

“... if Black girls had long hair”

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ABSTRACT

In his book entitled *The African origin of civilisation: myth or reality?* (1974), the Senegalese intellectual Cheikh Anta Diop makes the observation that, ‘The whole aspect of the world would be changed if Black girls had long hair’. I did not think about the full implication of this statement until a student in one of my classes asked why Diop could assert that the pharaohs of Egypt were black when in the images he knew of them, they did not have “Afros”. Thus began my search for images and histories of black hair. Never would I have imagined that this research would be relevant outside of my seminar course called “African civilisations”. When the students at the Pretoria High School for Girls ignited a conversation about hair and its regulation by schools in August 2016, my already prepared presentation was converted into a written lecture, and I attempted – through the use of archival images and video clips – to answer the seemingly simple question “what is black hair?” I was puzzled by the problematic question of what kind of historical evidence hair is.

In this article, I consider the volatility of the subject of black hair. I begin with Diop’s counterfactual and consider the “unfinished” project of black modernity through the politics of hair and hairstyling. I end with the “hair story” as a new mode – enabled by YouTube, vlogging and other social media – through which young black women particularly, express their rejection of the conformity that is often implied in social and written regulations of their hair.

Keywords: Cheikh Anta Diop; black hair; “natural”; Model C schools; black modernity; hair story.

1. All Diop (1974) includes on the subject of women’s hair and styling is a three-page insert. There are several other references to hair in his argument, but these are general rather than specifically about black women’s/girls’ hair.

2. The use of the plural “black girls” by a male author has structured the arguments I present in this article. I respond to his comments as a member of this “black girls” group and have also used the term “black women” to include not just myself, but many of my black female friends, acquaintances, relatives, colleagues and hairstylists with whom I have had conversations about hair. Writing from a purely personal position of the “I” would give the false impression that my ideas about “black hair” are singular or unique.

For several years, I taught Cheikh Anta Diop’s ideas articulated in his book entitled *The African origin of civilisation: myth or reality* (1974) to students without thinking about hair, despite Diop’s (1974:39) throw away statement¹ that, ‘[t]he whole aspect of the world would be changed if Black girls had long hair’.² This was until a student approached me after class and said, ‘Professor, how can Diop say that the pharaohs of Egypt were black? In the images I’ve seen, they don’t look black’. I asked the student, ‘what do you mean, “look black?” What is the “black look?”’ The student replied: ‘They don’t have black hair?’ To which I responded: ‘what is black hair?’ He paused for a moment and said, ‘they don’t have “Afros”’. I spent the afternoon thinking about what kind of

historical evidence hair is. Can the entire fate of a civilisation rest on whether its rulers had straight, wavy or curly hair? Then it occurred to me: the student was saying that in his experience, black people wear Afros and by definition these black people cannot be the same as the black people who were the Egyptian elite. This was an anachronism: contemporary black people have little in common with black people of millennia ago. But, how could I explain this to my students? At that point, I started Googling images of vintage African hairstyles; exactly the kinds of hairstyles that Diop uses to demonstrate the cultural links between Egypt and the rest of the continent, specifically West Africa. At the time, it seemed frivolous to spend an entire afternoon creating a PowerPoint presentation of hairstyles, weaves, wigs, bonnets and reading up on the research that had been done on Egyptian hairdressing. Even when I presented my findings to the students, I was still unsure about the wisdom of my intervention because as a “naptural”³ myself, I did not want to turn my teaching into an “anti-relaxer” or “anti-weave” debate.⁴ I framed the lecture with a disclaimer that I was doing this as a “public service announcement” since many of my students would go on to practice as doctors and dermatologists. I wanted them to know that relaxers and weaves damage black women’s hair and that many black women will visit their consulting rooms with balding heads that were not caused by hereditary alopecia, but by the abuse of chemicals and hair extensions. Fast forward to April 2016. Beyoncé releases an album entitled *Lemonade*, in which she is ostensibly chastising her husband Jay-Z, for cheating on her with a woman who she refers to as ‘Becky with the good hair’. In the song *Formation*, she takes the hair references further by defiantly asserting that, ‘I like my baby hair with afro/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils’. Critics rave about how this album is the new black anthem; how the word ‘Negro’ is being re-appropriated in the service of #BlackLivesMatter and how Bey⁵ has re-opened the conversation about what it means to be black in contemporary America. No one, however, points out that there is a painful and obscure link between ‘Becky with the good hair’ and the ‘baby hair and afros’. Hidden beneath the bravado of *Lemonade* are the politics of blackness to which only black people are privy. As a “creole” herself, Beyoncé is angry that her husband cheated on her with a white woman. She is basically saying, “I’m light skinned; I have good hair; how come I wasn’t good enough for you?” Although Beyoncé constantly addresses her unfaithful husband, the album is also a veiled threat to white women: “stay away from my man; you can’t afford him”.

When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay
 When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, cause I slay
 If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, cause I slay
 Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J’s, let him shop up, cause I slay
 I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay
 I might get your song played on the radio station, cause I slay
 You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, cause I slay
 I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making (Knowles-Carter 2016).

3. The term “naptural” is a portmanteau combining the possibly derogatory word “nappy” (meaning natural untreated African hair) and “natural”. The ambiguity as well as the negativity of the word “nappy” is evident in the April 2007 incident when an American radio host, Don Imus, referred to the Rutgers University women’s basketball team as ‘nappy-headed hos’ (Don Imus [sa]).

4. The politics of hair in the black community revolve around the question: “is that *your* hair?” This question leads to the debate over whether to straighten one’s hair – usually with a relaxer, which is an over-the-counter preparation containing sodium or calcium hydroxide – or purchase “virgin hair” and have this attached to one’s hair. Virgin hair comes from the East or Latin America and is “bought” from women with “straight” hair. There is some controversy about how such hair is “harvested” and also whether the packages sold commercially are actually “100% Virgin Hair” as they often claim to be. Both processes – relaxing and weaving – involve long hours at the hair salon and importantly, both give kinky or curly hair a “straight” look. These processes are presented as more “professional” or “presentable” than kinky or curly hair. Some natural hair advocates are against both relaxing and weaving. I therefore did not want to seem to be taking sides in a never-ending debate in which emotions run high on both sides.

5. “Bey” is a shortened version of Beyoncé.

This is Black Power philosophy for rich black women. And, I contend, that is what has changed the politics of blackness and the politics of hair. As black women have become wealthy and educated, wearing expensive weaves has become a new tool in the battle with white women over the bodies of black men. This battle is not exclusively a black versus white battle; there are some senses in which dark-skinned and light-skinned black women are also competing for recognition, as terms such as “yellow bone”⁶ become popular descriptors of black beauty. Thus, whether weaves are worn as an expression of success or an aspiration towards the yellow bone status, they signify the changes that are taking place within black culture and the shifting boundaries of what it means to be beautiful. The “Lemonade moment” as I call it, is also a signifier for two historical moments that are merging into one: it is a re-assertion of the position of African Americans as the “epitome of black modernity”; a position which they lost, depending on who you ask, in the 1970s when first, George Foreman unadvisedly took his Alsatian dog with him to the then-Zaire for the “Rumble in the Jungle” fight with Mohammed Ali.⁷ Second, as multitudes of Africans were exiled by coups and civil wars; beginning with the Biafran War of 1967, they ended up living in the United States and Europe and the mantle of representing the “black world” was unceremoniously snatched from African Americans by the emergence of “American Africans” (or European Africans). This latter evolution is at the core of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel entitled *Americanah* (2013). To put it succinctly, the presence of American Africans exposed African Americans to be as ignorant about “Africa” as their white counterparts. Growing up and living in isolated and boycotted apartheid South Africa, the film *Coming to America* (Landis 1988) introduced me, even if I did not know it then, to this emerging gulf between African Americans and American Africans. These moments may seem far away from South Africa but in fact, they are not. The reason why South Africans are talking about hair and race is simple; young black South Africans have experienced neither the disenchantment with African American culture that their African counterparts have, nor have they experienced the “black diaspora” and its “exile consciousness”. This means that young black South Africa still idolise African Americans and emulate the “politics of blackness” that they see portrayed in popular American culture. This is a very simplified introduction to the “issue of black hair”, but it helps frame the cultural moment that undergirds the inexplicable volatility of the topic.

6. A “yellow bone” is a person of African descent who has desirable “Caucasian” features – pointed nose, coloured eyes (that is, not brown), fair or light-coloured skin and/or “smooth” or “straight” hair.

7. For an account of how the contest between Mohammed Ali and George Foreman was perceived by the Zairians, see Yaa-Lengi Ngemi (2016).

The story of hair the way I tell it begins with two ideas: the first, posed by Diop, is about how the whole aspect of the world would be changed if black girls had long hair. The second is about the Greek concept of “mimesis” and how it helps to explain the history of hair on the African continent. To begin with Diop: counterfactuals are not a good method to use for writing history; they implicitly do exactly what the

historical narrative is meant to do, but in the opposite direction. They do so by telling a comfortable and credible story by merely inverting it. Thus, when Diop says that the whole aspect of the world would be changed if black women had long hair, he might be saying that the current stereotypes and misconceptions about black women's hair would be invalidated, and that therefore black women would become the epitome of beauty and grace. Alternatively, Diop could be suggesting that all the energy that black women have spent over the centuries lengthening and straightening their hair would finally be rewarded, and that they would be miraculously liberated from the struggle to "tame the puff", or in his terms, 'to adapt frizzy hair to feminine grace'⁸ (Diop 1974:39). For me, Diop is saying neither of these. Instead, the power of his speculative reasoning may lie in his suggestion that without the creativity of black women's hairdressing and hairstyles, the world would have been a poorer place. That is, it would have been robbed of one of the richest visual stories and visual performances in the history of humanity. Here is my reasoning: throughout his writing, Diop (1974) points to the ways in which the customs and practices of the ancient Egyptians are reflected in contemporary African life. Hair is therefore part of this enduring legacy of the Egyptian civilisation. Diop focuses on the descriptions of Egyptian hair found in ancient sources; he does not write about the meaning of hairdressing and its relationship to African history. In this article, I attempt to do just that – to show how hairstyling is as much a part of African history as any other "artefact".

8. Diop's association of femininity with hairstyling is not, I think, ironic. For someone who is of the generation that birthed both the African anti-colonial struggle and the Francophone Négritude movement, it would have been a normal attribution. However, what the comment also points to is that although he is taking hair seriously, there is also perhaps a presumption that hair is a frivolous *historical* topic and should not be discussed at length – thus, the brevity of his comments on black women's hair.

9. There are no neutral words to write and talk about black hair. Maybe it is the paucity of the English language, but there are simply no words that are not hurtful or potentially insensitive. To illustrate the point, one can refer to the "performance" by the group Un-ruly who, in June 2013, staged an art exhibit entitled *You Can Touch My Hair* on New York City's Union Square. They also made a film of people's reactions (Un-ruly.com 2013: [sp]). The point is that there was a counter-protest by black women who resented the idea of strangers being invited to "touch" their hair. As stated, there is no neutral way of talking about "black hair"; every word touches a nerve, including the word "touch".

I appropriate the Greek concept of "mimesis" as an explanatory tool for interpreting black hairstyles. The Greeks used the term to refer to the copying of external reality in the creation of art and literature, or 'the representation of life in drama' (OUP 2011:[np]). African hairstyling is mimetic in both senses – it borrows from nature even as it dramatises such nature and such borrowing. This is one of the first misconceptions about black hair; people often assume that black women deliberately choose "dramatic",⁹ over-the-top hairstyles. Not really; the hair itself is already architectural and dramatic, the hairstyle just accentuates the drama that is already taking place.

In 2009, the comedian Chris Rock made a documentary entitled *Good Hair* because one of his daughters had asked him why she did not have "good hair". In the trailer for the documentary (Rock 2009), one sees mainly black people explain why they prefer straight hair or weaves to natural hair. What is hidden behind what I would call the aesthetic preferences of black women, are two important drivers of the black hair care industry: the first is the cost of weaves or virgin hair; the second is the size of the black hair care industry; as one hears in the clip (*Good Hair Movie* 2009) African Americans are 20 per cent of the American population, and yet they consume 80 per cent of the hair products. The statistics for South Africa and the rest of the continent

10. Sisterlocks are micro-locks (twisted matted hair). They are created using a tool that resembles a crochet needle. The important point is that this tool is not commercially available and is only provided to trained practitioners. These types of locks can therefore only be created by a hairdresser trained through the Sisterlocks programme.

11. The campaign was titled #BREAK-THEWALLS (see SheaMoisture: Break the Walls 2016).

12. The movement is cosmopolitan in that it involves women from various parts of the black diaspora. What unites these women is that they use social media to write, talk about, and “display” various techniques for caring for black hair. They often also use their webpages, blogs and Instagram to promote products that they use to grow their hair.

13. The adoption of the Afro by the Black Panther Party and its association with Black Power is also an important cultural marker of the public visibility of the Afro. On the obverse side, even the Black Panther movement could be said to have been appropriating the “Afro” since at that time it was seen as “militant”. This is evident in the fact that the “Afro” of the black power movement was supplanted in the 1980s by the popularity of the perm, or what African-Americans call “Jheri curl”. The latter process involves the creation of a “wet” curled look and it was popularised by celebrities, especially Michael Jackson. For an explanation of how a Jheri curl is created, see Jheri curl ([sa]).

14. For a dictionary entry on the history of the word, see Jonathon Green (2010).

are more circumspect: in 2014, the market research firm Euromonitor International estimated that shampoos, relaxers and hair lotions were sold in South Africa, Nigeria and Cameroon alone to the value of USD1.1bn (Hair Care 2016). These conglomerates have, however, recognised the emergence of the natural and organic black hair care industries, and have moved in on these as well. Thus, L’Oréal purchased the American brand “Carol’s Daughter” (L’Oréal USA 2014:[sp]), and has also launched its own “curly texture” product line called Mizani. Beyond the market statistics and ownership of the dominant black hair products is the issue of professional hair care: simply put, black hairdressers are not trained to deal with natural black hair; they are trained to chemically alter the hair. As far as I know, there is only one technique of doing black hair that is copyrighted and requires specialised training and that is “sisterlocks” (Sisterlocks: welcome to ... [sa]).¹⁰ This means that the hair salon is often not the best place to go if you are black and you do not want to chemically treat your hair. The “beauty aisle” in supermarkets and pharmacies is also not useful. As the recent campaign by the natural hair care company SheaMoisture shows, the separation of the “ethnic” and the “beauty” aisles means that women with black hair feel even more isolated and frustrated when they search for products to use in their hair.¹¹ This is the cultural context out of which the “natural hair movement” has emerged.¹² I would therefore say that there are three cardinal values of the natural hair movement: first, hair is hair – I should not be evaluated or judged based on my hairstyle or texture. My hair should not be in a separate category called “ethnic”. Second, this is the hair I was born with; why must I change it? Third, caring for my hair should not be painful. Telling me to accept the burn of the relaxer or hot iron is to tell me that in order to be beautiful I have to suffer.

What then has led to the point that black people have to start a “movement” in order to gain recognition for their hair? Why is it that the subject of black hair still provokes so many extreme reactions on all sides? When my student reasoned that black people wear Afros and therefore could not have been the rulers of Egypt, he was assuming that the Afro is a quintessential black hairstyle, and therefore black people must have worn it for centuries? Although this is partially true in that the Afro is an African hairstyle, the Afro is also not the essence of black hair.¹³ One reason the Afro became so closely associated with people of colour might be because of the images of the pejoratively named “fuzzy-wuzzy”¹⁴ that British soldiers who were fighting Sudanese insurgents in the Mahdist War (1881-1899), sent home. This war popularised the image of the wild Afros that people often imagine when they think of black hair. Although it can be argued that Rudyard Kipling’s poem *Fuzzy-Wuzzy* (Kipling [sa]) was meant as a compliment and a salute to the fighting prowess of the Sudanese, the word has entered the English dictionary as a pejorative. Importantly, these images are misleading because they suggest that these Sudanese soldiers did not “dress” their hair or wash it, as it often



FIGURE **Nº 1**



Wig made of human hair from the 18th Dynasty, Thebes, Egypt. Trustees of the British Museum. (Wig made of human hair [sa]).

looks unkempt in the images. Nothing could be further from the truth. Across the African continent, techniques for dressing hair were as varied as the hairstyles that they produced. The Afro therefore is not some kind of standard African hairstyle; it is simply one of several hundred ways of growing and maintaining curly hair. For instance, in



FIGURE **Nº 2**



Zulu Woman, South Africa. Photograph by AM Duggan-Cronin. *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* Vol 3, Section 3. Copyright McGregor Museum, Kimberley.

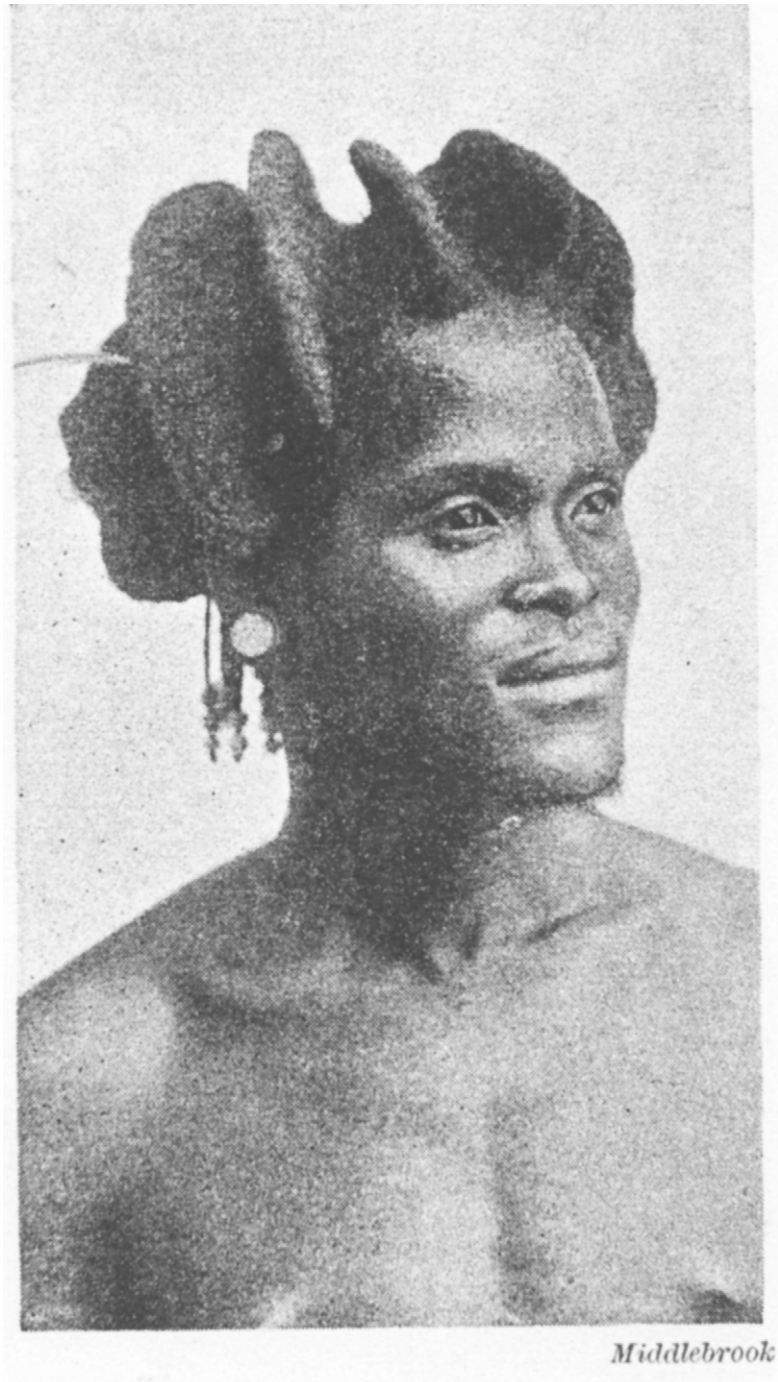


FIGURE **Nº 3**



Native from Southern District. Photograph by JE Middlebrook. Image courtesy of Sandra Klopper.

Egyptian antiquity various depictions of hair as well as hairstyles exist. The image of Egyptian women with wavy, shoulder-length hairdos seems to have led to the conclusion that they must have had “non-black hair”. However, in images showing Egyptian children, the story looks different since they have the partially shaved hairdos that are still common in Africa today. The Himba of Namibia have been photographed extensively – especially the children who often have a single or two braids with shaved sides. In modern hairdressing, this shaving is taken to the next level by the inclusion of elaborate hair designs. At its most conservative, the shaving is called a “fade” and often involves the cutting of a single line through the hair. Egyptian hairdressing is important for a second reason, namely that the Egyptians were master wigmakers. An image of a wig from the British Museum illustrates the point that there was not a preference for either straight or curly hair since both could be combined in a single wig (Figure 1).

Significantly, these wigs were made of human hair, which, unlike contemporary wigs, seems to have come from the wearers rather than a donor. In an article published in 1977 by the professional hairdresser and wigmaker, J Stevens Cox (1977:70), he notes that, ‘[t]he standard of craftsmanship exhibited in the wig is as high as in the best modern wigs, and its survival, with hair anchorages intact, is convincing evidence that its method of construction was suitable for its purpose and the climate in which it was worn’. In 2014, archaeologists working in the city of Armana uncovered the skull of an Egyptian woman¹⁵ with 70 braids and extensions (Jarus 2014:[sa]). This is again proof of the enduring appeal of braids and hair extensions. Moreover, the desire to elongate hair by using artificial or natural materials is common throughout the African continent.

The assumption that “hair” is a feminine issue is also common. This assumption is used in the present to monitor and police the hairstyles of women far more often than the hairstyles of men. Again, the evidence seems to show that such gendered assumptions are simply not part of the history of the African continent. An example is of a series of photographs and illustrations entitled “Zulu Dandies”.¹⁶

The comparison of these Zulu men with “dandies” is not accurate, since these men were not living off the income of women, nor were they “men of leisure”. Some were young men who worked as postal runners and were therefore running extremely long distances while sporting these elaborate hairstyles (Klopper 2010:36-37).¹⁷ What is relevant here is that these Zulu dandies represent a refusal to be gendered and “Zulu-ised”: many were rebelling not just against the hairdressing conventions of Zulu culture, but also against the patriarchal expectations of their fathers – by spending their money and income on these elaborate hairstyles, they were refusing the expectation that they should marry and set up their own homesteads (Klopper 2010). Another assumption

15. For more detail on this excavation see Jarus (2014:[sa]).

16. For a history of these images and the context in which they were taken, as well as their trajectories from photographs to illustrations, see Klopper (2010).

17. Moreover, there is a separate history of dandyism. For further detail see Monica Miller (2009), who traces the black dandy through three centuries of self-styling.

about black hair that needs to be challenged revolves around matted hair or dreadlocks. Many black women (and men) who wear weaves and relax their hair explain their choice by either saying that their natural hair is “unmanageable” or that natural hair is “dirty”. This is one of the most enduring stereotypes about black hair; people even cite the anecdotal evidence that Bob Marley’s dreads had 47 different types of lice in them when he died. These are urban legends of the worst kind because they perpetuate the stereotype that only black hair attracts lice and other vermin, which is scientifically untrue. When a black person decides to “dread” or “lock” their hair, they do not need to keep “dirt” in it to make it lock. Black hair – as does all hair – locks naturally when it is left uncombed or unbrushed. The association of locks with dirt partly comes from the Caribbean where Rastafarianism emerged as a subculture. However, even here, the misconception is that dreadlocks equal Rastafarianism. The Rastas got their locks from Africa. To be exact, matted African hair was transported to the Caribbean by images of Ethiopian soldiers who were fighting the Italian invasion that began in 1935.¹⁸ Using the example of Samson in the bible, they vowed they would not cut their hair until their country and emperor were liberated and the latter returned from exile.¹⁹ Before the war, the Ethiopian elite sported neat Afros and so the apparent conclusion reached is that it is only under conditions of war and colonialism that black people present their hair as “unkept”. When at peace, the hairdressers and barbers did their jobs and kept black hair looking fabulous. As the photographs from the ethnographic archive demonstrate, hairstyles did not need to be practical, nor were they limited by the frizz of the hair. African hairdressing found innumerable ways to eliminate the frizz and give black women the gracefulness and stylishness that they desired.

18. The history of Rastafarianism, especially its link to Ethiopia and to Haile Selassie is a controversial topic. For an academic treatment of the controversy see Charles Price (2009). In fiction, Marlon James’s *A brief history of seven killings* (2014) contains multiple references to the history of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, especially the connection between the subculture and reggae music.

19. The emperor’s name was Ras Tafari Makonnen (Haile Selassie), hence the name of the movement, “Rastafari”.

20. The term “hair story” is used in a YouTube video entitled *Black Women Share Their Hair Stories ft. Amandla Stenberg* (Stenberg 20016).

21. Even *Cosmopolitan* magazine published an online guide on how to “transition” from chemically-treated to natural hair (Allen 2016:[sa]).

22. The *Cosmopolitan* article cited above includes many pictures of female celebrities who have “gone natural”, including Lupita Nyong’o, Amandla Stenberg, Solange Knowles, Janelle Monae and Tracee Ellis Ross.

A discussion of black hair would not be complete without reference to the “hair story”²⁰ as a new form of black women’s narrative. My hair story begins with the songwriter and musician Tracy Chapman whose eponymously titled debut album *Tracy Chapman* (1988) features her portrait, with dreadlocks, on the cover. It was this image that made me decide to go natural. At the time, there was no information about how to create dreadlocks, and one of my school friends said that we had to use Sunlight soap. No-one told us that we had to first cut off our relaxed hair and we did not know that our hair does not need help to lock; we just had to leave it alone. Needless to say, my mother screamed when I came home from the holidays with hair covered in Sunlight soap. The hair story as a narrative revolves around the moment when a black woman decides to stop straightening her hair. In the United States, this is called “transitioning”; it often begins with the “big chop”, that is, cutting off the relaxed hair in order for natural growth to begin.²¹ The hair story is also important because it demonstrates the painful fact that even outside of institutional regulations, black women have to defend and/or explain their choice to go “natural” continuously. This is despite the fact that in the public eye, there are now numerous black female celebrities who have adopted natural hairstyles.²²

Against the rules

The present article was written in the urgent moment of the eruption of the “hair debate” in August 2016 at the Pretoria High School for Girls and other “Model C” schools in South Africa. The debate began when learners at the Pretoria school held a protest against the school’s code of conduct that includes rules about hair. The students also made allegations about racism in the school, particularly concerning comments made by teachers to black pupils (Ngoepe 2016:[sp]). What had once been my own professorial and personal reaction to a student’s query about the pharaohs of Egypt was repurposed into a public talk presented at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WiSER) (Mokoena 2016) as an attempt to clarify what was being debated in the media as “racist” school rules governing hair (Makhetha 2016:[sa]). At the time, it seemed like a futile gesture to respond to this debate by offering a sober and historical account of what “black hair” is and why it is that the controversy needed to be contextualised as part of African history rather than just a South African anomaly. Based on some of the comments I received from the audience, I began to read other black women’s accounts of “discovering” that their hair was, as Ayana Byrd and Lori L Tharps (2014) put it, ‘against the rules’. Paulette Caldwell’s (1991) article entitled “A hair piece” was one of the first texts that I read and wished I had read before preparing my talk. Not only does she provide what is a legal account of the American jurisprudence and case law regarding black hair and hairstyles, but she also prefaces her article with an autobiographical note, beginning with her own hair story entitled “Rediscovering my hair” (Caldwell 1991:365-366). It was this opening poetic exposition on the “innocence” of my childhood hair and how it is that hair stories are partly about returning to the place of wanting “to know my hair again” that prompted me to rethink the intersectionality that is embedded in my story of being a black female professor giving a lecture about black hair. Caldwell (1991:369) expresses the dilemma succinctly when explaining her decision to postpone a class discussion of one of these legal cases that concern black women’s hair in the workplace:

[t]he persistent student’s embarrassed questioning and my obfuscation spoke of a woman-centered silence: She, a white woman, had asked me, a black woman, to justify my hair. She compelled me to account for the presence of legal justifications for my simultaneously “perverse visibility and convenient invisibility”.

Although my student was not as persistent as Caldwell’s, I too responded to his query as if to “justify my hair” (at the time I wore my dreadlocks in neat braided styles created by my stylist Ms Tabitha and never wore my locks “out” at work). In so doing, I too was participating in this intersectional conversation in which I either speak for other black women (especially those who are “forced” by circumstances to wear wigs, weaves,

relaxed hair), or resort to the liberal language of “choice”, in which my decision to be “natural” is just one of many socially and culturally acceptable choices. Caldwell’s article complicates both positions. Although it may seem like a professional duty for black women in positions of power and influence to represent those women who are not there to represent themselves, such representation runs the risk of essentialising black women’s identity by presenting natural hair as “authentic” and therefore, by implication, depicting black women with weaves as “inauthentic”. The liberal position carries its own risks; by presenting everything as a choice, it runs the risk of ignoring one of the most glaring barriers in black women’s understanding of their hair, namely information.

Although it may seem trivial (and maybe controversial), many black women choose what to do with their hair based on scant information. As the Chris Rock documentary on “good hair” illustrates, black women often do not even know what chemicals are in the hair preparations that they find in the hair salon or the “beauty supply store” (as it is called in the US). Black women therefore often construct their hair rules and regimen based on what they see other black women do or what their hair stylists recommend. I have no doubt that this is true of women with straight hair too (racially this would be white, Asian and South-East Asian/Indian women). Thus, one of the most dangerous places for a black woman to be, at least when it comes to hair, may be the hair salon or the company of other black women. The latter conclusion disrupts many of the womanist or feminist claims that have been made about the “safe spaces” that black women construct for themselves away from the “white gaze”. Regarding hair, the most uncomfortable gaze can be the gaze of other black women who either explicitly or silently judge each other for being natural and/or for having a “weave”. Although it may be claimed that such gestures do not have the same effect as the gaze of the white commentator, I argue that this only serves to evade the painful question of how black women teach other black women the rights and wrongs of caring for their hair. The argument I put forward is that white legislators and rule-makers (whether it is the juries and judges in Caldwell’s account or the school governing bodies in the case of South Africa’s “Model C” schools) are mostly ignorant about “black hair”, and often resort to so-called “common sense” in making their decisions. The painful question therefore is why have black women become “ignorant” about their own hair? In a conversation with my grandmother about the trauma of watching my dreadlocks break, I told her that I had stopped using over-the-counter synthetic hair products and that instead, I was using castor oil to moisturise my hair; to which she casually replied, ‘we used to do that when we were young’. This is when it struck me that one of the losses that black women have suffered when it comes to hair care is the knowledge of our mothers, grandmothers and even great-grandmothers. What seems to have been implied in my grandmother’s comment is that when she was

raising us, it did not seem appropriate to moisturise our hair with castor oil. I am guessing that one of the effects of the emergence of the black hair industry has been to give black women the false confidence that this industry functions in our best interests, and that we can trust the products it creates. In actuality, mainstream hair companies such as L'Oréal own most black hair products, so such confidence is misplaced. Thus, to return to Caldwell's (1991:365) musings, black women may need to ask each other about what we have lost in our embrace of the "market" logic of "hair products", or as she puts it,

[w]hen will I cherish my hair again, the way my grandmother cherished it, when fascinated by its beauty, with hands carrying centuries-old secrets of adornment and craftswomanship, she plaited it, twisted it, cornrowed it, finger-curled it, olive-oiled it, on the growing moon cut and shaped it, and wove it like fine strands of gold inlaid with semiprecious stones, coral and ivory, telling with my hair a lost-found story of the people she carried inside her?

It is this reconnection with our foremothers' knowledge that would, I think, lessen the focus on the white gaze since it would remind us that our hair was "loved" long before it was the subject of public scrutiny and debate. More importantly, knowing that African women have been teasing and lengthening their hair for centuries may also allow the contestations to shift away from the binary of natural versus relaxed, which seems to create more problems than it solves.

If the debates and judgements about black hair are partly driven by what Shirley Anne Tate (2015:92) calls 'epistemologies of ignorance ... where whites refuse to acknowledge the world they have created', could it also be possible to think about the epistemologies of ignorance that drive black women's denial of their own complicity in the creation of stereotypes about black hair. What would such a dialogue look like? As intimated above, it would primarily involve an account of what I, as a black woman, have lost in not having knowledge of the history of black hair, and especially the care and craftswomanship of the past. As a second move, the "epistemological" question would have to be reconciled to the autobiographical one. In other words, as a black woman I would have to talk about how my hair shapes my consciousness and the making of the self. What kinds of self do I become when I chose to go natural or to wear relaxed hair? And, does it matter? A text to which I return repeatedly whenever I have to write about auto/biography is Linda Anderson (2001). Anderson's text appeals to me because, in it, she considers the place of politics and representation in the theoretical position and interpretation of autobiography. On the issue of autobiography's potential as a "text of the oppressed", Anderson (2001:103-104) points to Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography entitled *Dust tracks on the road* (1942) as an example of a black

autobiographical subject who foregrounds her individuality, while minimising her group identity as a black person and a black woman. By insinuating that her autobiographical self is a fiction, Hurston, Anderson (2001:10) writes,

is wary of any collapse back into the body or the community which might “fix” her in one place and close off the “horizon” she had directed her “self” towards from childhood. However, if Hurston’s autobiography maintains a gap or distance between language and experience, this does not mean that her writing simply transcends her historical and social situation to speak “universally”.

In our dialogues and debates about black hair, might we be able to make the same manoeuvre, that is, of avoiding a collapse back into the bind of being “bodies” while also disavowing a universalising language? More importantly, in thinking about how hair speaks to the “now” of contemporary South Africa (Bystrom & Nuttall 2013:307-308), might we, as black women, position ourselves as anything other than victims of a dominant and pervasive “white culture”? Might we talk about hair “now”, without denying its over-reaching historicity and facticity? I suggest that the problem is not one of hairstyles, but of the definition of culture. Thus, although a feminist thinker such as Tate (2015) makes several references to “popular culture”, black people as the creators of this popular culture are mostly left out of her analysis; instead, she focuses on popular culture as a standard imposed from the outside. Specifically, the notion of black culture deployed in Tate’s text implies that black women do not desire each other’s bodies (the trajectory of desire is only one way). Although her arguments may be appropriate for a discussion of black women’s bodies, do they apply for a discussion of black hair in popular culture? This is especially pertinent since it seems to be the case that hair regulations also regulate the regulators. In other words, whereas it may be physically impossible for a white woman to develop a ‘bootylicious’ behind (Tate 2015:62), the same is not true for hair. White people can also lock their hair or fade their sides. If, as black people, we are asked to abandon the terrain of our own cultural self-representation and self-reproduction, what are we left with? If indeed, to return to Diop’s counterfactual, what if black women ended up with long/straight hair? If by some miracle we achieved a pain-free, chemical-free ability to lengthen and tame our puff, what would the world look like? It is not that we will be left with a world in which there are no spectacular hairdos or flamboyant coiffures. Instead, what society will be left with is cultural appropriation. As black people, we see and will continue to see images of ourselves refracted through other people’s interpretations and especially through the churning and workings of the “luxury” markets of consumption. Or, as Geneva S Thomas (2015) puts it, cultural appropriation allows some white people to use black culture as a ‘personal kind of stock room of coolness they get to pull from whenever it moves them without ever restocking it’.

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