, thick, relaxed, locs, twists, braids, etc. Participants also gave responses that provided insight into how African American women's hair is talked about. For instance, a Hispanic female respondent, age 29, answered, "not cherished in natural styles as much as it should be, polices, used as a way to hold African American women back professionally in variety of careers, dynamic, versatile, hair can be used for bonding and forming lasting relationships, hair is a part of identity." Others like African American female respondent age 48, said, "I feel sorry for black women who don't recognize the beauty of their

texture and choose to put relaxers on their hair or wear weave or wigs like European hair. I hate the term ‘good’ hair that we use in the black community. Nappy isn’t bad unhealthy hair is, I hate that we have to think through our hair style for a job. Natural hair is amazing.”

I used these various responses as a starting point to the ideas of how people talk and think about African American women’s hair and what questions I wanted to ask my interviewees. They were useful also not to just formulate questions, but also to understand the “public” aspects regarding symbols. They are the public that sees African American hair and formulate ideas and meanings.

Interviews

The interview portion of the research was conducted with a total of eight hair stylists who identified as African American women who specialized in hair styles frequented by African American women. Each virtual or phone interview lasted no more than one hour in length. I asked the same list of questions for each participant, in no order, but followed up for further explanation based on their replies. Some questions were omitted based on each stylist’s experience, details about their background, and responses from previous questions if it was not applicable. The following is a sample of the list of questions asked in each interview:

1. Where did you grow up? Describe your upbringing.
2. Growing up, what were some of your favorite hairstyles to wear? Can you describe them?
3. Can you describe a time you felt pressured to wear your hair a certain way? How did you feel?
4. Did you go to the salon growing up? Can you describe your experience there?

5. What kind of styles or techniques do you enjoy doing the most? Why?
6. When did you start styling African American women's hair? How did you get into the hair industry?
7. Tell me about a time you felt most confident with your hair.
8. What type of relationship do you typically have with your clients?
9. Tell me about a time you felt most confident as a hairstylist? Alternatively, a time you felt most insecure?
10. How do you learn new techniques?
11. Describe your hairstyle currently.
12. What do you feel is a defining moment when it comes to your hair?
13. How does social media affect how you do hair?

The three overarching themes that were revealed from their responses and stories were beauty, hair texture, and education.

Beauty

When it came to talking about beauty, many facets of the theme were revealed. In relation to hair, the theme beauty brought up ideas surrounding confidence, appearance and how it's projected to others, self-esteem, and artistic expression. Hair as an expression of overall beauty is not an idea that is uncommon and is categorized under the industry of the same name for a reason. Hair as a public symbol in the instance of how it is interpreted by people and their reaction to the wearer can also be seen as a private symbol in this instance because it reflects some aspects of the inner self that the "audience" or people surrounding may only be able to

guess at for the wearer. But as mentioned by Ganath Obeyesekere, they can borrow that public symbol to reflect something private.

Public symbols in the sub-categories found surrounding beauty can include appearance, how it's projected to others and artistic expression. Stylists mentioned appearance in various examples whether they were talking about the work they do for their customers or how they manage their own appearance regarding their hair. Kacey Simone, 37, talked multiple times about her work on clients and appearance, "So the thing is I specialize in beautifying the inner and outer woman...to make them feel good about that stuff. I think it's very important because a woman's hair is her glory." She explains that she often works with clients who suffer from alopecia, and it is important for her to help these women through their lack of hair by applying hair replacement systems and what she calls "beautifying" them. Kacey uses hair in this instance as a public symbol as "their glory." Hair in this way communicates to the audience that there is significance in making sure it is done up because it is a direct reflection of self. It reflects great magnificence of each woman. Melissa Jones, 32, also mentions the "glory" analogy in relation to African American women's hair, "At the end of the day, like if your hair is how you like, they say it's your crowning glory, but I still feel like it should still be kind of each woman's separate journey with how they deal with it, you know?"

Georgina Stevens mentions how she navigates her hair appearance in her relationships and comments of public reactions to appearance growing up, "Back where I'm from for them to think you got it or not even think about, show the class you're in. You have to come stepping out clean all day every day or don't leave the house...but I've always trained whoever I'm with to see me in every aspect so that when you do see me in my glam stage or when I just get my hair done other than that, you can not necessarily appreciate that, but like, I want you to feel like I'm

beautiful in my natural state.” In this example, she uses her hair in its “natural” state as a symbol to her people and her partner. She explains that as often as she makes sure her hair is styled, she also makes sure her partner appreciates when it is not done up. Here, her hair is a public symbol to her partner and other people that despite what it may appear to be, she is still beautiful. In this way she is fashioning this public symbol, her hair not being done up and styled, and redefining what it means for her. To not have the hair done up in public or in front of a romantic partner is typically seen as an indication of lack of self-value or lack of beauty, but she is actively resisting this. She re-assigns this public symbol that translates as negative and redefines what it means for her and her public reflection. On an individual level, as Practice Theory explains, there is a working relationship here between how undone hair is seen in society especially for African American women and how Georgina actively resists that thinking.

Another sub-category under beauty is artistic expression or creation. Kacey mentions artistic expression through her work and often mentions doing hair as a “gift”. Continuing, she said, “I wanted to be in the medical field, but when I discovered I had a gift, that’s all I wanted to do, you know, I wanted to create.” She goes on and explains in many instances in her interview that hairstylists have a God given gift that is expressed to the world and impacts the lives of their clients, especially African American women. She explains that this artistic gift could be utilized in many ways outside of monetary gain by styling hair for impoverished, homeless, or even older people who can no longer do their hair.

Renae Ash, 55, also mentions hairstylists using their artistic talents in the community, often doing hair for free to help people who don’t have the means to pay to get their hair done. She mentions how important hairstylists can be in the community for that reason because they can use their talents to help others get jobs or even have a better self-image of themselves. Renae

also mentions the salon and/or barbershop having an impact on the community as a place where people came to get information on what was going on in the news, their everyday lives and a place for them all to come together. As seen in this instance, the role of the hairstylist is not only an artist who enhances appearance through hair, but also impacts the lives of their clients and community through service.

The role of the hairstylist in the hairdressing community here is understood as community worker and informant. Edgar Schein's basic underlying assumptions is understood in these two roles of the hairdresser, especially in relation to their community. Basic underlying assumptions are the things in a culture that are believed and valued by the members of the group, in this case the African American hair community. These are unconscious aspects of how the group behaves, thinks, and feels as a result of "learned responses that originated as espoused values." (Schein, 1984) From their responses, the two hair stylists value the impact they have on the hair community and their social environment. An outsider might presume their role is simply to care for and style hair or even label them an artist as well, but from the stylists' responses the underlying assumption goes beyond styling the hair. It translates into a person who has an impact on the community they serve. The community service and informant aspect are behaviors adapted as a result for a need in their personal community, whether it is their neighborhood or their book of clients who come to them for their services. Their clients come to them for information, news, as well as uplifting them in their moments of need through the vehicle of hair.

Other stylists mentioned the hair they do as being art or creative expression, but also mentioned that typical hairstyle choices of their clients today don't necessarily help them exercise that aspect as often as they like. Briana Smith, 38, mentioned that her favorite styles to do for clients is bridal hair because she can get creative and more artistic with the styles, but she

doesn't get the chance to do it often. Bridal hair is typically fashioned in an updo with curls, pins and twists and can often be accompanied by jewel adornments as well. Given the historical context of African American hair in America, this is not a surprising choice by her clients to choose styles that are less extravagant or hairstylists themselves who work in corporate or office environments. If we consider underlying basic assumptions again, it says that there are certain beliefs and assumptions which are not discussed, but are understood on their own by the people. Historically, straight hair was the acceptable style when working in corporate America and even historically when enslaved people began to change the texture of their hair to assimilate to their White counterparts. In today's politics the C.R.O.W.N Act, which seeks to prevent hair discrimination due to texture and style, has yet to pass through the Senate and become a law despite numerous news and media stories regarding hair discrimination in the workplace and school. It is evident the hair choices for the hairstylists' clients are impacted by the society in which they live in. In this case, the stylists are hindered with their expressive aspect of styling hair due to their clients' choices to survive in a "system" that does not allow them to wear styles that are deemed "unprofessional". There is a larger implication that without straight hair, it is difficult to assimilate and survive because their appearance is unacceptable.

Under the theme of beauty, confidence, and self-esteem were also brought up regarding the stylists doing work on clients and getting their own hair done. Confidence was expressed recurringly by stylist Kacey when she spoke about the work she does on clients. She specializes in hair replacement systems for clients who have alopecia or traction alopecia. Alopecia is a sudden hair loss in certain spots of the head or can be loss in chunks at a time. From interviews, I learned a lot of the stylists concerned themselves with a form of alopecia they called traction alopecia. This type of alopecia is caused by too much tension from hairstyles worn by the client

that constantly pull at the hair, often towards the front of their hairline. Kacey explained that due to the hair loss experienced by her clients, she was adamant about creating an environment for them where they felt confident after they left her styling chair. She said that one of her most crucial characteristics outside of creating art and instilling “Godly” principles in her work, was to make sure her client felt her most confident when she left her space. She expressed some of her clients with types of alopecia had to continually find stylists who would work with their ailment, and she was one of the only ones who would make them feel beautiful. Kacey explained that in her hometown of Flint, Michigan, she was a popular stylist starting from hair school, and when she left, a lot of her clients were upset because they did not have anyone in the area who could work on their hair like she could. There is a therapeutic role she plays for her clients that involves appearance, especially in regards to their hair. It’s implied here the impact she had/has on her clients as someone who boosted their confidence and self-esteem by styling their hair despite their hair loss. Hair in this example has a connection to appearance, self-esteem, and the therapeutic role of the stylist. This is part of the private symbols Edmund Leach references in *Magical Hair* (1958) in which he says, “Symbolic behaviour not only ‘says’ something, it also arouses emotion and consequently ‘does’ something...the characteristic quality of private symbolism is its psychological power to arouse emotion and alter the state of the individual.” The hair style itself is a symbol to the public, but the restorative and self-boosting aspect that happens with the clients during their appointments is a private symbol that shows up in their self-esteem, confidence, and morale. Hair appointments in this case are transformative experiences in which the stylists aid in achieving.

Melissa also mentioned her goal when styling her clients, that she hoped to create an environment in which they felt comfortable. When she decided to start doing hair as a full-time

stylist, she quit her career as a full-time psych counselor and wrote down all the aspects she envisioned for her salon. She explains, “So as far as writing down the type of atmosphere, I was like, I want women to feel welcome; I don't want them to feel judged even though...because I know that dealing with um black women's hair is a journey. So I . . . I want to create an environment where they can come in and they can feel like, like, I don't even have to walk in where covering my hair up, like I can just come as I am, like they say at the church. I can just come as I am and not feel judged and she's gonna take care of me and I am going to feel safe in her hands.” She explained that some of her clients come to her feeling judged from past experiences with stylists and their own hair journey. She felt it was important for them to feel confident that she has their best interest regarding the health of their hair and that they leave feeling better than when they walked in.

She also explained how one of her most confident moments with her own hair was when she decided she didn't want to get relaxers anymore. A relaxer is a chemical treatment that is applied to the hair to change the texture, typically from curly to straight permanently. It is also called a “perm” amongst the African American hair community. She felt once she started to see her natural curl pattern, she felt more freedom to do fun things like different hairstyles and coloring because it was healthier. Melissa felt like with her relaxer her hair wasn't at its healthiest and that's why she decided to “go natural.”

Hair as a symbol of beauty is quite apparent in these stories and shared experiences. From their perspectives, hair translates as beauty publicly but also privately. Public and private are brought together in the hair styling space in a type of therapy. The audience or viewer physically sees the hair style and imposes their beauty standards to form opinions, but privately the wearer forms meanings of their own, assisted by the hairdresser. This is all through the sign vehicle of

hair. For the stylists, hair is publicly translated as art. They take what is given to them and work their hands to make something they and their clients translate as beautiful. The appearance of the hair meaning transforms privately and is expressed publicly, as Obeyesekere has mentioned. The women borrow something publicly seen and express their own inner beauty through their hair. Hair transforms as self-esteem and confidence for the wearer.

Education

The second theme most coded in the interviews falls under education. Each stylist in some way or form mentioned this theme. Whether it was learning new styles or educating their clients, it was an apparent aspect handling African American women's hair. Often the stylists talked about growth when it came to education.

Hair growth and scalp health was brought up often as an indicator of health and often a product of education. For most of the interviewed stylists, they used their knowledge on maintaining the health of their clients' hair as a starting point for the styles in which they chose to specialize, or services offered. They also used their own experiences with their hair journey and styles to determine how they managed their clients' hair and how they did business.

They explained that educating the client on what products were best for their hair, styles that protect their hair from tension and heat damage, and how to maintain their styles were essential. But if the client wants a certain style, they will do what they can to make the client happy with the results without doing too much damage. Renae references when she was starting out as a stylist versus today and the importance of learning how to manage African American women's hair, "I didn't know the technique of actually maintaining hair, especially for the clientele that I would mostly have, which is African American. So even down to how to cut, so,

and that's sad. You know, we didn't have a wide variety of schools with that type of love and . . . admiration for us in the sense of teaching us how to maintain our hair and how to operate in besides chemical...how like I was when I came out not knowing what I was doing. It looks good for a week or two, but they're tearing it up...so now we maintain the health and beauty of hair. That should have been the main thought from the beginning, not just for the hair, but health period." There is a larger implication here regarding education, especially when Renae was starting to do hair in the late 90s to early 2000s. From her response, learning about Black hair was not of importance in hair schools or in curriculum for hair education. Hair education for African American women and stylists was not as easily accessible or known as it is today, resulting in the beauty of the style taking on more importance than the health. This is a recurring example of the therapeutic characteristic of hairstyling as well as the limitations for the stylists' schooling. The history of African American hairstylists and their entry into the beauty industry due to denied service by their White counterparts, further implies that the curriculum for hair schools as they were formed still sought to exclude Black hairstylists. So as a result, we see years of African American women tending to the therapeutic, self-assuring quality of having their hair done up rather than the health.

Kenya mentioned, "You do what you can as a professional, you try to tell them... Yeah, I educate them on a lot of different things, but you know, sometimes their mind is made. They come in there 'I want this, I don't care.' You know?" She goes on and explains that with clients it can be different when trying to educate them on what's best for their hair because "you don't know what you're coming up against" with each client that sits in the stylist's chair. She used the analogy that when you go to the doctor, the doctor is the professional and you listen to the

physician; it's the same with hair professionals and how important that client may listen to information the stylists provide.

When considering the client and stylist relationship about education, the stylist takes on a role as teacher, professional, and leader. Organizational culture explains “that cultures begin with leaders who impose their own values and assumptions on a group. This ability to perceive the limitations of one’s own culture and to evolve the culture adaptively is the essence and ultimate challenge of leadership” (Schein, 2004) The stylists are leaders in that they set the standard and rules for how a typical hair appointment should go and how to maintain the hair. However, with educating the client, it looks to be a working relationship between the “teacher” and the “student” or client. Despite the hairstylist being a sort of leader in the hair industry, clients still ultimately have agency to do what they want when it comes to their hair.

Another important aspect of education was social media. The stylists all used some form of social media, whether it was apps like Facebook, Instagram or Styleseat to get their work seen and attract new clients. Styleseat is a booking app used by hairstylists, barbers, estheticians, and other beauty specialists where clients can search for nearby offered services, book appointments, and check reviews. Often, they asked friends or followers for help by providing free hairstyles for them in exchange for pictures to post to their profiles. Social media, specifically YouTube, was often a starting point for learning how to do hairstyles, especially for the stylists new to the industry. For some of the stylists like Sarah and Lauren who just moved to the Houston area within a few months to weeks from our interview, they solely relied on YouTube for their techniques when starting their business and a few classes from stylist who offered virtual courses online.

Texture

The last recurring theme was texture. Although the word “texture” was not explicitly said, the idea of it was often brought up. In relation to texture, the word “natural” was almost always brought up in relation to African American women’s hair. “Natural” in the African American hair community is defined as without chemical intervention like relaxers or “perms.” The women often spoke of them “going natural” and as embracing their curls and inner self, and most of them described when they went natural as a defining moment for them. In contrast, straightening their hair or using “relaxers” was a moment when the women felt pressured to have their hair in that fashion.

Historically, in recent years “going natural” was a movement to embrace yourself and “Blackness,” and it is evident in the interviews that this was the idea behind their decision to wear their hair “naturally”. This movement was like the “natural” hair movement in the 60s and 70s by African American men and women. Both movements sought to embrace African American’s hair without chemical intervention and symbolize a new awareness among African American people. Lauren explained that if it wasn’t for YouTube she would not have the tools to know how to do her own natural hair. She said that in high school was around the time she started her natural journey and tutorials through YouTube really helped her to understand her hair and how to make it thrive. Kacey also brought up her transition from “relaxing” her hair to wearing her curls. She explained that her hair was always thin and straight, but when she finally went “natural” she saw what her real curl pattern looked like and was happy it wasn’t “nappy” like she previously thought it would be.

Melissa explained that her defining moment was not necessarily related to “going natural” but taking control of her “crown”: “My defining moment was when I realized that I am

the person that has to wear this hair. So, I will not allow outside forces to influence me to feel bad about it or sway me one way or another. Whatever I want to do with my hair, I'm going to do it. If I want to put a relaxer on it, I will do so...I feel free with my hair. Like I do what I want to do with my hair, and it is what it is. I don't ask permission to do things with my hair. I don't seek validation when it comes to my hair. I am literally in control of the crown.”

Their stories of going “natural” or embracing their hair in any stage is translated as a symbol. The signifying element here is the hair in its natural state and publicly given the historical context of African American women changing their texture to assimilate; the interpretant is the association of natural hair to embracing Blackness or themselves. The object is the hair itself. This is the working relationship between the sign, interpretant and object theorized by Charles Peirce. Hair is also seen as an icon and index, in relation to Peirce’s categories of symbols. He defines an icon as a symbol that has a direct identifier to the sign (2018.) Icon in the case of hair is the direct association people see when they see hair or hairstyles. There is no interpretation of the meaning of the symbol; when we see hair, we know it is hair. There is a real and direct connection when the audience sees textured hair on African American women and symbolizes it as “natural” hair. Index is a category defined “when the object and the sign are linked by real sensory relation.” (Bau Macedo, 2018) An index doesn’t resemble the object being represented but rather implies the object. “Natural” hair as the object in the index category shows evidence or symbolizes the empowerment of African American hair texture and liberation from a beauty standard imposed that celebrated straighter hair textures. For these stylists, the decision to “go natural” was one of freedom from societal and social pressures to have their hair a certain way regarding gaining employment and navigating society. Their natural hair or the decision to

take their hair decisions into their own hands without precaution on the reactions of their socialized environment brought out a sense of self or self-identity for them.

Also considering the “natural” hair and its impact on politics, the workplace, or environment around them, we see Sherry Ortner’s Practice theory come into action. In the interviews, stylists mentioned navigating their hair in the workplace and some of the instances when their hair was not deemed “professional.” Melissa explained when she was a school counselor, one of the administrators commented about her hair not being professional because it was in colored braids. When I asked about the outcome, she said she simply told the administrator that she wasn’t changing it because it was not a distraction, and it cost money to have her hair in that fashion. If the administrator wanted it changed, she would have to pay her to have it changed. This same mindset came up when Sarah explained that when she looks for new jobs, if her hair comes up in conversation as inappropriate or unprofessional, she does not consider the employer an option for employment. With the CROWN Act still underway and in some states passed as law, Practice Theory tells us about this relationship when the structure or socialized environment influences the “actors” but also how the actors influence the system. With the women purposely acting against previous notions regarding textures like coily, nappy hair as unprofessional, we see them changing the socialized environment. Their natural hair is so crucial to their sense of self, that they are unwilling to change it to gain employment or fit in.

Conclusion

Though each theme is broken into sections, each often coincides with the other and relates in some way to meaning and understanding of how these women form their individuality. To feel beautiful, they learned more about their hair growth and what styles worked best for the hair health while also giving them confidence. They embraced the texture of how their hair grows to express themselves and ultimately express their identity. Hair, as revealed through a cognitive anthropological lens, is a crucial part of the sense of self expressed by African American women. Each theme shows how important it is to their being so much so that they are unwilling to change it to assimilate to the beauty standards centered around European American traits.

Beauty as a recurring theme and one of the most mentioned themes is unsurprising to me. Hair cross culturally is often used as a symbol for beauty, among other aspects. Hair shows so much about personal style and, for African American women, the options almost seem endless on how they want to express that. A notable characteristic of the theme hair as a symbol of beauty is how it can be both public and private. Publicly, we see hair and decide for ourselves the aspects that make it beautiful, whether it be the actual style, adornments, length, texture, and so on. For the woman, she privately works out how her hair makes her feel, and it can only be guessed as to how she is working those meanings for herself, whether it actually makes her feel beautiful due to the appearance and what part of her style makes her feel confident or is something she would have to express.

Education and learning were also an unsurprising theme about African American women's hair and practices. With ever changing trends in hairstyles and the maintenance of the hair, for African American women and their stylists, it is an aspect that is seen in the history as

well. As styles and trends have changed, so have the ideas around how to care for the hair. In recent years, especially in response to the natural hair movement, understanding hair type and texture are important in what styles can be worn and how to care for them.

Finally, the theme of texture is important. Though the terms “good” hair and “bad” hair in reference to texture are not often used when talking about African American women’s hair today, texture seems to still be a recurring characteristic to how hair is talked about. “Natural” hair is a common term used or mentioned when talking about African American women’s hair, especially for the women interviewed. For the most part, becoming “natural” translates to embracing the hair as it grows and embracing an aspect of being Black. This is evident because historically straightening or applying a relaxer treatment was used to assimilate and because straight hair was associated with European American’s hair. It was a symbol of not accepting their “natural” self. It is also evident in the way hair was talked about in each woman’s journey because for most of them “going natural” was a defining moment when they felt freedom or closer to their self-identity.

African American women’s hair has the working relationship as being an object that acts as a signifier, icon and index in Peirce’s triadic theory of symbols and symbol categories. It not only directly symbolizes what it is, but reflects beauty and identity. It is especially apparent when talking about “natural” hair as a symbol of physically textured hair, freedom and “Blackness”.

This research’s challenges were in the number of women interviewed and the demographic of the surveys. If more stylists’ stories were used, it could potentially bring up more themes surrounding hair and/or supplement the themes already established through this research. I also believe sitting in on a greater number of stylists’ hair appointments would show

more of the working relationship between stylist and client and themes that might come up. Due to social distancing during the pandemic and the nature of how hair is done today, having extra people during an appointment goes against CDC pandemic guidelines. In the past hair salons were more popular, but from the interviews that I conducted, most if not all the stylists worked from their home alone and only allowed one customer/person in at a time. I would like to see more research on post-pandemic hair appointments and what might come of it. For the survey, because most of my social media following was predominantly but not exclusively African American, the demographic reflected majority African American or Black identifying participants. Future research should consider studying ideas of more people who do not identify as African American, do not have previous experience with African American hair, and examine their ideals surrounding African American hair.

From the terms used for hair styles and practices to defining what certain styles mean for the women who wear them, the way hair is presented in this research provided various cultural identifiers, meanings, and larger implications of these notions within a sociocultural society. The commonalities within this study and the literature show societal pressures, media representation, emotions attached to hair care, relationships formed, feelings and stereotypes attached to hairstyles and textures, and ultimately personal expression of self and value. These stylists assist Black women in the “beautification” of their hair while also providing a restorative role within their relationships with each other that helps shape their inner self-esteem and value. Their hair practice is apart of the “will to adorn” by Zora Neale Hurston that satisfies an inner sense of self and connects each Black women to a cultural identity.

References

- Alexander, B. K. (2003). Fading, twisting, and weaving: An interpretive ethnography of the Black barbershop as cultural space. *Qualitative inquiry*, 9(1), 105-128.
- Ashley, W., & Brown, J. C. (2015). Attachment tHAIRapy: A culturally relevant treatment paradigm for African American foster youth. *Journal of Black Studies*, 46(6), 587-604.
- Atwood, R. (2012). Senegal's Forgotten Slaves. *Archaeology*, 65 (5), 47-51. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/41780836
- Banks, I. (2000). Hair matters. *New York University Press*.
- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2003). Strong and large Black women? Exploring relationships between deviant womanhood and weight. *Gender & Society*, 17(1), 111-121.
- Botchway, D.-V. N. Y. M. (2018). The Hairs of Your Head Are All Numbered: Symbolisms of Hair and Dreadlocks in the Boboshanti Order of Rastafari. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 12(8), 20–38.
- Boylorn, Robin M. "Beauty Parlor Politics." The Crunk Feminist Collection, edited by Brittney C. Cooper, Susanna M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn. *The Feminist Press at CUNY*, 2017, pp. 282–84.
- Byrd, A. D., & Tharps, L. L. (2001). Hair story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America. New York: *St. Martin's Press*.
- Bau Macedo, L. (2018). Charles Sanders Peirce and the Social Ontology of the Firm: A Semiotic Perspective on Human Agency. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 52, 1036 - 1055.
- Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair Act of 2020. H.R.5309.116th Congress. 1st Sess. (2020)
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: *Basic Books*.
- Harvey, A. M. (2005). Becoming Entrepreneurs: Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender at the Black Beauty Salon. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), 789–808.
- Hurston, Z. N. (1983). Characteristics of Negro Expression. 1934. *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: *Turtle Island*, 49-68.
- Johnson, A. M., Godsil, R. D., MacFarlane, J., Tropp, L. R., & Goff, P. A. (2017). The "good Hair" Study: Explicit and Implicit Attitudes Toward Black Women's Hair. *Perception Institute*.
- Johnson, T. A., & Bankhead, T. (2014). Hair it is: Examining the experiences of Black women with natural hair. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*.
- Leach, E. (1958). Magical Hair. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 88(2), 147-164.

- Mageo, J. (1994). Hairdos and Don'ts: Hair Symbolism and Sexual History in Samoa. *Man*, 29 (2), new series, 407-432.
- Mertz, E. (2007). Semiotic anthropology. *Annual Rev. Anthropology.*, 36, 337-353.
- Obeyesekere, G. (1984) Medusa's hair. The work of culture: symbolic transformation in psychoanalysis and anthropology. Chicago: *University of Chicago Press*
- Ortner, S. (1984). Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 26 (1), 126-166.
- Ortner, S. (2006). Anthropology and Social Theory: Culture, Power, and the Acting Subject. Durham: *Duke University Press*.
- Patton, T. (2006). Hey Girl, Am I More than My Hair? : African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair. *NWSA Journal*, 18(2), 24-51. Retrieved from www.jstor.org/stable/4317206
- Rasmussen, S. J. (1997). Between Ritual, Theater, and Play: Blacksmith Praise at Tuareg Marriage. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 110(435), 3–27.
- Richardson, R. (2015). Can We Please, Finally, Get Rid of ‘Aunt Jemima’?. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2015/06/24/besides-the-confederate-flag-what-other-symbols-should-go/can-we-please-finally-get-rid-of-aunt-jemima>
- Riggs, M. T., & California Newsreel (Firm). (1987). Ethnic notions. Berkeley, CA: *California Newsreel*.
- Rowe, K. D. (2019). “Nothing Else Mattered After That Wig Came Off”: Black Women, Unstyled Hair, and Scenes of Interiority.” *Journal of American Culture (Malden, Mass.)*, 42(1), 21–36.
- Schein, Edgar H. (1984) Coming to a New Awareness of Organizational Culture. *Sloan Management Review* 25 (2): 3-16
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sieber, R., & Herreman, F. (2000). Hair in African Art and Culture. *African Arts*, 33(3), 55-96. doi:10.2307/3337689
- Smitherman, G. (2000). Talkin that talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America. *Routledge*.
- Strauss, C. & Quinn, N. (1997) A Cognitive Theory of Cultural Meaning: Introduction, Cambridge, UK: *Cambridge University Press*
- Synnott, A. (1987). Shame and glory: A sociology of hair. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 38(3), 381-413.
- Vinson, B. (2011) Choir member clapping, photograph. University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, crediting UNT Libraries Special Collections. <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1007154/>

WBAP-TV Television station (1977). Woman at a desk, 2.

White, S., & White, G. (1995). Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. *The Journal of Southern History*, 61(1), 45-76.