Redefining the Identity of Black Women:
"Natural" Hair and the Natural Hair Movement

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents and my great aunt. Thank you for your

unconditional love and support. You all have motivated me to reach my highest potential.

If it were not for your sacrifices and encouragement, this would not have been possible. I

also dedicate my thesis to the natural hair community in Washington, D.C., and at large,

for inspiring my research. Your presence cannot be overlooked.

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Abstract of Thesis

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This study examines young, Black women's hair practices and perspectives within the current wave of the Natural Hair Movement. Based on twelve in-depth interviews with Black women in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, this analysis uses Black feminist thought and standpoint theory to center the concept of "natural" hair and explore participants' relationships to it. The analysis is attentive to the ways family, peers, and media have influenced Black women's hair practices and perspectives, and grounds these in the history of racialized, gendered, and class-related perceptions of Black women's hair. My interviews reveal that "natural" has become such a desirable label that even Black women in this study who straighten their hair consider themselves "natural" due to the term's newfound subjective meaning. This indicates that the Natural Hair Movement has contributed to the rhetorical success of this label, even while its meaning has now expanded so broadly that it includes nearly every hair care practice other than chemical relaxing. While some may argue that this inclusive definition of "natural" dilutes an important cultural distinction between Afrocentric and Eurocentric hair practices, it may also indicate that these Black women seek not to be divided over hairstyle preferences but rather, seek a collective identity as Black women who are free to make informed choices on the basis of what is important to them.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Black women in the United States have created and adopted a variety of hairstyles and hair care practices over time, for reasons including ease, expression, image, conformity, and non-conformity. Styles have emerged and faded from popularity, but some have come to signify something more than an individual woman's assessment of what is best for her on any given day. In the 1960s, African American women who wore their hair in its natural, kinky, curl pattern were viewed with pride and admiration by some, and judged as unprofessional, inferior, and inappropriately political by others. The term "militant" took on a negative connotation for African American women and men who wore their hair naturally because many feared the social change this population was fighting for during the Black Power Movement. Afrocentric hairstyles such as the afro, twists, and dredlocks have been considered forms of political protest against the norms imposed by White culture. The negative perspectives about Black women who wear their hair in these styles have not only come from Whites, but from those of African American descent as well.

As the momentum behind the Black Panther Movement faded, straight hairstyles that resembled the dominant portrayal of White women's hair texture gained popularity once again during the 1980s and into the new millennium. African American women who straighten their hair in a way that resembles the styles of White women—styles that are sometimes called "Eurocentric"—face the criticism of some of their Black peers, including accusations of low self-esteem and a desire to assimilate into White society, as opposed to being proud of their racial identity (Rosette and Dumas 2007). Through my own casual conversations with other Black women over more recent years, I realize that

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there has been a shift in the hair debate in which many African American women are now glorifying those who wear their hair in its natural state as opposed to those who straighten their hair. When I go out in public wearing my natural curl pattern, I am frequently praised for being "brave" enough to wear my own hair and not manipulating it through hair straightening or weaves.

For the purposes of this study, I refer to the conscious and deliberate natural hair practices of Black women as a movement. Feminist scholars Janet Chafetz and Anthony Dworkin (1986) define women's movements as "conscious and collective revolt on behalf of women, defined as a general category with a set of problems and needs specific to themselves, which in turn are created by a sociocultural system that categorically disadvantages them relative to men". Black women have united and voiced solidarity to reject the normative standards of beauty, which have marginalized their inclusion for centuries. To challenge these norms and images of "acceptable" beauty, some Black women have collectively made conscious decisions to wear their hair in its natural curl pattern. African American women from all over the U.S. as well as Caribbean and European countries have joined together in producing media materials to educate other African Americans on how to properly care for their hair, from using organic Black produced hair products, to demonstrating different natural hairstyles and hair maintenance techniques. What some may have initially perceived to be a trend has transformed into a movement because its economic power has now caught the attention of predominantly White hair care lines. Brands such as Loreal, Patente, and others that once ignored Black audiences have established new norms by producing hair product lines to accommodate the thicker texture of African Americans who now seek mostly

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"natural" hair products. This movement has brought attention to the ethnic struggles that Black women face in society due to their hair, and helped change the negative perceptions that some have about "natural" hair.

The Natural Hair Movement includes masses of Black women who have stopped using chemical relaxers to alter the texture of their hair. Relaxers are a type of hair product that contains strong chemicals that transform a tight curl pattern, making the hair straighter but also damaging it. When Mintel, a market research company, surveyed Black women ages 18 and up in the United States (approximately 50% reside in the southern region) about their hair practices in 2013, approximately 70% stated that they have natural hair (Mintel, 2013). During the 1980s and 90s it would have been uncommon to see many Black women wearing their hair naturally. However, now, in any given space it may be difficult to find someone who is not natural. In the D.C. metro area where I conducted this study, from my own personal observations and others that I speak with, it is just as common to see a Black woman wearing a natural hairstyle as it once was to see a Black woman wear straight hair.

In this project I explore the experiences and interactions of Black women with the Natural Hair Movement, with specific attention to the ways in which their attitudes and identities have been influenced in relation to this movement. My sample consists of twelve Black women ages 18-40 from the D.C. metro area. I focus on D.C. because this is where I was first exposed to Black Women's interest in "natural" versus "non-natural hair," as well as the characteristics that are associated with both types of hair textures. I seek to understand how race, class, and gender, especially among Black women, has shaped the experiences of the participants in my sample regarding standards of beauty

and attractiveness in the beginning of the 21st century. This research addresses specifically these young Black women's relationship with the negative stereotyping about Black women's hair that has been so prominent in the United States until fairly recently, as demonstrated through their own decisions regarding their hair.

This study also focuses on how women's interpretation of the views of their family members, peer groups, popular figures, and the media foster their own identities. These areas of focus are important for numerous reasons. First, no other scholarship has directly addressed African Americans' perceived identities in relation to this current wave of the Natural Hair Movement. Unlike much of the research on Black women's hair, this study does not begin with the assumption that one hair practice is inherently oppressive or liberating over the other. Rather, it grounds the perspectives of these young Black women by researching whether they view their hair as natural or non-natural, and how they interpret the meanings of the category in which they place themselves. While other contexts and views are also relevant, this project was not designed to be a comparison of Black women's views versus another group's. This study recognizes the diversity amongst Black women, and sees this difference worthy of an exploration of the construction of their reality through their interactions with other Black women.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks that I operate in are Black Feminist Theory and Standpoint Theory. I use these theories because of my own personal experience of being a Black woman and the importance of hair I saw placed upon me and other Black women I interact with. Before I was even old enough to formulate an explanation of why hair is

so important among Black women, I knew my hair needed proper attention and must always be well-groomed when in public. Standpoint Theory is defined as "the notion that the social group to which a person belongs will directly influence the way in which that individual perceives and interprets daily experience" (Sullivan, 2009). Standpoint theory allows me to start from my own experience to explore how structures of domination as they pertain to beauty have not only marginalized women as a whole, but more specifically, Black women. It allows me to lend a credible voice to the study as an insider of the group that I wish study. I use these theories and works by Black feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins to examine how Black women see themselves and others, and how discrimination, parental control, and other social influences have contributed to the way in which Black women position their identities. Black feminist theorists contribute to scholarly works on the lack of images and representations of Black women in mainstream society, and highlight how when this population is featured, their presence is often accompanied by, or associated with negative racial stereotyping or controlling images. A core theme of Black Feminist Theory is to challenge these controlling images. The popularization of the Natural Hair Movement, which rests on premises that are both liberatory and at times contradictory, has given Black women the confidence to create their own ideas of what it means to be beautiful and rise against negative attitudes that natural hair once generated.

Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2001) is the foundational sociological work on the lived experiences of African American women, images of beauty, and the production of knowledge. In the 4th chapter of her book, Collins addresses the negative, controlling images such as the mammy, the hoochie, and the discriminatory

images of beauty that have been used to describe or define Black women. She examines the effects that colorism in the United States has had on Black women, and the struggle they experience with Western standards of beauty. Collins recounts how Maya Angelou, a well-known Black female poet, records in her autobiography the painful realization that "the only way she could become truly beautiful was to become White" (2000), although Angelou has long since overcame these feelings prior to her death in May 2014. As a young girl growing up in the 30s, she hoped that one day she would wake up from her dream of no longer being Black and ugly with big kinky hair, so that the world would then see her as beautiful because she would have fair skin with long, blonde, straight hair. The ideology then, which remains in evidence still today, that Blackness does not equate to beauty has prompted some Black women to question, or even more harmfully despise their natural, unaltered selves.

Based on her analysis of how Black women envision themselves, Collins theorizes how past overt discrimination, oppression, and racism have contributed to the negative controlling images and perceptions that they have internalized. Western culture often plays into the color hierarchy because light-skinned, bi-racial Black women are more likely to be seen in the media over darker skin black women. And prior to this new wave of the Natural Hair Movement, it was uncommon for a Black woman with afros, braids, or dredlocks to be shown on television, in movies or advertisements. These controlling images convey a message to Black women that lighter-skinned Black women are more beautiful than darker-skinned Black women, and that hair which is closest to White hair is beautiful hair. After decades of circulation of these images about Black women and their hair, over time, Eurocentric looking hairstyles have become legitimized

by some African Americans as it has influenced too their perceptions of what constitutes Black beauty.

Alternatively, when it comes to controlling images, Collins also suggests that Black women have taken on the language and manners of their oppressors. When examining hair practices throughout history, there have been periods in time which Black women predominantly styled their hair to resemble the texture of White women. Collins states that although some have taken on the language of their oppressor, they still "play the game" by hiding their true self-definitions. This is found today when Black women appear to adopt Eurocentric hair practices in the workplace to conform to European culture and expectations, but outside of work and in leisure time they wear their hair in Afrocentric styles. In their private lives, they proudly wear common natural hairstyles such as afros, twist outs, puffs, and showcase who they believe they really are. This practice is evident among the women featured in the book, *Hair Dilemma: Conform to Mainstream Expectations or Emphasize Racial Identity* (Dumas and Rosette, 2007). The authors examined the pressures placed upon Black women to conform to mainstream standards of beauty, and the implications of these pressures on Black women and their employers. Dumas and Rosette determined that Black women "look the part" to prove that they deserve to be there. Black women use their hair to navigate other's interpretations of them, their character, including professionalism and competency. Collins and Dumas and Rosette suggest that it is Black women's awareness of these negative perceptions about these controlling images that influence their hair practices, whether they choose to conform through Eurocentric styles, or challenge them by wearing Afrocentric hairstyles.

In the next section, I explore previous scholarly literature that addresses Black culture, images of beauty, and hair to examine what is currently known and understood to be the representation of Black hair in Western society. I present what has shaped these negative perceptions about Black hair, and what Black women think of their hair, particularly when it is in its natural, unaltered state. I seek to examine the internal conflicts (if any) that Black women face as they make decisions about their hair, as well as the conflicts that exist between Black women who wear natural or non-natural hair as they analyze hair practices that may be different from their own.

Chapter 2: The Evolution Of Black Women's Hair

In this portion of the paper, I examine the evolution and transformation of Black women's hair over time. I cover the history and culture of Black hair, the symbolism of Black women's beauty, the brief rise and fall of "natural" hair during the Black Power Movement, Black hair practices and the attitudes behind them, Black hair in the workplace, and today's resurgence of "natural" hair.

History of Black Hair

Hair can be perceived as a representation of women's identity. However for Black women, their hair may not only be symbolic of their femininity, but their race as well. Before Africans became enslaved in the United States and still walked their own soil, it was and still is very common for Africans to wear their hair elaborately and style their hair with braids, shells, twists, beads, and a variety of other hairstyles. The dressing of the hair could take many hours or even days to complete (Byrd and Tharps, 2002). The hairstyles of African women were respected among other Africans. Their hair was

considered elegant and a representation of age, religion, rank in their community, wealth, marital status, and even occupation within their culture (Byrd and Tharps, 2002). The kinky texture of their hair was universally accepted within the African community, it allowed African women to arrange their hair in so many different styles due to the versatility that its texture offered.

During the transatlantic slave trade, enslavers collected approximately 300 Africans at a time, and before they set sail, every slave on board would get their hair cut off for sanitary reasons.   The removal of hair by their White owners was the first step in ridding slaves of their identity and lowering their status in American society (Byrd and Tharps 2002; White 2005). Upon arriving to the United States as slaves, working outside day in and day out gave those of African descent no choice but to neglect their routines of hairstyling that was customary to their traditions back in Africa (Thompson, 2009). While some hairstyles worn by Africans during slavery are still worn today (including twists, braids, Nubian knots, dreadlocks), slavery changed Africans' connection to their hair and their roots (Thompson, 2009). Slaves were summoned to fieldwork and had no excessive amounts of time to dedicate to maintaining their appearance. In addition to not being able to focus much on appearance, the combs that were readily available in their homeland were not as readily available in America (Thompson, 2009). What were once long and healthy locks were now matted and tangled tresses due to the inability to obtain combs while enslaved in the United States. Because of the lack of hair care and consistent toiling of labor in the sun, many Africans developed diseases of the scalp as well as wing worms, causing their hair to experience breakage or fall out. Scarves were worn not only

as protection from the sun, but to also cover hair that had become unsightly and unkempt (Thompson, 2009).

According to Cheryl Thompson who studied the history of Black hair and hair altering methods, slaves who worked in the "big house" would wear wigs like their owners and their wives, while others shaped their own hair to look like one. This practice distanced those enslaved from their cultural traditions of viewing their thick, wooly African hair with such prestige. During slavery European scientists began to separate and categorize Blacks based on their appearance of hair and skin tone (Thompson, 2009), resulting in the colorism that African Americans experience today. Angela Harris, who researches the effect of racism and colorism in America, argues that "The hierarchy employed in colorism, however, is usually the same one that governs racism: light skin is prized over dark skin, and European facial features and body shapes are prized over African features and body shapes" (Harris, 2008). Blacks with lighter skin and straighter hair were (and still are) believed to be superior, and those with darker skin and "African hair" were believed to be inferior because their appearance was considered unattractive according to White European standards. To negate these controlling negative images, in order to resemble Whiteness and "appear" presentable, many African Americans began to practice skin lightening and applying harmful products that would straighten their hair. The hair practices of those of African descent went from elaborate hairstyling designs reflecting their African culture, to the imitation of a White European hair texture and standard of beauty (Thompson, 2009).

Hair as a Symbol of Beauty

While the bulk of the literature that discusses how hair has shaped the identity for Black women focuses on a racial gendered identity, when looking at gender in isolation research concludes that women face different obstacles than men in their attainment to achieve beauty standards. For women, hair reflects and portrays one's attractiveness in their community (Weitz, 2000), and women are raised to value and pay attention to the ways in which they present themselves to the world. Weitz examined through interviews and informal conversations the symbolic meaning of hair and the ways in which hair shapes women's identities. She concludes that women style their hair based on the emotions they feel and obstacles they have been experiencing as a method to reflect their mood and current struggles. By changing their hair, these women also change their identity. Women are taught to value their appearance because our society upholds beauty as a determinant of some women's ability to court and find suitable husbands (Weitz, 2000). Women often style their hair according to the desired interests of their boyfriends or husbands. Hair is used to navigate the outcomes of their intimate relationships, using the change of their hair to signal the dissolution of an intimate relationship to signify change in their personal lives and the desire for something new (Weitz, 2000).

African American women face different types of pressures than African American men in achieving beauty standards because of the different expectations opposed upon both genders. In *Rapunzels Daughters,* Weitz states that "hair remained central to the identity of Black women" (2000). Even though she relates this claim to Blacks ability to express themselves and their African culture through different hairstyles while enslaved, she maintains that over generations, this concept remains true. The culture of Black hair

is embedded with the racial legacy with which this nation was built upon, and the stereotyping produced because of its racist history. Weitz argues that through women's upbringing, we are taught that our hair is an extension of our appearance, and one of the first things a person sees. Young Black girls learn during their youth that they are judged and defined by their appearance: style of dress and presentation of hair.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, White depictions of what African Americans looked like were visions of beady eyes and thick lips with wild unkempt hair. These images were popular in comic cartoons, in children's stories, in food, soap and advertising, all created by Whites (Congdon-Martin, 1990). These images were symbols used to represent degeneracy, simplicity or "savage" appearance in the African American culture (Congdon-Martin, 1990). The development of the film industry in the early 1920s and 1930s elaborated the genre of White depiction of African Americans and took it to new levels of popularity among White consumers (Bogle, 1994).

In addition to depictions in film, the performance of beauty comes to us through a variety of mediated images that we are bombarded with daily. These messages of beauty, especially those in advertisements, construct and communicate ways in which women can make themselves look better by using products that can tone, redefine, reduce aging, straighten, lighten, and otherwise "fix" their appearance. What women and men learn is that attractiveness is one of the most defining characteristics of a woman. American women are primarily shown on television, commercials, and other types of media having shiny, bouncy, blonde long hair. Although these images are directed toward women of White European descent, African American women are still impacted by what is shown

because the media is less likely to feature African Americans, especially in beauty advertisements unless the product appears to be marketed to Black women.

Madam C.J. Walker, a well-known African American female historical figure who is prominently featured for her contributions to Black hair care during Black History month, once made a living by washing the clothes of others. In 1905, she invented a product that altered the hair by softening its texture when accompanied with a hair straightening comb. Through her career, Walker was able to change Black women's perspectives about their hair and provided them with a method by which they believed they could obtain "good hair" and feel better about themselves and their appearance. Madam C.J. Walker's hair product line became a million dollar industry in the 1900s (Thompson, 2009) and created a new trade for women looking to attend beauty schools. As a Black woman, her race and gender gave her credibility amongst other Black women to believe in the value and worth her hair product line. Author Tracy Owens Patton attributes Walker's hair product line to increasing the self-esteem of Black women because it challenged the notion that Black hair is not beautiful through her renowned hair straightening technique. Black women could now too have "beautiful", Eurocentric-looking hair by altering their hair's natural texture. Even though the ability to have straight hair may have increased the confidence of some Black women, because they did not embrace their natural hair, its beauty became equated with its ability to imitate a White European hair texture and assimilate.

Although the role of class is sometimes implicitly expressed through discussions of race, during the 20th century straightened hair was a marker of the New Negro status, a person of lighter-skin, educated, and able to assimilate into White society. Black

women's hair that had been chemically altered to become straight was a way to represent those of the middle class according to Rooks (1996). Walker believed that by transforming her appearance (hair), she might gain the self-confidence she was longing and be successful like other Black women. Her advertisements implicitly suggested that by manipulating hair texture, one could change how African Americans may be viewed by White society. Walker encouraged Black women to move beyond the domestic sphere and to choose a life for themselves. Noliwe Rooks argues that Walker linked "learning to grow hair with prosperity by encouraging women to become Walker agents and open up a beauty parlor." She promoted the art of hair dressing as a route to economic self-sufficiency by encouraging women to become business leaders by selling her products. The practice of hair straightening among Black women became intertwined with this group's professionalism, and respectively, upward mobility. In contrast, natural hairstyles such as afros, braids, and dreadlocks took on negative connotations.

Walker's legacy left a powerful mark on the Black hair care industry, but it also conditioned some to believe that the definition of beauty is not inner beauty, or intelligence, but rather outer beauty. This culture of hair suggests that in order to be professional and climb the corporate ladder, you must meet the standards of beauty for a woman, and that is by having straight hair. Prior to the Black Power Movement, Blacks did not publicly negate Western culture's perspective about Black hair. Consequently, White standards of beauty became the norm by both African Americans and Americans of White European descent in their communities because of the barriers Blacks faced from participating in mainstream media (film, advertisements). These advertisements were instrumental in fostering the competition between light-skinned African American

women and dark-skinned African American women because light-skinned Black women with a multi-racial hair texture were more prominently featured in the media. This has led some African American men to express desire for White or lighter-skinned women with long, straight or multi-racial looking hair, as opposed to lighter-skinned or darker-skinned women who may have chosen to wear shorter or natural styles (Patton, 2006). Since the era of slavery and even still today, both men and women have been conditioned to believe that light-skin is superior.

Cheryl Thompson's 2009 study explores how media and socialization shapes grooming practices of Black women, and her research participants discussed the perception of "good hair". One of the participants described "good hair" as hair that is less "nappy" and more closely resembles White hair textures. Meanwhile "bad hair" is hair that was coarse and thick. Another participant, Nicole, recounts how growing up she was often told that she had "good hair." "Good hair" to Nicole was when a person had strong, thick, healthy hair. The softer, and finer the hair was, the more likely the hair was described as "good hair." Many Black women struggle with their hair's natural hair texture because it does not measure up to the elite's standards. They struggle to continue the altering process, as the images of women with long silky hair flood the media (Patton, 2006). Good hair was always an aspiration and the definition of "good hair" was hair that is not "nappy".

Brief Rise in Natural Hair and its Negative Connotations

During the Black Power Movement in the 1950s, natural hairstyles including the afro acquired popularity as a symbol of Black pride. One of the goals of the Black Power

Movement was to show how Black culture has been influenced by Westernization and hegemonic normative societies that devalued the Black race. This movement acknowleged the internal and external degradation of the Black race. Supporters of the movement viewed hair straightening practices as an emulation of White standards of beauty, therefore perceiving those participating in such practices as possessing self-hatred. Arogundade (2003) argues that prior to the afro there had never before been a hairstyle that projected such fear into mainstream society. As a result, in the 1960s the afro became associated with those wanting to empower the Black community and promoted a pro-Black way of life. For some Whites, the afro took on a militant connotation because they perceived these African Americans to be violent and dangerous. Although the afro does not possess as much political symbolism today in 2014, some Blacks and Whites still associate Black empowerment and militancy with the natural hairstyle today.

Rastafarian hairstyling is another form of chemically free hairstyling that came to prominence in the United States with the success of Bob Marley, a Rastafarian - a wearer of dreadlocks. Rastafarian hairstyling or dreadlocks is a style in which the hair is matted and twisted together, producing multiple individual locks of hair. This hairstyle exhibited signs of pride in the natural qualities of African physical and cultural attributes. Byrd and Tharps (2001) suggest that the Rastafarian was derived from the days of the slave trade. When African Americans emerged from the slave ships after months spent in conditions adverse to any personal hygiene, Whites would declare the matted hair that had grown out of their kinky unattended locks to be 'dreadful' (Byrd & Tharps 2001). Because such

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a history is linked to the name "dreadlocks," many wearing that style today choose to drop the 'a' in dreadlock to remove any negative connotations.

Black Hair Practices & Attitudes

In the United States women of different races struggle with their perceptions of themselves and their self-definition. Throughout history, different definitions of beauty surfaced throughout the media creating a guide to beauty for many different women. For many African American women, personal identity development requires learning how to live in a predominantly White male society, while becoming a Black woman (Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, Ryan-Finn & Grove, 1996; Perkins 1996). The mass media and society portray African American women in stereotypical oppressive fashions, from southern plantation mother-like figures on the Aunt Jemima box, to sexually promiscuous animals. Labels such as these can make it extremely difficult for African American women to love themselves and to nurture their self-esteem (hooks, 1993).

In *Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women* (1996) Noliwe M. Rooks studies the politics of race and beauty that encompass the identity of African American women from the nineteenth century to the 1990s. She contends that society's standards of beauty are shaped by dominant ideas. These dominant ideas are what influences Black women's decisions to ask for permission to straighten their naturally thick and tightly coiled hair. In the book, Rooks discusses her experiences being the daughter of Black activists who was the only child at her school to wear a natural hairstyle. As she desired to fit in with her classmates, she harassed her parents for permission to straighten her hair when she was 13 years old. Her parents refuted her

wishes and believed that she should be happy with her textured hair and reject the societal norm of a Eurocentric look. Although Rooks did not share those same sentiments as her nationalist parents, she came to learn that her hair has significance and "bridged the space between personal identity and a larger racial politic" (1996).

The relaxing or perming of the hair is still a common and popular tradition amongst African American women. The chemical alteration of the natural hair texture begins for some between the ages of 6 to 8 years old. Author Ingrid Banks (2000) argues that this process happens early on in life because Black women are raised to believe that their natural, "nappy" hair is shameful and undesirable. Because of the negative perceptions that African American women experience about their hair, they attempt to conform to White normative standards of beauty. Whitney Bellinger's study revealed that Black teenage girls chemically alter their natural texture to achieve long, straight hair that resembles a White European hair texture, or hair that is more commonly known as "good hair". She concluded that another common reason for the hair texture's alteration is that many African American women think the natural state of their hair is too difficult and inconvenient to maintain. With thinner-looking and less coarse hair, Black women find more satisfaction in the ability to manipulate their hair in this texture.

In an article titled: *Am I More than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair*, the author Tracy Owens Patton (2006) discusses some of the post-slavery history pertaining to Black hair and the beauty struggles that African American women go through. She contends that "their beauty has been wrought with racist stereotypes" (2006). The racial legacy of African American women has led them to impersonate the looks of White European women through the

development of the Lily Complex, the "altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate, to be accepted as attractive" (Patton, 2006). Cheryl Thompson (2009) says that since she was a teenager, her hair had been chemically altered from its natural state without first understanding why. Because of the negative stereotypes associated with Black hair, how Black women choose to style their hair is a critical and complex thought-out decision that is often influenced by family, peers, and the community they inhabit. These racist stereotypes continue to permeate the minds and attitudes of African American women today in regards to how they may view themselves, as well as others who choose to wear their hair naturally. Many Black women describe natural hair in a negative manner which contributes to issues of self-identification. To describe hair in the natural state as something negative, could only show how the person perceives herself if she were to ever be without manipulated "good hair."

In the documentary "*Good Hair*" (2009), Chris Rock delves into the background of African American women's hairstyles. Black women are interviewed to discuss certain sentiments they hold about their own hair, and their perceptions about what is considered "good hair." During an interview urban model Melissa Ford said, "I have always thought that good hair was White hair." Meanwhile actress Nia Long expanded on this remark by acknowledging, "There is always some sort of pressure in the Black community if you have good hair, you are prettier, or better than the brown-skinned girl wearing natural hairstyles." Some Black women devalue themselves and their appearance when they do not fit into the "good hair" category. However, relaxing and straightening their hair allows African American women to alter their hair and transform

to an image of beauty that measures up to mainstream Western culture's standards, and therefore they believe that they too are now beautiful.

Hair in the Workplace

In 2007, a Black woman in West Virginia was fired from her job at a prison for wearing braids, which was deemed inappropriate, by penal standards. Braids or cornrows have long been considered natural hairstyles for African Americans in the United States. They are a viable option for African Americans who require low hair maintenance. The thicker hair texture of African Americans allow their hair to be easily manipulated into braids, a protective style that can be worn for days, weeks, and even months at a time. In 2007, a fashion editor of Glamour magazine spoke with a group of lawyers and found out why many African Americans were afraid of wearing their hair naturally. According to the do's and don'ts of corporate fashion, wearing afros was not considered appropriate, and dredlocks were referred to as "dreadful" as the office was not a place for "political hairstyles" (Thompson, 2009).

For some Black women, these negative perceptions pressure them to chemically straighten their hair to gain employment. Getting hired and maintaining employment is one of the reasons why many African American women spend so much money on their hair. African American women are aware that in order for them to be considered for a promotion, they are supposed to adopt a certain look. Looking 'neat' means either a very manicured natural hairstyle, or straight, relaxed hair. Whitney Bellinger conducted a study in 2007 in which she interviewed 15 Black women to understand their decisions to alter their natural hair texture. One participant in Bellinger's study mentioned that hair is

representative of how well you take care of yourself, while another admitted that once the hair is left in its natural state, White society would view it as weird. The responses given in Whitney's study reveal a feeling that a woman's hair is a way to show a potential employer that one will work hard and excel in their career.

Hair is used to represent status for women. Rose Weitz contends in *Rapunzel's Daughters* (2000) that hairstyles chosen by women throughout history have changed with capitalism. She argues that hair maintenance is a marker of status. "Men gained status by having an attractive wife" (Weitz, 2000). Women would wear elaborate hairstyles to symbolize their socioeconomic status. Elaborate hairstyling meant that women had both the time and money necessary to obtain such hairstyles, giving men the opportunity to show off their wives attractiveness to others. African American women spend $500 billion annually on their hair (Roberts, 2013). This statistic suggests that for Black women, the maintenance of hair can become quite costly, and its consistent upkeep is more affordable for those of middle and upper class status. Hair is also viewed as a marker of class for Black women in the workplace. Authors Rosette and Dumas' (2007) study concluded that Black women in the workplace use hairstyles to differentiate their social class. Black women attempting to show that they hold some type of power or rank in their careers are more likely to wear non-natural hairstyles such as straightening their hair or wearing extensions such as weaves or wigs to achieve a more European hegemonic standard image of beauty. Their research revealed that at the time of their study, Black women of lower rank in the workplace are less likely to use conforming behavior in making decisions regarding their hair.

More current research on the subject of natural hair reveals many motivations for women's hair decisions. Shauntae White (2005) who studied whether women who wear their hair naturally are making a rhetorical statement to reject European standards of beauty discovered that for many women, their decision to wear their hair in its natural state is a process of change in the way they define themselves and also a journey to "self-discovery" that gives a sense of pride and strength. Through the process of self-discovery in the Natural Hair Movement, Black women are able to re-create their self-definitions. However, it is important not to fall into the stereotypical idea that all women who have natural hair are trying to make a political statement. Some women she interviewed claimed that their natural hair did not affect how they felt about themselves. Some women decided to go natural as a matter of personal preferences or an expression of their artistic creativity. The same is true for some women with relaxed hair. As opposed to relating their decisions to self-hatred and loss of identity, their decisions to straighten their hair derived from a matter of convenience. Relaxed hair is understood to be more manageable and less time consuming. Relaxers and the process of straightening one's hair may not be a symbol of self-hatred, but has evolved to be a part of Black mainstream culture.

Women of color appear as though they have disregarded the negative meanings that "nappy", natural hair once represented, and have taken on their own self-definition because today so many wear natural hairstyles rather than straightened hair. In 2013, Mintel published an article stating that chemical relaxer sales have declined 26% since 2008, and they projected a continued decline throughout the year. And from my

observance, metropolitan areas have seen an increase in the number of Black women that wear natural hairstyles such as afros, twist-outs, and other styles that do not require the altering of their hair texture. There has been a shift towards naturalism, and attitudes suggest that natural is now superior to processed hair because naturalism is a non-conforming behavior. Subsequently, Black women use their natural hair to reproduce Black feminist knowledge to fight against the normative societal standards of beauty and systems of oppression, revealing that despite their natural kinky textures of curls, they still encompass the beauty of a woman.

Although a great deal of literature has been written on the pressures Black women encounter to alter their natural hair, much less attention has been given to Black women's decisions to wear their hair naturally. The bulk of literature written in the new millennium has focused on women's exposure to the natural hair movement from the 60s and 70s, how they understand the phrase "good hair", or if their decisions to straighten their hair stems from the self-hate they have of their culture. As a result, we do not have a full understanding in a scholarly platform of what motivates Black women today to wear natural hairstyles, or of the ways these women center natural hair within a wider context of racialized, gendered, and economic social order.

Chapter 3: Methods and Data

Design

In 2007, I moved to the District of Columbia from Detroit, Michigan to pursue my undergraduate studies at a local university. Within a week of living here, I was constantly being asked if I was "natural." Black female strangers appeared to be

fascinated with my hair because I have never had a perm and was therefore "natural" according to their beliefs. Because of this, I have always been curious as to why so much emphasis and importance was placed on having "natural" hair. I wanted to explore how the Natural Hair Movement has helped re-define the identity of Black women despite racial attitudes and beliefs of the past. A qualitative method using an open-ended interview question format is ideal for an exploratory study of this kind. Interviews with young African American women in a setting where they felt comfortable has provided a rich source of data for my analysis. Having interviewed 12 participants for my study, I am not attempting to generalize my findings or suggest that they are representative of all Black women, or all Black women in the D.C. metro area. Instead, I am highlighting the lived experiences and social forces that these women encounter in the D.C. metro area in relation to their hair.

While the subject of natural hair may not appear to be a sensitive topic on the surface, it can often be a difficult subject to navigate. I wanted participants to be able to talk freely without fear of judgment. I used semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with Black women to assess what natural hair means to them, how social, historical, and cultural influences have informed their hair practices, how they place themselves within this context, and examine their attitudes about the Natural Hair Movement. In my original study design, I intended to conduct a small, manageable exploratory study consisting of 12 participants. I wanted to solicit participation from two different groups, those with natural hair, and those without natural hair. Ideally, I would have liked for approximately 6 participants to identify as natural, and 6 to not identify as natural. However, after beginning the interviews, it became apparent that many Black

women identify as natural despite the fact they practice hair straightening or wear other Eurocentric hairstyles. During the coding and analysis process, it became apparent that my participants could be classified into the following: "Natural with Eurocentric hairstyles," "Natural with Afrocentric hairstyles," "Non-natural with Eurocentric hairstyles," and "Non-natural with both Eurocentric and Afrocentric hairstyles." I focus on the different types of hair practices in the analysis that follows.

Recruitment

My primary method for recruiting participants was through calling and emailing hair salons in the U St and Petworth communities with a majority Black clientele, and notifying them of my study before visiting them to ask for permission to speak with their clients. I was also able to recruit participants by attending natural hair-related events in the D.C. metro area such as an African American/natural hair art show and Natural Hair Meet-Up, and through word of mouth. The natural hair events proved to be the single most successful recruitment method in producing participants for the study who categorized their hair as natural. Due to the overwhelming number of Black women in D.C. who identify as natural, I reached out to a graduate school colleague to inquire if she had any friends in the area who did not identify as natural. In all I was able to recruit twelve women, eleven who identified as having natural hair, and one who did not. However, months after the interviews concluded, Monique, the only participant without natural hair, notified me that she had cut off what remained of her chemically relaxed hair and "went natural". While the composition of my sample differs from my original plan, I

learned through these interviews that "natural" is a more complex category than I had imagined, and the views of women within this category vary greatly.

Participants

The participants in this study are all Black women of African or West Indian descent. I interviewed women in Washington D.C. and the surrounding metro areas in Virginia and Maryland as a matter of convenience. I targeted women between the ages of 18 and 40 to capture the perspectives of young adults who may be familiar with the Natural Hair Movement and whose practices may be in scope with my research question. The D.C. metro area population consists of people of substantial class variation. All of my participants were college graduates although this was not my intent. Many of the people attending the natural hair events and hair salons are of different backgrounds, however it could be that those with a college education were more willing and open to being interviewed. Two participants in particular vocalized that they believed my study is important because conversations about natural hair should be happening on a scholarly platform, and not just social media.

The majority of my participants had annual earnings between $25,000 and $50,000. Two participants reported an income under $25,000 as they are full-time graduate students, taking a break from the workforce to focus on school. Only one participant, the oldest, reported an annual income between $75,000 and $100,000. As stated earlier, initially, I intended to recruit women who label their has natural, and those who do not, but my search yielded participants who almost exclusively label their hair as natural. While I do believe that my recruitment methods helped to yield participants who

are college graduates, most of whom are working class, I do not believe that this impacted their identification with the natural label. Today, natural hair is commonly described as hair that has not been chemically relaxed, and can therefore include a wide variety of hairstyling. The definition has broadened from its prior understanding throughout the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s to virtually include most Black women under its umbrella.

Data Collection

The interview questions were designed to get a deeper understanding of how respondents see themselves, what factors have been influential in shaping their ideas of beauty and how they choose to style their hair, and their understanding of the Natural Hair Movement. IRB approval was obtained by The George Washington University's Office of Human Research and the data collection began two months after receiving permission to proceed with the study. The interviews took place over the course of two months in the Washington, D.C. metro area, and each lasted for approximately an hour. All participants were asked to choose a public setting as the location for the interviews. Since many of the locations suggested were coffee shops, participants were made aware that the presence of others could inhibit the confidentiality component of the study and were notified that if this became an issue, the interview could be stopped at any time. No participant stated that she felt uncomfortable with the likelihood that someone else within this public space could potentially hear their responses.

Prior to each interview, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym by which they could be identified in the dissemination of my research. However, all wished to be

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identified by their actual names. Interview participants were willing to talk freely about this subject because for many, it is important to discuss Black hair, especially Black natural hair in a scholarly context. Next, I asked for their permission to have their responses recorded and told them that the recordings would be deleted immediately after the interview had been transcribed. After the recordings began, all participants were asked for their consent to participate in the study, and notified that they could discontinue at any time if they felt uncomfortable. The interviews were semi-structured and intended to serve as a guide and foundation for questions, allowing the conversation to be open and flow in any necessary direction regarding the participants' hair practices, their perspectives on the Natural Hair Movement, and their self-defined identity (please refer to *Appendix A*. on p 57 for the interview schedule).

To gain a better understanding of what types of hairstyles the participants like and would wear themselves, midway through the interview they were shown four photos (Appendix B) of varying hair texture and length, two that are traditionally considered natural and two that are not. I thought it was important to show both short and long hair because I believe that some women desire long hair, even if they have short hair themselves. Photo A depicts a woman with a short natural hairstyle, while Photo B is of a woman with long, straight hair, which is traditionally understood to not be natural hair. Photo C is of a woman with big, long, natural hair, and Photo D represents a woman with short, straight hair which is also traditionally not considered natural hair. Some participants wanted to know my opinion on the questions I asked, but because I did not want to influence their responses, I told them that I could not give my opinion. As we approached the end of the interviews, participants were asked about their annual earnings.

Since some may potentially see this as a sensitive or private topic, they were given cards to reflect different salary ranges, and asked which one reflects their salary.

Data Analysis

After conducting each interview, I transcribed the audio recordings and imported the transcriptions and notes from each interview into NVIVO, a qualitative analysis software. The NVIVO documents were saved as password protected files, and all audio recordings were deleted from both the recording device and my computer. For the data analysis portion of the study, I followed the techniques outlined by Berg and Lune in their 2012 publication: *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences.* To begin the initial coding process, words and themes from the transcripts were identified and placed into individual, unique categories. I read through each transcript, and parsed out different topical areas that arose from the participant's responses, and highlighted these concepts. Themes such as convenience, descriptions of hair, hair texture, and many others were prominent throughout the transcripts. It took approximately three times to thoroughly read through each transcript and identify the themes I analyze here. To differentiate the themes from one another, each theme was highlighted in its own color.

Next, I began the axial coding process, examining how the various categories may or may not have been grouped together to generate a sense of meaning and thought behind the information provided by each participant. I used item and paragraph analysis, coding both words as well as paragraphs. Upon reading the transcripts, it was common to see that interview participants would use multiple sentences to thoroughly provide their response (definitions) on what it means to have natural hair.

It was vital to examine which themes were the most common across all interviews, and specifically which descriptors within those themes were more commonly said by which participants. I would count the frequency with which certain descriptors such as "kinky" or "coarse" were used, as well as the frequency with which words such as "nappy" were used to describe natural hair. After meaningful patterns were identified in the transcripts, the information that I discovered during the coding process was then examined to see how it did or did not correlate with previous literature published on the topic of Black or natural hair. For instance, the lack of the word "nappy" appearing infrequently in the text stood out because authors such as bell hooks (2001) and Noliwe Rooks (1996) would use the term "nappy" to describe the hair texture of a Black woman in books they wrote. However for the participants in my study, many refrained from using the term "nappy" to describe their hair. Participants such as Amma, Christiana, and Monique all made it a point to mention that they dislike the "n" word, "nappy".

After coding I was able to analyze what the data reveals about the population being studied. In the following section I discuss my participants' reactions to the 21st century wave of the Natural Hair Movement. First, I address whether they identify as having natural hair and how they define the term natural. Then, I examine the impact of family and peers, the racial attitudes of the past and present, and the media's influence on their current hair practices and self-definition.

Chapter 4: Uncovering the Impact of the Natural Hair Movement

The Natural Hair Movement is characterized by the African American community-at-large as a cultural shift not only in the way Black women wear their hair,

but also a shift in the way Black women see themselves. Traditionally, having natural hair meant that a Black women did not straighten her hair, and instead consistently displayed her hair's natural hair texture whether with an afro, twists, braids, or dredlocks. For this project I wanted to research and analyze the role that this movement has had in the Washington D.C. metro area, and how it has impacted the practices women in this area use to style their hair. I hoped to address the role race, socialization of peer and familial groups, and the influences multiple forms of media has had on this population's decision to go natural, and their decision to stay natural. My goal was to assess how all of these social factors have helped to re-define the identity of Black women in a more positive way, helping them to understand that they do not have to conform to European standards of beauty to see their natural selves as beautiful.

When I reflect on my own personal observations as a resident of this metropolitan area, I tend to see more Black women with natural hairstyles than women with Eurocentric or straight hairstyles. Despite this observation, I still expected there to be a larger representation of Black women in the D.C. metro area who did not categorize themselves as natural and chose to wear their hair in more Eurocentric hairstyles such as straightening their hair or wearing weaves that gave them the appearance of straight, long hair. For decades, Black women were more likely to wear straight hair than Afrocentric hairstyles. I expected that there would be a large population of Black women who labeled their hair as natural because they no longer use relaxers, but that some would wear Afrocentric hairstyles and that others would use various methods to straighten their hair (Eurocentric hairstyling). For the Black women that manipulated their hair to resemble a White European hair texture by wearing straight hair, I thought they would

acknowledge the racial history of African American women in the United States and how it has influenced how they defined themselves prior to their decision to no longer relax their hair. I also thought that the Black women who no longer relax their hair but still wear straightened hair would lend credit to the Natural Hair Movement's role in stimulating them to think deeper and to rise above the hegemonic standards of beauty that have been imposed on African American women. Finally, I expected there to be a population of women who did not chemically relax their hair, but chose to straighten it and did not identify as natural. This group was not represented in my sample of interview participants. This expectation arose from my own personal experiences and definition of what is natural, which has also been formed by authors such as Noliwe Rooks (1996), Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps (2002), and others who never formally introduced a woman with natural hair as someone with straight hair.

What it Means to be Natural: Definition VS. Practice

The first research question I intended to uncover was what does natural hair mean to each participant, and whether they identified with that label or not. For all of the subjects interviewed for this study, when asked to define natural hair, the consensus was that natural hair means hair that has not been relaxed. Some participants went even further to describe natural hair as hair that has not been chemically altered, with the exception of hair coloring. Methods of hair straightening, wigs and hair extensions are all inclusive to the term natural hair. However, they did acknowledge that in conversations with other Black women about the meaning of natural, some would say that if a Black woman chooses to chemically color her hair with something other than henna (which produces a red color naturally), she cannot be considered as having natural

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hair because the hair's cuticles have been penetrated by the chemicals in hair coloring, thus altering the hair's natural texture and curl pattern. Christiana, a 26 year-old graduate student who wears her hair in Afrocentric styles such as afros, twist-outs, and braids defined natural as "how it grows out naturally and being comfortable in my own skin." To Christiana, being natural is not just about wearing your hair in its natural texture, but also accepting who you are and being comfortable with your image, even when many Americans do not acknowledge your beauty. For Christiana and others in my sample who wear Afrocentric hairstyling, being natural was a part of how they defined themselves, and how they chose to present themselves to others. Natural is not just a term to define their hair, but it is also who they are as Black women, and being comfortable with their image.

Through my search to unravel the importance of the Natural Hair Movement in shaping the identities of Black women, I determined that the women in my sample place less emphasis on how one categorizes oneself (natural or non-natural hair), but the hairstyles and hair textures that one chooses to wear. Monique the only woman who does not espouse the "*natural*" label states she is not natural because she continues to use chemical relaxers to assist in straightening her hair. She, along with the other women who straighten their hair believe that they are not consciously trying to ascribe to a hegemonic European standard of beauty with their straight hair, but instead are donning what they feel is a convenient image for them.

One of the most interesting aspects of these Black women's self-definition is that while all but one considers their hair to be natural, half of the women straighten their hair most, if not all of the time. Society has influenced the presentation of our bodies based

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on our biological sex. The teachings in socialization by our parents lead women to produce their bodies as objects for others and their praise. The term "natural" is a label that all but one of these Black women ascribe to, no matter how they wear their hair. They are challenging the biological meaning of natural, and have allowed their subjectivity to establish their own identities.

The next group of women I categorize as natural with Afrocentric hairstyles both label themselves as natural, and wear their hair in a manner that emulates their African roots. One participant from the study who is representative of this group is Brenda, a 25-year-old woman who went natural in 2012. Both Brenda's mother and grandmother have a hereditary medical condition that causes hair thinning, and Brenda is concerned that she too may develop this medical condition in the future. After reflecting on the hereditary hair issues that her mother and grandmother encounter now, and the healthiness and liberation that having natural hair can offer, Brenda made the decision to do the big chop and cut off what remained of her chemically straightened hair. Currently, Brenda primarily styles her hair in a short afro or twist-outs that displays her natural curl pattern. "I'm a little more standout and I like twist outs because they make your hair look textured and adds more dimensions to it." Brenda prefers these styles because they accommodate the current length of her hair but still accentuates her natural texture. These hairstyles allow her to be bold as opposed to the more "tailored", "polished" look her mother prefers.

Brenda categorizes herself as having natural hair. As she describes it, "Natural, to me means my hair isn't impacted by relaxers, like I don't use chemicals on my hair, I don't have any color in my hair. I don't really think that matters as much, the color part.

But I don't have any color, and I just wear my hair the way it comes out of my head so that's kind of how I would describe natural for me." For Brenda, being natural is not only about how one chooses to wear her hair, but also about how one feels. Brenda states, "I also have, um this thing about just wearing my hair, learning to love my hair the way it is and not feeling like I have to have it be straight for me to be pretty, so that's what I've been learning about myself and my hair and why I wear it this particular way." Brenda's decision to go natural not only stemmed from concern about the future health of her hair, but also her desire to learn to love her natural curls, and realize that she is still beautiful even when she does not straighten her hair.

In her own words, Brenda describes her hair as "kinky, thick, tightly coiled, and having its own personality." First, she defines herself as being a Black woman, but also as someone who is trying to be her best self, and accepting and loving herself for who she is. She believes that she is a bold, caring, and intelligent person, and that her boldness is transmitted through the way she wears her hair. Going natural brought her liberation because she was no longer weighed down by the concerns of how the weather or activities that she engaged in would affect her hair. During the portion of the interview where Brenda was asked which photo appealed to her the most, she chose Photo A which depicts a Black woman with a short afro, very similar to Brenda's hair at the time of the interview. Brenda likes Photo A the most because the woman "accentuates her hair-even though it's short-with her lip gloss, her makeup, stuff like that, and it's out of her face. It kind of shows her face." Brenda is firm in her decision to be natural and wear Afrocentric hairstyles, and is not interested in changing for her family, or for the purposes of the corporate sector. Her hair now expresses who she is, not who she wants to be.

Brenda's concerns about hair lie within other's desires to achieve long, straight hair; she wants people to "think about why they're relaxing their hair or straightening their hair. If they are doing it just as a personal preference or if they're doing it just because that's what other people think they should do."

For Brenda, Christiana, and many others who identify as being not only natural, but willing to express this on a daily basis through their hair practices and wear Afrocentric hairstyles, they recognize the way in which race, gender, and at times class intersect to oppress them. They are proud to connect with their African roots and discontinue manipulating the natural texture of their hair are important because they show that some Black women are resisting the oppression produced by White culture. Black women who are natural and accentuate Afrocentric hairstyles have disregarded the language of their oppressors, and no longer wish to use their bodies to assimilate. Changing their hairstyles from Eurocentric to Afrocentric is not only a change in cultural identity, but a change in self-definition as well. This group of women is consciously making a decision to create their own definition of beauty by learning what works best for them, as opposed to listening to how White culture says they should style their hair in order to be beautiful.

The Artificial Natural

In contrast, the second cluster that appears prominently in this study is natural with Eurocentric hairstyles. During the recruitment process, I intended to find a larger number of potential participants who did not label their hair as natural, but it was difficult to locate a number of people who did not. The term "natural" has become a desirable

label for those in my sample, as well as for other Black women in the D.C. metro area whom I interacted with for the purposes of my research study. Many Black women wish to place themselves within this category, regardless of whether they wear their hair styled in a manner that actually displays their natural hair texture. When participants were asked if they label their hair as natural, and what natural means to them, those who replied natural and styled their hair in Afrocentric methods immediately gave responses that expressed their beliefs. For the natural group who chose to straighten their hair, their responses suggested that they were fighting for inclusion in the natural community because they defended their justifications as to why they too are natural, or asked for my opinion about who is and is not natural. Respondents such as Perri acknowledged that when discussing their hair with other Black women who are natural with Afrocentric hairstyles, she has been told that she is in fact not natural, or not completely natural because she till chooses to primarily straighten her hair. For those with similar practices as Perri, they may face opposition and scrutiny from those who chose to openly and consistently show their natural hair texture.

Although participants within this category say they have natural hair, their hair texture often differed from the Afrocentric group because they use styling techniques that straighten their hair such as a blow-dryer and bristle brush (blow outs) or flat irons. Ashley's hair is not chemically relaxed, but she does straighten it. She also uses chemicals to dye it from its natural hair color.   This participant described her hair as "very thick, very curly, and tends to get a little stuck together when you comb through it." Ashley grew up in a household where high value was placed on hair and the physical presentation of one's self, and the common practices were hair straightening and using

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relaxers to assist in the process. The first time she had her hair relaxed was at the age of 16, and from that point on until 2011, whenever she would go on vacations and get her hair wet, her hair would poof up, which she did not like. So instead she opted for curly weaves and stopped getting relaxers.

Ashley's definition of what can be considered natural hair is very similar to the definition that Brenda from the Afrocentric group provided. Ashley defined natural hair as "hair that has not been texturally, chemically altered, you don't put any chemicals in your hair to change the texture." She acknowledged that even though chemicals are necessary to color your hair, this does not make a woman exempt from being considered as having natural hair. For those who wear weaves or wigs, while it is not their hair, the hair underneath is still natural if they have not used any chemical relaxers. Therefore, hair straightening techniques such as blow outs or straight extensions are all hairstyles that can be used by someone with natural hair. Although this participant as well as others from this comparison group primarily wear their hair straight, at times they will wear their hair in its natural curl pattern as well.

When showed the photos of the various hairstyles, Ashley stated that Photo C appealed to her the most. "I like really big, my dream hair is big, and curly, and fluffy, and you can lose things in it, and I like length." This participant admitted that Photo A however, did not appeal to her because of its short length.

"I don't like women with short hair, I just don't. I like hair, and that's a little too short for my taste. I very much like traditional looks on people. I've always thought short cut hair is for men, and lengthy hair is for women. And I know women with short hair, and you know it's pretty on them, but I would never choose it."

Her decisions about her hair stem from what she thinks will make her look best, and although her family's views and her understanding of gender have influenced those ideals, she believes that the racial legacy of African Americans has no effect. She stated that race doesn't necessarily influence her hair practices. Interestingly, she admits that "for a while, I didn't want to wear an afro to work, I didn't always feel as kempt or as neat as I wanted to be." Sometimes, Ashley would wear Afrocentric hairstyles but did not feel comfortable particularly in a workplace setting, however overtime she became more at ease with wearing her afro at work.

Ashley is someone who sees herself as a "forward-thinking young woman who wants to take care of herself, and be well put together." Her journey to achieving good health does not just consist of being fit, but also in how she maintains her hair. Ashley does not believe that her hair defines who she is or her identity like those from the Afrocentric group. Instead, this participant views it as an accessory. Hair enhances the beauty that she already possesses, and she styles it based on her mood and the fashion style she wants to portray that day. When asked if the Natural Hair Movement has made her more comfortable to wear her hair in its natural curl pattern, she initially felt that it had no influence, but then recalled, "I'm a little bit happier to wear my hair in its natural curl pattern." After thinking through her attitudes before and after going natural, she realized that her views about wearing afros, braids, twist-outs, and other Afrocentric hairstyles have changed as a result of her exposure to the Natural Hair Movement in D.C.

Many of the participants I interviewed with Eurocentric hairstyles reflected Ashley's ideals and do not conform with scholarly literature by Ingrid Banks, Tracy Owen Patton, and Noliwe Rooks on the culture of Black women and their hair. They are

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not apt to acknowledge the negative controlling images throughout history that have unconsciously impacted their perceptions about their hair in its natural state. Yet it is hard to believe that these images have not influenced their preference for and decision to display European hairstyling practices.

While some may disagree with the statement that the Black women in my sample who straighten their hair (with relaxers or other methods) are natural, Black Feminist Theory allows for subjectivity in how they define themselves. The term natural is characterized by the lived experiences of these women, and defined according to their beliefs. The perspectives of this group are pivotal because Black women who straighten their hair are understood by some to be exhibiting self-hatred. It is their disdain for the natural texture of their hair that leads them to manipulate and alter its texture to conform to White standards. However, for the women in my study, they have discredited the self-hatred theory. While hair is an extension of their body, they use it as another object or tool to present their best selves according to their own standards and not history's.

During my research, I expected to find a third cluster of hair preferences in my sample, one which was representative of myself. In the process of interviewing participants and asking them how they categorized themselves, I was surprised that all but one of the participants with Eurocentric hairstyles identified as natural. Some may argue that hair straightenining does alter their hair's natural texture. I expected some of the women in my sample to explicitly define natural hair as the way in which your hair naturally grows out of your head; meaning that the hair's texture should not be altered. Therefore, straightened hair, chemically relaxed or not, is not natural hair.

I am positively impacted by the influences the Natural Hair Movement has had on Black women in the Washington D.C. metro area. My stance on what natural hair means and who is natural was not represented in my sample, even though there are other women who share my perspective. I define natural hair as hair in its natural state, and how it naturally grows out of your head. Natural hair means that you are leaving your hair in its original texture, and are not altering it by any means whether through the process of chemically straightening it, or using hair straightening tools such as a flat iron, hot comb, or using a blowout method of a hair dryer and rounded barrel brush. Women who are natural consistently wear their hair in an Afrocentric hairstyle, although they may straighten it on very few occasions. I have never chemically relaxed my hair, but my hairstyle of choice is straight hair whether with flat irons or the blow out method. Even though I straighten my hair, I do wear my hair naturally curly fairly frequently, approximately 50% of the year. Because I often wear my hair straight, I do not believe I should be labeled as having natural hair for this reason.

Many of the hair practices that I utilize today are very similar to what my mother did when she was responsible for the upkeep of my hair as a child. She never used chemical relaxers to aid in straightening my hair. For me, getting a relaxer was a very foreign concept although all of the other girls I knew my age were getting "kiddy perms" (a milder relaxer frequently used for children). As a child I never felt the pressure to ask my mother to perm my hair to be like other children because I did not necessarily desire what they wanted. I was always the girl with long straight or spirally curled hair, and in many ways I felt my hair still looked like the others despite the fact that no perm was used to achieve this look. Because of my hair's length and texture, my "Blackness" was

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often questioned by peers because they assumed that I must be multi-racial for my hair to have its texture. Throughout my childhood, I often had the opposite sentiment of many of the women within my sample who stated that during their adolescence, they desired to have flowing hair like girls in the "Just For Me" hair product ads. I wanted my hair to be like the girls who wore their hair braided with beads, to be able to hear them making noise as they clanked together whenever I'd walk. I believed that braids was a more suitable hairstyle for young Black girls and that I would be able to fit in with the other girls.

As I got older and approached my 18th birthday, I began to wear my natural curls more and still do primarily because of the weather change I experienced moving from Michigan to Washington, D.C. which is extremely humid in the summers, although my preference was still straight hair. Seven years later, I wear my hair naturally curly probably 50% of the year, but over the years I have learned to take care of it and make the process of wearing it in this state more manageable on a daily basis. This information did not exist in abundance when I moved to D.C. in 2007. The Natural Hair Movement in D.C. educated me on how to care for and maintain my naturally curly hair, and taught me various natural hairstyling options.

As someone who transitions between both Afrocentric and Eurocentric hairstyling, I believe that my hair defines me because it is a physical representation of myself. It's very easy to determine my mood and attitude based on how I present myself, and my hair is an extension of that. I believe that my hair practices are very telling of the fact that I can be simple and plain, but bold on some days. Most importantly, my hair shows that I march to the beat of my own drum, and that I do what I feel works for me on

a particular day. Despite the fact that I represent both Eurocentric and Afrocentric, having straight hair is my preference because of the convenience that it offers me for every day hair maintenance. While I do not personally believe that it is better to have straight hair or that straight hair is proper, I do believe that this preference stems from the racial legacy of Black standards of beauty in regards to hair. If instead, my mother had chosen to have my hair naturally curly all of my life, that would have probably been my preference instead because that is all I would have known. For generations, it was taught that young Black girls should press their hair, and I believe that those passed-down practices and in many ways traditions, are what resulted in my preference for straight hair.

During my childhood I was affected by the pressure placed on me by my peers and I did not want to be made to feel as a sell-out or someone who thought she was better than the other Black girls because of my hair. However, aging and maturity has afforded me the comfort of figuring out who I am and what my individuality means, and the ability to denounce not only mainstream White cultural ideals but also the opinions of other African Americans who conform to those ideals. My growth allows me to create my own history, and to create a definition of beauty based on my own ideals and affirmations.

Descriptions of Black Hair Texture

One construct used to assess the way in which participants viewed themselves is through the descriptions they gave to describe their hair. Many of these adjectives differed based upon the hair texture of the participant, not whether or not they labeled

their hair natural or non-natural. For women who wore more of an Afrocentric hair texture, common hairstyles were wash-and-gos, twist-outs, bantu knot-outs, and braids. When asked how they would describe their hair, responses such as kinky, thick, coily, or tightly-coiled were most frequently given as a way to describe their natural curl pattern. Taira used adjectives such as care-free to describe her natural hair when styled into an afro or wash and go. For women with hair that resembled a more European look, the most common hairstyle was straightened hair that was achieved with a flat iron. Among the natural and non-natural hair portion of the sample who straighten their hair, common words such as natural, thick, curly, unmanageable, and kinky were used to describe their hair. All of the participants with straight hair but identify as natural mentioned the desire to use as little heat as possible to protect their hair from damage, and at times wore Afrocentric hairstyles. However their primary styling of choice was flat-ironed, straight hair.

Some of the women in my sample used multi-racial Black women as a reference point to describe their hair. Because, as Brenda noted, "the way our culture is, it praises long hair or hair that looks like someone was mixed or has Native American or Hispanic in them." Lighter-skinned Black women were described as having thick, loosely curled natural hair which does not face as much scrutiny and judgment because their natural curls are more acceptable and somewhat expected. Light-skinned females were also described as having long, thick flowing hair and given the "good hair" title (although participants also expressed that they in fact believe there is no such thing as "good" or "bad" hair) which has been commonly ascribed in the Black community to those of lighter skin. Many of the Black female participants that I interviewed did not categorize

themselves amongst this light skin population with this hair type, even if they were light-skinned themselves. They expressed the belief that because they were not viewed as having "good hair" growing up, it influenced their desire for relaxed, straight hair. While the concept of colorism was created long ago during slavery, it still exists today and affects Black women's judgments on what kind of natural hair is beautiful or more acceptable.

Rationale: Convenience

Most of the women in my sample say they base their decisions about their hair on what they feel is convenient for their lifestyle, and what makes their hair more manageable to deal with. Some believe that natural hair provides more versatility, allowing those with this hair texture to alternate between different hairstyles more frequently than if it were straightened. However, those who straighten their hair also feel they have more versatility with their hair because they could make the decision to have it straight or naturally curly, and then style it accordingly. Conflicting perspectives were given about which hair texture provided more convenience for their lifestyle. Natural hair participants with Afrocentric hairstyles state they feel more freedom to lead active lifestyles such as working out, or getting caught in the rain or snow. Alternatively, both natural and non-natural participants with straight hair believe this style is more convenient for their lifestyle because it requires less daily maintenance, and only has to be restyled on an average of a bi-weekly basis.

With both groups discussing the importance of convenience as it pertains to hairstyling, they offer differing opinions on what convenience means to them. Because

all but one of the study participants categorized themselves as natural, when concentrating on straight hair versus Afrocentric styling, those with Afrocentric hairstyles believe that their hair in its natural curl pattern offers them versatility with styling. They believe their hair in this state is more convenient because they are more apt to engage in certain activities such as working out without having to worry about sweating out their straight hair by the end. They do not have as much regard for how the weather could affect their hair and run from the rain or snow. The convenience of natural Afrocentric hairstyles liberates them from the burden of constantly worrying about their hair, which weighed on them when they previously relaxed their hair. Making the decision to go natural, they no longer spend $60-$70 every two months on a relaxer to chemically straighten their hair, but instead purchase products that allow them to maintain their own hairstyling, although it means spending 3 to 4 hours every few days to maintain their hair. Participants who straighten their hair believe that this hair texture is more convenient because it saves money and time. They invest an average of $45 dollars and a couple of hours to get their hair professionally styled every two weeks, lasting longer than the necessary maintenance of Afrocentric hairstyling. Straighter hair was determined to leave their ethnic hair in a more manageable state than its natural curl pattern.

Rationale: Impression Management

The pressure to conform to acceptable standards of beauty is the most apparent in institutions of employment. The presumption exists that employers prefer and expect Black women to have straight hair that resembles the texture of White women. Women with natural hair agree that employers may influence how Black women style their hair, out of fear that their hair may give off negative perceptions about their character and

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capabilities as a worker to others. Women who identify as natural and straighten their hair suggest that one may want to straighten their hair when going on interviews, and other special occasions so that their hair reflects the images that they are trying to portray to others of higher status. As Perri stated, she would not want to come across as "intimidating or headstrong" when going on job interviews to practice law. However, Brenda expressed a different point of view: "if I try to get a new job and I interviewed and people don't like my hair and they wanted me to change it, I'd be the one that says I guess I don't need to be here, because if you don't like my hair than I guess you don't like me." She declares that any company that wants her to change her hair because they think it comes across as unprofessional, is not the right place for her to work. Although participants with Afrocentric hairstyles agree that the context of Black natural hair in the workplace is still an issue that society needs to overcome, they see it as less likely inhibiting them from obtaining opportunities, because they will not conform and falsely portray an image that someone else wishes to see, no matter their status.

Although some of my participants were graduate students, those in the workforce stated that professional appearance is a core component of employee expectations. One participant reported earning an annual income between $75,000 and $100,000 in the field of Communications. Taira's tenure in the workforce and stage in her career has positively impacted the context in which she works and how she chooses to professionally present herself at her company. As a 34-year-old Black woman with natural hair who has only worn Afrocentric hairstyles for the past year and a half, Taira has the ability to style her hair in whichever way she wants without considering the pushback she may get from her employer. Prior to going natural, she chemically relaxed her hair and straightened it.

Taira does not feel that the workplace has any bearing on her image and how she chooses to present herself because of her status within her occupation that excuses her from the overt objectification that others of a lower status may face. Her stance differs from Cheryl Thompson's 2009 study that stated a group of Black female lawyers believed their natural hair would be deemed inappropriate for the workplace. Despite having climbed the corporate ladder, these women felt stigmatized if they wore their hair naturally. The remaining study participants all earn modest incomes if any at all, and the concept of professional image in either the workplace or graduate school weighs substantially on their presentations of self. Through the responses given about workplace expectations of professional appearance, those of low or middle socioeconomic status are more likely to feel that they have to conform to a certain image of beauty to get their job, keep their job, and show that they deserve to have the professional and educational opportunities afforded to them.

Rite of Passage and Judgments About Hair

Many different structural factors appear to influence Black women's decisions regarding their hair. The socialization process of study participants during their adolescence was the first period in which they were exposed to how they should maintain their appearance and look presentable as women. Many of the hair practices used by study participants today are an extension of the methods utilized by their mothers when they were children. All of them relaxed their hair prior to transitioning to a natural hair state. The decision to go natural was at times made by themselves, but in most cases their mothers made the decision to start taking them to have their hair chemically straightened as a way to make their hairstyles last longer and to make their hair easier to

comb and style. By the time they were 12 years old, and for some much younger, they received permission by their mothers to begin relaxing their hair. Monique describes coming from a family of beauticians where maintaining your hair was a priority to keep up your appearance and look presentable. Monique notes, "well, I'm from the south so hair is very important. I come from a family of beauticians, my aunt, my mom's sister does hair. You know whenever I know I'm going to see my family, I make sure I get a relaxer before I go down there (laughs). Because…they would have a fit. They take pride in having kempt hair because, well, that's all they know." With an aunt as a beautician, she feels pressured to conform to the idea that she needs to have relaxed hair. Each time she returns to her hometown, or plans to see her immediate family, she ensures that her hair gets relaxed because she is aware of the standards and expectations they have of how her hair and her overall presentation of self needs to be.

Peer groups and friends also have a large influence on the study participants decisions regarding their hair. Peer groups provide a form of support of what looks nice by wearing their hair in similar hair textures and hairstyles. Throughout childhood, many of the participants mentioned seeing other students like them with relaxed, straightened hair. When Sarah was asked what influenced her decision to get a relaxer, she states, "I think because so many of my friends were (pause). I was at a catholic school at that time that was primarily a black school and I think so many people in my class were getting them (relaxers) and their hair was a certain type of way and I wanted my hair to be that way." Seeing their peer groups with a certain hair texture and style inflicted the desire in them to also have relaxed straight hair. Relaxed hair was described as a rite of passage by many participants amongst Black women, signifying one's transition into adolescent

years. The decision to relax their hair was sometimes made by their mothers, and many times often sought out and asked for on their own because they knew that their friends had begun relaxing their hair. However, Amma, who begged her mother for a relaxer, recalled how attending elementary school with other White children made her want to have "hair like a White girl" because she thought that their hair was pretty and hers was not prior to relaxing her hair. As Amma reached her teenage years, she explained how attending high school deterred her from having natural hair or wearing Afrocentric hairstyles because of the pressure put on teenagers about their physical appearance. Instead, Amma wanted to conform to what her Black peers around her were doing, so she continued to get a relaxer which would make her hair appear to be long and silky.

The ways race affects Black women's decisions about their hair is complicated. Natural hair participants who wore Afrocentric styling readily discussed how the history of race in the United States has affected Black women and their perceptions of beauty. The way that African Americans have been perceived makes them aware of the potential implications that natural hairstyling can have for them, and the message these Afrocentric hairstyles communicate to members of the public, both Black and non-Black races. Because of the negative associations with the natural state of Black hair, participants believe that it discourages other Black women from wearing their hair naturally too for fear of being discriminated against. For the natural hair participants with Afrocentric hairstyling, this was part of their conscious decision to go natural. In an interview with Christiana, she stated, "I think that for me being natural is like being comfortable with my own skin. Just accepting all aspects of who I am. I think it's like a part of my heritage and culture and part of our history and story as Black women." It was a

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statement similar to others, that they should be allowed to wear their hair however they choose, without having to think about how its appearance could affect someone else. Christiana and others were trying to combat the negative stereotyping associated with African American women's hair and prove that their hair is not a reflection of their character.

Overt negative stereotyping and negative comments regarding the texture of Black hair today comes at least in part from Black women themselves. The racial implications of beauty and hair throughout history are still embedded in the thoughts of women, giving some an uneasy relationship with the natural-born qualities of themselves and their race. Amma, one of the natural hair participants who styles her hair in Afrocentric ways, received comments from other Black women declaring that natural hair is not for everyone, and does not look good on everyone. She states, "all of the hair comments I've received, like the negative comments are of people of um Black race. Like I never in my life can remember or recall anyone that's had something negative to say about hair at school, work being of another race." She suggests that some African Americans believe that only Black women with a mixed-textured curl pattern look "right" with natural hair. According to Amma, "I really can't remember anyone being natural except one girl and she was light-skinned with big curly hair and that was like to me, she could do that. I was like there is no way I can do this with my kind of hair and still look pretty or look decent." Black women are more likely to tell other Black women that natural hair is not pretty, shaming what is true to them and discrediting the notion that their real hair texture is beautiful and worthy of compliments. Some of the participants I

interviewed who label themselves as natural but straightened their hair, state that straight hair is more presentable and kempt, and suitable for special occasions.

Images and the Message Behind Them

With the availability of media only a fingertip away, we are constantly bombarded with images of beauty as it pertains to our hair. During the interview, Monique recalled the hair product commercials she saw growing up that made her want a relaxer. "Just for Me" relaxer ads depicted images of young black girls with freshly done, bouncy curls after relaxing their hair. These advertisements impacted many other young black girls who wanted relaxers to be beautiful, desiring to be and look like the child models in the ads. Currently, their influences no longer come from the girls in the "Just for Me" ads, but celebrities making red carpet appearances or posting photos on social media such as Instagram or Twitter of their looks for the day.

YouTube has been the mega force behind the Natural Hair Movement's progression from state to state, and continent to continent. Black female YouTube vloggers such as Kimmaytube (Kim Love), Naptural85 (Whitney White), AfricanExport (Vanisha Sapp), and Taren Guy have produced video tutorials on the website providing instructions on how to care for and maintain natural hair (see Figure 1 below). They educate their audiences as they go through their own personal journeys of growing healthy natural hair. This was vital because many Black women do not even know what their natural hair texture looks like, let alone how to care for it without a relaxer and still keep it healthy. These videos inform their audience on numerous styling options available to them for natural hair. For all of the natural hair participants, YouTube helped influence their decision to go natural and to stay natural. Participants were

introduced to these channels by subscribing to natural hair blogs that featured top Natural

hair YouTube channels, or simply by googling key words that featured regular hair care

maintenance and hairstyling for the various types of natural hair within the Black female

community. Even the group who is Natural but Eurocentric acknowledges that they too

have also looked to Natural hair YouTube channels to learn various hair maintenance

practices that they can implement into their routine to keep their hair healthy. However, a

lot of the introduction to new YouTube channels that feature natural hair instructional

videos and blogs come from word of mouth from others within the Natural Hair

community.

Figure 1. Naptural85's Instructional Video on Natural Hair and Exercise.
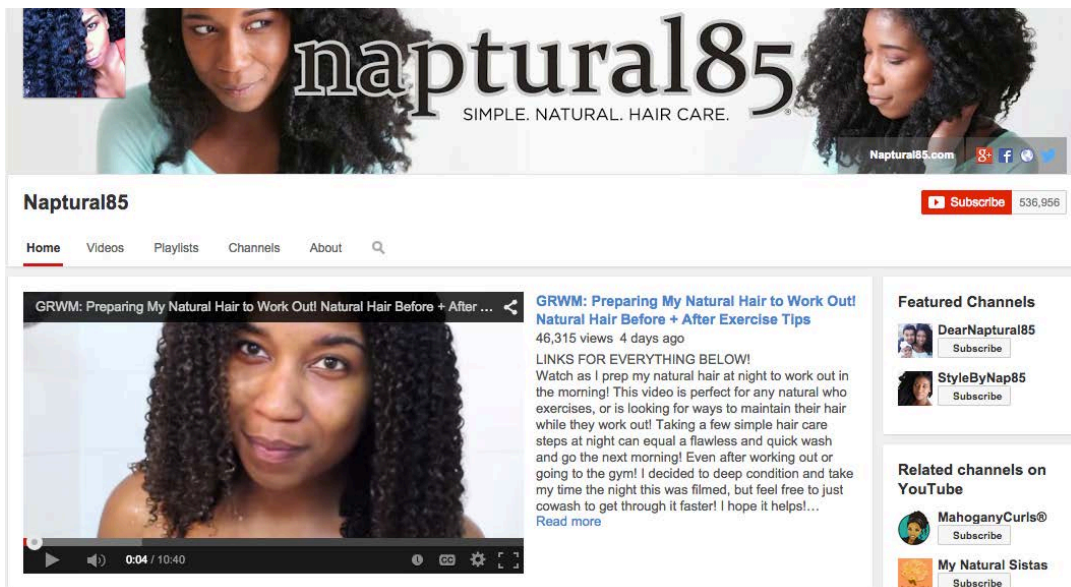
With the large social media presence of natural hair vloggers and subscribers,

Black women no longer compress the knowledge they possess. They no longer depend on

on the White beauty industry to teach them how to care for and style their hair. Instead,

they are producing this knowledge within their own natural hair "community". They are

not reflecting the interests of the dominant group, but Black women with natural hair who have been ignored for decades. Vloggers such as Naptural85 not only teach their audiences how to style their hair, but they also educate them on how to make their own hair care products from ingredients such as honey, coconut oil, avocados, most of which can be found at your typical grocery market. Natural hair vloggers have captured the attention of many Black women, and have aided in the acceptance of natural hair among other Black women. Their presence has helped discredit the controlling images that some Black women have bought into about themselves, and helped them to realize that natural hair can be beautiful on all Black women, not just those of multi-racial descent.

Attainment of Beauty

As part of the interview process, participants were asked to examine four photos and discuss which hairstyle appealed to them the most and why. Respondents stated that they chose a certain photo because the hairstyle looked the most like a style that they would wear themselves, or it was a style that they would wear in the event that their hair had the ability to look that way. When I presented each participant with the four photos of Black women all wearing different hairstyles (see Appendix B), they said that while all of the hairstyles were beautiful, they most frequently chose Photo C, which depicts a young adult Black female with a big, long, curly fro. Christiana chose Photo C because "she has big hair. I think that when she walks into a room people will notice her." This woman's hair texture allowed for her curls to be extremely defined and tight and if straightened, would fall to at least bra-strap length if not longer. Photo C either represents a realistic style for some, or a desirable look for others. Although their actual hair texture differed from the model's hair in the photo, participants desired to have the

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natural hair that more closely resembled a multi-racial curl pattern of long length. Photo A was only chosen by one participant, which depicted a Black female with a very low, cut, thick, tightly-coiled afro. Brenda chose this hairstyle because it most closely resembled her texture and hairstyle, as she underwent the "big chop" approximately a year prior. In contrast, the quote below expresses Sarah's thoughts on doing the "big chop" for herself.

> "I would never do a big chop. Are you familiar with Shang Somaya? She is a YouTube person and she has all these millions of followers and she did a video segment of long, really nice hair. It was like all these girls wanted their hair to be like and one day she said she was going to cut all her hair off because she didn't feel like her hair is a reflection of her. And I shouldn't care what my hair looks like so she cut it all off. But I felt like my hair doesn't define me but I would not be that bold to do that. So I guess hair kind of defines people but I don't see it as defining me but I couldn't do that."

Overall, all but Brenda place importance on the length of hair. Even if participants did not choose Photo C, they still chose a hairstyle of mid or long length, which reveals the value that these Black women place on long hair, which is consistent with the views of many other African Americans. This portion of the interview reflected how controlling images of both Western and Black culture have played a role in what Black women view as beautiful or want to identify with. While Black women can never truly obtain the hair texture of White women, and some do not want to, women with a more defined curl pattern are understood to be beautiful, reflecting the continuing dominance of White and multi-racial women's hair.

Many participants asserted the way they style their hair is a direct reflection of who they are. It is a physical representation of the way in which they define themselves. This correlation is more likely to be found amongst Black women with natural hair who

groom it into Afrocentric styles. They are more apt than their counterparts with straight hair to define themselves as care-free, bold and out-going, which, they say reflects both their hair and characteristics of their personality. While they do fear that others may make assumptions about their character such as being unkempt or unpresentable based upon the physical appearance of their hair, the characteristics associated with being bold, care-free and outgoing and the support of the Natural Hair Movement has instilled the confidence in them to be able to disregard the negative sentiments others may have about how they choose to style their hair. Alternatively, Black women with straight hair were less likely to see a relationship between how they style their hair and how they define themselves. Those with straight hair were more likely to report attributes such as nice, friendly, and hard-working. Although participants in this group used adjectives such as out-going and care-free as well, they were less likely to believe that their hair had no bearings on their identity, even after they stopped relaxing their hair and became natural.

The Personal is Political

This current wave of the Natural Hair Movement has caused conflicting perspectives about the way Black women now define themselves, and the symbolic representations of their hair. Amongst the natural hair participants who primarily wear Afrocentric hairstyles, the Natural Hair Movement has been pivotal in their acceptance of who they are, and in their view that Black hair in its most natural state equates to beauty. The Natural Hair Movement offered a context in which Black women could question White European ideologies of beauty that they have been exposed to throughout their life, and express their love of self through their hair.   They are not focusing solely on their oppression as women, but as Black women and resisting the controlling images that they

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once credited to be true. Those with Afrocentric hairstyles acknowledge the unconscious

self-hatred that they once had for their natural beauty, as they faced internal conflict

about transitioning into this lifestyle, and initially felt that they could not do it. For

example, Amma initially tried to go natural a few years ago while she was in college. The

result was "I just didn't feel pretty, and I just felt like okay I need to have straight hair to

look nice." Prior to transitioning and finding the strength to do the big chop, Brenda

Kittles asked herself if she could be pretty with short hair that displayed her natural hair

texture:

"Because I think a lot of people because of the way our culture is, where it praises long
hair or hair that looks like someone was mixed or has Native American or Hispanic in
them or whatever. Like, people look at that, and other people feel like their hair isn't as
beautiful because of that. I'm subconsciously trying to tell myself that okay my hair is
fine the way it is."

The movement was a journey for Brenda and others in which they learned to be

comfortable with who they are, and accepting qualities of their race, regardless of the

negative implications their Afrocentric hairstyling may have. The movement's

momentum offered acceptability that did not exist before.

Some participants who straighten their hair do not express a strong connection

with the Natural Hair Movement. They say that the movement has not altered their

identity in any way, or challenged their way of thinking in regards to their hair. Hair was

described as not being a reflection of their identity, but an accessory. As Ashley

mentioned previously, hair is something that changes depending on your mood or outfit.

They negate the idea of the self-hatred theory of race, beauty, and hair being applicable to

how they see themselves, and having an impact on the hair texture they choose to display.

Their reasons for being natural center on their education of how unhealthy the chemicals

are in relaxers, and how damaging it is to the hair and scalp. Naturals who straightened

their hair did not report that they were making a statement with their hair about loving

their natural self, and dismantling the hegemonic beliefs of what can be labeled as

beautiful or presentable. The Natural Hair Movement was attributed to not being a

lifestyle change amongst this group, but a fashionable trend that will expire in due time.

Perri who identifies as natural but wears straight hair reflects, "to me today it's just

strictly a fashion thing. Like nobody is really trying to you know fight for justice like

that, like how they did back then, I think it's just a fad. I think it's just a fashion

statement. Like however you want your hair for that day is how you're going to wear it."

Like Perri, participants with straight hair suggested that while Black women may no

longer chemically relax their hair, they believe that in five to ten years most Black

women will go back to straightening their hair and neglecting the wash-and-gos, twist-

outs, afros. However, it was never acknowledged that they themselves have transitioned

to natural to be a part of its popularity.

        While natural hair has often been correlated with being a political statement from

its linkage to the Black Power Movement, the group of participants with Eurocentric

hairstyles did not agree with this literature. Their hair was not a symbol of their desire to

take a stance on an issue of political importance to the Black race. Due to their inability

to be aware of the oppression that they and other Black women face in 2014, some may

argue that the oppression African American women face is so embedded in society, Black

women may not even realize their desire and actions to assimilate into White culture and

"sell out" due to their hate as suggested by author Cheryl Thompson.

This 21st century wave of the Natural Hair Movement embodies Black feminist thought because it addresses and acknowledges the unique experience and standpoint of Black women as individuals, and not as a collective race. It recognizes the shared experience of being Black women, the inability to naturally have Eurocentric hair, and the oppression it creates in our society because they cannot live up to Western standards of beauty. However, their unique Black feminist standpoint gives way to produce knowledge about the subjectivity in defining natural. There is no single definition or phrase that can adequately describe what it means to be natural, because it takes on a different meaning for each woman based on her lived experiences.

Chapter 5: Discussion

From birth, Black women are taught to not love their hair. The controlling images not only impact how society views African American women, but also how African American women see themselves because the negative stereotypes associated with these images have permeated their beliefs and the way in which they define themselves. The attainment of beauty is a concept important to many women, and a large aspect of that is the upkeep and maintenance of their hair. However, for Black women, societal expectations are different as they are often expected to conform to a more normative standard of beauty that is White European.

The twenty-first century wave of the Natural Hair Movement has been inspirational for many of the young Black women in the Washington D.C. Metro area, such as the women in my sample. Its popularity here in the District of Columbia has made many of the Black female young adults critically think about what products they

are putting into their hair and the implications it has on the health of their hair. The Chris

Rock documentary revealed to many Black women just how strong and damaging

chemicals are in the relaxers that they use. This awakening led to a large reduction in the

percentage of Black women who chemically straighten their hair. In 2013, a study

released by Mintel revealed that relaxer sales of African American hair product lines

have declined 26% since 2008. From 2012-2013, they surveyed whether Black women

were natural and approximately 70% of respondents reported that they currently are, or

have worn their natural hair. Although there are various definitions on what natural hair

means, the common consensus is hair that has not been chemically relaxed. A person can

label themselves as natural, but still make the decision to alter their hair texture using

straightening techniques that allows their hair to mimic a more Western European

texture.

The Natural Hair Movement has garned support from Black women in the United

States and abroad due to its momentum behind social media. It has gained much

recognition because it has taught Black women how to love their natural hair, and to learn

to classify beauty through their own personal lens and standpoint. This study has revealed

that less importance is placed on who identifies as natural and who does not, but who

wears straight her versus hair that is representative of the African Diaspora. It appears

through casual conversations I have had with other Black women, and by examining the

women in my study that many of the Black women in the D.C. metro area identify as

natural. Even though these women identify as "natural", some may use hair-straightening

practices because they believe their hair is more manageable this way. This rationale may

be interpreted by some solely as a matter of convenience, whereas others may interpret it

as a reinforcement of the structural, hegemonic norms produced by White culture which favors straight hair. Black women have begun challenging the controlling images and negative stereotypes that have been traditionally associated with African American women's hair in its natural state. They have formed a new understanding of Black beauty, one that is not concerned with mainstream society's definition of beauty.

Although family is instrumental in the socialization process of children and instilling morals and values in them, as they age, Black girls' influence on their identity comes from their peers. As African American women became exposed to the Natural Hair Movement as young adults and the benefits it offers for the health of Black hair, peer relations have a strong influence in whether or not to go natural. In earlier stages of life, interactions with peers produced a strong urge within Black women as youth to relax their hair so that their hair could look like other classmates, or other young Black girls appearing in advertisements for mild child chemical relaxers. However, now as adults, interactions with peers who wore their hair naturally had a resulting effect of encouraging others that they too could have natural hair if they wanted because a community of support now exists. Black women willing to wear their hair in Afrocentric hairstyles has aided in propelling the acceptance of natural hair into mainstream society.

Through the Natural Hair Movement, African American women have been able to produce their own knowledge, and alter the way in which Black beauty is viewed in Western society. With the emergence of new technologies, bloggers and vloggers have captured the eyes and ears of millions of Black women by providing their audience with instructional videos and tutorials on how to care for Black hair in its natural state, something that many of the viewers did not know how to do prior to accessing these

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forms of social media. Social media has been the pillar of transmitting knowledge and making others aware of the Natural Hair Movement's presence. These producers of knowledge on Black natural hair who share their experiences on social media empowers their audience to learn about their own natural hair, and reject normative standards of beauty such as constantly straightening or relaxing their hair.

This current wave of the Natural Hair Movement has generated a shift towards naturalism, and the term "natural" has become a desirable label for many Black women, even if they do not wear their hair in its natural curl pattern. Being natural appears to generate a notion of being superior and having the courage to negate the belief that chemical relaxers are necessary to have beautiful hair. Black women who consider themselves to have natural hair and also wear Afrocentric hairstyles, are deliberately challenging the controlling images portrayed by White Western culture. They are well aware of the racial legacy of African Americans in the United States, and the negative racial stereotyping associated with their natural beauty, and therefore their hair in its natural state.

While Black women who are natural and wear Afrocentric styles are much more aware of the racial implications that Black hair has, and consciously take a stance to reject the ideals that support hegemonic ideologies, those with Eurocentric styles are not. Because you can still be natural with straight hair, those with Eurocentric hairstyles see themselves as equal to those with natural hair. Those with straight hair acknowledge the separation they face by some Black women who wear "traditional" natural hairstyles, but their adoption of this label may be a fight to bridge the divisions between Black women. They have decreased the stigma associated with straightening their natural hair texture by

suggesting they have similar approaches to hair care. Just because they choose to wear Eurocentric styles does not mean that they experience self-hatred for their hair's natural curl pattern. Although they alter their natural hair texture, this is not an attempt to conform to White normative standards of beauty. They too are rejecting the controlling images of White Western culture by showing there is no correct way to be a beautiful Black woman, but that Black women come in varied shapes, sizes, skin color, hair texture, and attitudes and beliefs.

Contributions to the Field

In the beginning stages of this study, close friends and graduate colleagues were excited that I wanted to tackle the meaning behind the Natural Hair Movement, and the impact that it has had on Black women in the D.C. area. While conversations about Black hair are constantly taking place in hair salons, the media, the privacy of our homes, and amongst circle of friends, the conversation has been very limited on a scholarly platform. Even though a plethora of literature exists on natural hair during the Black Power Movement, and throughout the early 90s and 2000s, not much has been written on today's context of being natural. My goal was to add to our understanding of the culture of Black hair in its naturalness. Despite the fact that some may initially assume that the concept of being natural in 2010 is no different than being natural in the 1960s, my research has revealed that this 21st century wave may be distinctive.

This study on the 21st century wave of the Natural Hair Movement has contributed to narrowing the gap on the availability of recent, scholarly literature. Through my research, I have been able to unravel what it means to not only be a Black

woman with natural hair, but that the term natural is subjective. It takes on multiple meanings and is no longer reflected in just the women who choose to wear afros, braids, or dredlocks. Black women wearing Eurocentric hairstyles may also label themselves as natural. My research has revealed that the negative connotation associated with being natural has decreased significantly, and instead, has become a favorable description by which to describe Black hair. Despite some Black women's desire to be included in the natural hair category, it is important to recognize that while the natural/non-natural labels are important, hair practices are the determining factor in understanding the connection to Afrocentric culture and hairstyling.

Although some may view the shift in Black women's hair practices as nothing more than a decision to be part of a trend, my research has shown that it is much more than that, particularly for the population with Afrocentric hairstyles. Previous research by scholars such as Cheryl Thompson and others has been conducted on the linkage between a Black women's hair and identity, but this study's goal was to see specifically how the Natural Hair Movement has influenced and changed the way in which women see and define themselves. This study examined how this movement has encouraged Black women to create their own definitions and standards of beauty whether they choose to reject or adopt Eurocentric hair practices, culture, and oppression by identifying as natural. It addressed how the movement has educated Black women on how to care for their natural hair through popular social media, and respectively embrace their naturalness, as well as the naturalness of others, even if they choose not to partake in it themselves.

Recommendations for the Future

There are several weaknesses within my study that can be improved in future research. For this study, I was only able to include 12 participants in my sample. The time and funding necessary for an extensive study placed restraints on my ability to interview a larger number of Black women about their hair practices. All of my participants were college educated and could have impacted my findings to some degree because their experiences and persepctives may differ from someone without a college degree. I was also limited to interviewing a population of people that was accessible, and therefore located in the same metro region as myself. Future research studies could be strengthened by increasing the sample size, allowing the findings to be more generalized across African American females who label their hair as either natural or non-natural. This study could also be expanded by acknowledging other metropolitan regions across the United States with a large African American presence, and examining whether or not the Natural Hair Movement exists in these locales, but also the role that this movement has played for Black women there and how they define themselves today.

Another limitation with this study is that while it uses Black Feminist Theory as a framework to understand the ways in which gender and race intersect to oppress Black women through their inability to naturally have European physical features, this study does not heavily address the social class component. Additional questions could be added to gain a better understanding of how one's social class could affect their decision to "play the role" in the workplace, wearing Eurocentric hairstyles while at work, but displaying Afrocentric hairstyling outside of work. Researchers could inquire if study

participants have ever received negative comments from colleagues about their hair, especially when worn in its natural state. It is important to also examine Black women's experiences in the workplace and ask if they believe their hair has hindered their career advancement or if they have been asked to change their hair in order to keep their job.

All in all, the widespread popularity of the Natural Hair Movement has helped some Black women counter negative stereotyping of the past about their natural hair, and embrace their own understandings of what is important in their self-presentations. It has allowed them to define beauty on their own terms, in and outside the workplace. While all Black women who identify as natural may not wear Afrocentric hairstyles, they all agree that they have dismissed the negative controlling images produced by mainstream White culture and instead style their hair according to what they perceive to be a convenient image for themselves.

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Appendix A.

<u>Semi-structured Interview Guide</u>

1. How would you describe your hair?
2. Why do you wear your hair that way?
3. Would you label your hair as natural or non-natural, or does that matter to you [will only ask if they haven't already labeled themselves as natural or non-natural]?
4. If natural, how many years have you been natural?
5. What are the 3 most recent hair-styles that you've worn?
    a. Why'd you alternate between the various hair-styles?

Now I'd like to ask you some questions

6. What does having natural hair mean to you?
7. [Shows participant photos of natural and non-natural hairstyles] Which hairstyle do you like the most?
    a. Why?
8. When did you first wear your natural/non-natural hair?
    a. Was this an explicit decision of your own?
9. How has your upbringing influenced your decisions regarding your hair?
10. Has the racial history of Blacks in the U.S. influenced how you wear your hair?
11. Do you think the racial history of Blacks in the U.S. has influenced how other Black women wear their hair?
12. Do you think the media (this includes tv, movies, advertisements, YouTube, magazines, etc.) has influenced Black women to wear their natural hair?
13. How do you define yourself?
14. Do you think your hair is a reflection of who you are?
15. Could you elaborate more on that?
16. Did the Natural Hair Movement influence or shape that identity in any way?
17. Do you think your hair reflects how you want others to see you?
18. If a stranger saw you, what do you think your hair symbolizes to them?
    a. What is your worst fear about how people may perceive your hair?
19. What do you hope your hair says to someone else about your identity?
20. Which card reflects the educational attainment of your parents when you were growing up?
    a. Options are: less than high school, high school diploma or GED, some college, bachelors degree, graduate degree
21. What is your occupation?
22. Which card reflects your income bracket?
    a. Less than $25,000
    b. $25,000-$49,999
    c. $50,000-$74,999
    d. $75,000-$99,000
    e. Greater than $100,000
23. Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to add?

Appendix B.

PHOTO A

PHOTO B

PHOTO C

You don't have to spend much to have healthy hair

PHOTO D