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# Narratives of Black Women on Hair in the Workplace


## Abstract

*Hair is a physical characteristic laden with socio-political significance and, in the case of black women, it remains a complex symbol of racialization, othering and marginalization. In this study, we attempt to present black women's perspectives on their hair and, by extension, their positions in a historically White institution of higher education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen full time staff members in various departments at the University of Cape Town. Key themes from the study revealed how black women used hair as a tool for negotiating and constructing multiple dimensions of their identity, and how–in the midst of institutional conversations about transformation and decolonization–they challenged dominant, ideologically-laden perspectives on hair.*



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## Keywords

*black women; decolonization; hair; inclusivity; marginalization; narratives; transformation*


## Introduction

Images of beauty are heavily racialized in favour of Eurocentric ideals. Hair is a particular site of racialization, with African[1] hair historically regarded as inferior and seen as socially unacceptable, while the Eurocentric emphasis on long, straight hair has been centred as the standard of beauty (Erasmus, 2000). Since the time of slavery, African hair was deemed less attractive while long straight European hair became the desired aesthetic. Such racialized notions of hair have penetrated deep within the social structures of society, including the workplace. In the past, there were several examples in history of black[2] women being treated unfairly or discriminated against for donning African hairstyles and natural hair

[1] The term 'African' means belonging or relating to the continent of Africa, or to its countries or people.

[2] Racial signifiers remain highly contested in post-apartheid South Africa. For the purposes of this paper, the term "black" is used to refer to persons of African descent.

in the workplace. Black women who don their natural hair have experienced negative reactions, have been excluded from certain jobs or have been forced to adhere to strict policies informed by Eurocentric values that regard African hair as 'unprofessional', untidy and inappropriate (Kelley, 1997). Scholars suggest that such racialized notions have limited the agency for black women to express their identity and culture through their hair (Caldwell, 1991). Black women who wear their African hair in the workplace are therefore at odds with the broader ideology that White is better as they define their own standards of beauty. This raises interesting questions about these women's experiences of wearing their natural hair in, for example, a workplace environment, and, given Eurocentric valuations of hair, how they feel about straight hair.

***Constructions of black corporeality and inferiority***

From a historical perspective, black feminists have argued that the black female body, negatively constructed through white-centric notions and patriarchal discourses, date back to the early 18th and 19th centuries during the period of colonialism in Africa. White slave masters mutilated and dismembered the bodies and genitals of African natives, used their body parts as 'scientific evidence' to promote racial difference, and developed a biased system of racial classification (White & White, 1995). White supremacists also created a range of literature and discourses of black inferiority which solidified general misconceptions of black people. Such discourses were used to accord exaggerated claims of primitiveness to black women's bodies (Griffin, 1996). They were powerful and influential forms of controlling how black women's sexuality was constructed in our society.

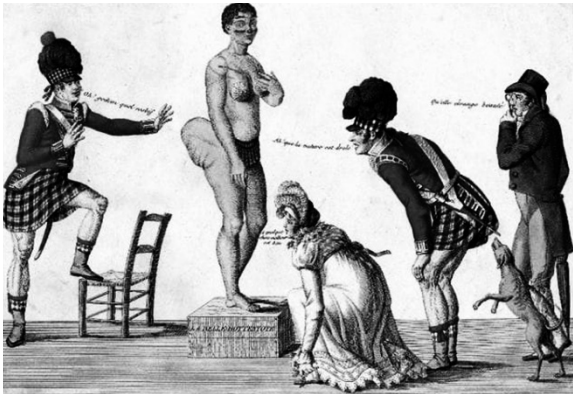

***Figure 1. Les Curieux en extase, ou les cordons de souliers (The curious in ecstasy or the cords of shoes) (Anonymous, 2012)***

Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman or the 'Hottentot Venus' was one infamous yet striking example in history of the othering of black women's femininity and sexuality (see Figure 1.). Her unique "steatopygia" or large protruding buttocks was considered a sexualised

***Figure 2. Mammy women were usually dressed to be a representation of their master's wealth (Anonymous, 2014)***

object of interest by her White captors and their European counterparts (Osha, 2008: 80). Other stereotypical models in the form of, for example, the Mammy (see Figure 2.), Sapphire and Jezebel, also controlled the image and sexuality of black women. These models were central to American popular culture during the 1940's and onwards, and further bolstered degrading images and racial stereotypes of black women. Black women internalized these stereotypes as 'normal' characteristics that make up who they are, instead of seeing themselves as individuals with the agency to define their own identities. With the oppression of the black female body comes a different form of struggle for black female writers, scholars and intellectuals to change and redefine the black body in a more positive light (Hobson, 2003). Black women, especially in the academy, have struggled continuously to reclaim agency and subjectivity in creating and affirming their own discourse on 'blackness' and black beauty (Benard, 2016; Brown-Glaude, 2010; Springer, 2002). More knowledge needs to be created from an Afrocentric-feminist perspective to help liberate black women from a consciousness that sees them as inadequate and less than human, in order that they can define their own standards of beauty. Collins (2002) describes how this perspective involves black women using their position as 'outsiders' to introduce a new perspective on their marginalization in knowledge production when seeking transformation in society.

***Enslaved hair: Past and present***

Black oppression dates back to the transatlantic slave trade of the early fifteenth century, when European colonizers first set foot in Africa. African women had unique ways of styling their natural hair which had evolved since precolonial times, to being enslaved and traded on the west coast of Africa, to being brought to the New World to work in the fields and plantations of America. Many hairstyles originated among many ethnic groups in Africa, from the Fulanis and Mandingos of the Mali region, to the Yoruba tribe of the west coast of Africa (Patton, 2006). These hairstyles worn by

***Figure 3. and Figure 4. Natives of Ugogo, east central Africa Gogo (Anonymous, 2012)***

the African women had a sociocultural significance because they identified an African woman's tribal affiliation and social status according to ethnicity, age, marital status, fertility and spirituality (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014).

Hair was used by various tribes such as the Yoruba and Mandingos to carry messages because the unique texture of African hair allowed men and women to shape and sculpt it in different forms (see Figure 3. and Figure 4.). Adornments and hair dressing items such as feathers, beads, clay and vegetable fibre were all used as techniques in the hair grooming process and creation of various intricate styles: dreadlocks, braids, twists and plaits. Because these styles took between a few hours to several days to complete, many African women would use that time to form social bonds with one another (Patton, 2006). When the European masters arrived in Africa, they were drawn to these eye-catching hairstyles.

Despite such interests, they compared African women's hair texture to that of animal fur, calling it 'woolly' – a derogatory term used as a means to dehumanise, oppress and strip away the cultural significance attached to African women's hair (Thompson, 2009). The slavers shaved the heads of the African slaves when they arrived in the New World, which symbolized a removal of their African culture. Because black men and women had to work the fields and plantations in America, they neither had the time nor the tools to care for their hair. The African slaves were forced to use "axle grease" and cooking oil on their hair while the "small-toothed comb of the master damaged many heads" (Kelley 1997: 346).

***Figure 5. Juno (Waller) Seymour, minding the great grand-daughter of her first owner (1853) (Anonymous, 2012)***

***Figure 6. Black Panther Party members rally in 1968 (Anonymous, 2011)***

Lester (2000: 205) describes how many African women used head scarfs or "kerchiefs" to hide their hair from the slave masters and their feelings of inferiority towards their hair was further exacerbated when they had to take care of the White masters' children and comb their hair (see Figure 5.). This resulted in black women rejecting their own children's hair. The desire to conform to Eurocentric standards of beauty was passed down through many generations in black communities. In 1905, hair styling tools such as the straightening comb and a wide range of hair care products were first introduced in African American communities by Madam C. J. Walker, a black woman who revolutionised the black hair care industry in America (Lester, 2000). These tools and products influenced black women to internalize racial notions of hair by accepting that long, silky, straight hair or 'good hair' was an ideal worthy of admiration. The desire for 'good hair' in the black communities becomes not only a question of beauty but an issue of maintenance. 'Bad hair' is difficult to comb and requires straightening, while 'good hair' is associated with both beauty and minimal maintenance. However, methods to achieve 'good hair' have health implications when used for prolonged periods of time through the use of relaxers and the harmful chemicals found in it.

***Hair-raising power***

African hair has remained a symbol of black people's subordinate position and oppression in society, but it also represents a historical site of struggle against White supremacy. There were three major movements throughout history which incited backlash against White supremacy in the black communities. The Rastafari movement of the 1930's, the black Power Movement in the mid-1960's and the 20th

century Natural Hair Movement were all examples of 'hair-raising power'. Hair was central to these movements to invoke a political struggle for transformation in order to bring about the autonomy of, and pride in, black culture (Ogbar, 2004).

According to Erasmus (2000: 4) the concept of natural hair "was equated with blackness and black consciousness"; the Afro was not just a hairstyle, but a 'mind-set' with a political message of empowerment (see Figure 6.). However, African hairstyles like the Afro have been misunderstood as a sign of masculinity, dominance and political confrontation within American society, and such notions have resulted in African hair being viewed negatively in the wider society including the workplace. For example, Kelley (1997) argued that African American women who chose to wear their natural hair in the workplace received negative assessments from employers. Employers considered the Afro and other ethnic styles as 'inappropriate' and a sign of racial militancy. Some articles (Caldwell, 1991; Rosette & Dumas, 2007) recount examples of lawsuits in the United States filed against companies who fired black women for wearing African hairstyles in the workplace. Although these cases were dismissed, work policies' discrimination against African hair and hairstyles still exists today, which brings into question how much agency black women have to express their identity and culture through their hair and the flawed understanding that society has of their hair within the workplace environment.

***Hair in the workplace***

Nonetheless, little research – both locally and abroad – has been conducted on the subjective experiences of black women regarding hair in the workplace. A literature search of scholarly articles yielded only a few such studies (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Opie & Phillips, 2015). Johnson and Bankhead (2014) conducted a study where the workplace environment was one of a few social environments considered in understanding the subjective experiences of black women with their natural hair. The study made use of a quantitative online survey with questions that explored the reactions that black women received from society (friends, family members, colleagues) when they wore their natural hair and whether they received discrimination in various social environments. Results showed that of the total number of participants, only 33% of the black women experienced discrimination, and received the most negative reactions from family members, strangers and friends, and not from their work colleagues. The majority of participants indicated that they received favourable responses from their social environment. Although Johnson and Bankhead (2014) stated that the positive responses received by the black female participants were surprising, they could be indicative of a positive trend and acceptance of natural hair styles in multiple settings. The researchers emphasized how their findings challenged the idea that black women needed to straighten their hair in order to achieve success or social mobility. The findings

also indicated that black women who wore their natural hair had a higher self-esteem and were able to achieve economic success.

Opie and Phillips (2015) conducted three quantitative studies that compared Eurocentric hairstyles and African hairstyles. Their studies explored the ratings of dominance and professionalism of black female candidates who wore African or 'Afrocentric' hairstyles versus those who wore straight or 'Eurocentric' hairstyles. All studies used stimuli of nine photo-shopped images of black, White and Asian female candidates. Based on the responses, a majority of the black participants reacted negatively to the black female candidates with African hairstyles. The researchers concluded that wearing African hair in the workplace, which makes race salient, would trigger negative stereotypes of black people. Therefore, black women would downplay or manage the threat of being associated with negative stereotypes by discouraging other women from displaying African hairstyles. Also, because of low ratings of professionalism based on these styles, black women would conform to Eurocentric styles that are viewed as more professional and would "suppress identity traits" of African hair (Opie & Phillips 2015: 11).

On the basis of the aforementioned studies, it is evident that the general social environment in which black women find themselves creates spaces that either accept or discriminate against their choice of hair, and such experiences can be measured to some extent. However, the studies conducted did not consider the subjective or intangible meanings of black women's experiences – particularly within the workplace – that require in-depth examination and interpretation. The aim of this paper, therefore, was to explore the meanings that black women attach to hair in a workplace environment – specifically, a higher education institution. Black women who work in historically White institutions face many challenges in terms of their professional socialization and overall success – both in terms of general faculty positions (Henry & Glenn, 2009; Turner & Gonzalez, 2011) and the academy at large (Gregory, 2001; Harley, 2008; Patton, 2004; Wyche & Graves, 1992). The University of Cape Town, an institution where Eurocentric norms hold hegemonic status, was an ideal setting for this study, which sought to explore how black women construct and negotiate their identities. It attempted to offer a medium through which black women could recount their narratives, in a manner that would allow them to reflect on their experiences according to their own terms of reference.

## Methodology

This research draws upon two critical theories, namely, critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality theory. The intention is to encourage a focus on the historical, social and political dimensions of (post-) coloniality and, with it, the manifestations of White hegemony that have played a pivotal role in the construction of a racialized society that has dehumanised black corporeality (specifically, African hair) and black

subjectivity (specifically, black women). These theories constitute a powerful frame of analysis that can be used for engaging with social constructs such as identity, race, and gender and how these shape and determine black women's lives. Such theories align with the Afrocentric-feminist approach that serves to 'undo' the negative roles, racialized notions and conditions that colonisation has perpetrated in black women's lives by encouraging them to adopt a language of autonomy that restores their control over how they define their own identities. This study used a qualitative exploratory design and was informed by social constructionist thinking and narrative approach. In keeping with its qualitative design, the sampling method chosen for this study was purposive sampling. A sample of black women of African descent who work in various departments at the University of Cape Town were selected, and they were either academic or support/professional staff. The sample consisted of 14 (n=14) black women between the ages of 20 and 35, of African descent (whether resident in South Africa or other African countries) and with various ethnic backgrounds.[3]

Before the study commenced, ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Department of Psychology's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Cape Town. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Such interviews allow the researcher to gather rich, meaningful descriptions from participants, and the open-ended nature of the questions help to define the topic under investigation in greater detail and allow participants to explore the topic from their perspective, knowledge and experience (Rabionet, 2011). Interviews were conducted at UCT and participants were interviewed in their offices, home departments, or in spaces they considered sufficiently private. Interviews were recorded using a portable voice recorder and were transcribed verbatim. The anonymity of participants was safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms in transcripts as well as in the writing of this paper.

Thematic narrative analysis was considered appropriate for this study because it allowed for potentially rich explorations of the meanings participants attached to hair. Thematic narrative analysis, in particular, is an analytic approach that focuses on 'deconstructing' the content in the narratives of the participants (Riessman, 2008). Specifically, Fraser's (2004) framework for conducting a thematic narrative analysis was used**.** This framework provides steps that will guide the researcher in analyzing the narratives of the participants.

## Reflexivity: Power Relations in Research

As researchers, we acknowledge our positions of authority in the research process and the power imbalances that exist between ourselves and participants. My positioning,[4]

[3] Although, in its inclusive sense, the term "black" refers to all persons of colour, in respect of this study's participants it refers specifically to black African women.

[4] The reflections in this section are those of the first author.

particularly in terms of gender, race, culture, and political ideology, impacted the research process in many ways (Berger, 2015). As a black female researcher interviewing other black women on hair in their work environment, I was already aware of the historical significance of African hair and how it had been racialized and categorized as inferior.

To be sure, this was a personal journey that shaped my understanding of African hair and influenced me to choose this particular research topic, and to focus specifically on black women. In terms of both race and gender, I was able to identify strongly with participants; as a result, it was important for me to appreciate the experiences of my participants on their own terms and not filter them through my own frame of reference. As a black middle-class postgraduate student of Cuban origin, my cultural background, language and life experiences differed from those of the participants interviewed. This difference in culture and language may have acted as a barrier to rapport building and the data analysis process. However, having prior knowledge and exposure to the Natural Hair 'community' and being a black woman with African hair was an advantage in a certain sense, and enhanced the data analysis process due to my insights on African hair. Another important point to address is that my position as the researcher involved an inevitable degree of power in choosing the narratives or 'voices' that were heard and interpreted. In this regard, however, I attempted to view the process of data collection and analysis as a collaborative effort between the participants and myself, and I attempted to think of myself as a 'vessel' or 'instrument' through which the participants could share their own stories and 'construct' their personal meanings accordingly.

## Findings and discussion

### *'Rich hair, poor hair'*

The first theme revealed a class discourse in which the participants perceived hair to signify a black woman's socioeconomic status. The word "broke" was used to frame a black woman with natural hair as someone who is struggling financially and is therefore incapable of participating in hair care practices to appear Western while a black woman with straight hair is considered to be "going the extra mile", and communicating her ability to get her hair groomed. Straight hair meant that one was afforded a higher level of respect and status and had easier access to economic opportunities and other social advantages (Allen, 2010; Lester, 2000). This notion of "going the extra mile" was also coupled with the phrase, 'getting your hair done' – a term that became popularized through the invention of the first hot comb, other straightening techniques and weave technology in the black hair care industry that ultimately made straight hair the standard of beauty. Black women who opt for extensions need to buy the hair product, go to a hair salon and pay a stylist to achieve

their desired style. This hair investment process from the purchase of the product to achieving the desired style was how black women communicated their status and ability to participate in 'getting their hair done.' The notion of hair being constructed through Western standards is also evident in how mainstream media and the black hair industry promote 'good hair' as the only valuable commodity. Participants described being exposed to images of 'good hair' in magazines, television commercials and products in the black hair industry, while natural hair is rarely acknowledged or represented. These industries capitalize on producing and maintaining the image of the ideal black woman through the promotion of long straight hair, and associating this image with high status and a move towards modernity.

***Kirabo:*** *"I find that, I've learned some people have uh, like with each weave, it's Anna it's it's what what, what they call it the name, it's Regina, and, because also when you buy it at the shop, you say I want a Regina weave, you know, you going for a specific look.*

***Interviewer:*** *So what does that—when somebody wants to get a specific weave, say a Regina weave, what do you think that means"?*

***Kirabo:*** *"We are sort of uhm, you are going with the trends, you able to change up your look, there's different colours, shades and everything, and almost everytime you go back there is something new. Even the way it's shown on the packaging, it looks good, you want that style that she's wearing."*

In Kirabo's narrative, she provides some detail on the consumption process of 'good hair' in the black hair industry by going to the shop to select and purchase a weave. As previously noted, this investment process is one of several steps in 'getting your hair done'. She spoke of how specific names like "Anna" and "Regina" are given to each style of weave so that when a black woman goes into the shop, she can ask for a particular style. Gilchrist & Thompson (2012) contend that through the marketing of weave technology these industries inadvertently create a culture that sends a message to black women that they are deficient and need to do more with their hair. Therefore, having a variety of weaves with different colours and shades to choose from is considered a way to maintain the cycle of doing more. In Kirabo stating: "almost every time you go back there is something new", she points to the notion of being lured to go back again for a different style, and to essentially keep up with the "trends". She also expresses a desire to embody the image of a black woman with a weave as it is displayed on the packaging. Although Kirabo's narrative shows how purchasing weaves and taking the time to choose different styles seems to be a pleasurable experience, the choice of other black women to not be a part of this culture to do more with their hair and to personify the 'ideal'

black woman means that they get left behind and consequently get classed as poor and lacking in beauty.

This perception was reaffirmed by some participants who had short natural hair and explained that they felt a level of pressure from their friends and from society in general to make a statement by getting weaves or wigs, and that their short natural hair was not enough. Participants who consciously chose not to engage in a culture of doing more spoke of the isolation that was a consequence of their choice. They expressed feelings of shame, inadequacy and isolation from their friends or other women who chose to go with the trends and their experiences of scrutiny, judgement and being treated differently reinforced their felt lack of belonging in the wider culture. Also, the construction of gender was implicated in their decision to keep their hair short. They allude to how they were perceived as masculine and less of a woman by others because they cut their hair and kept it short, and were seen to be going against the embodiment of the 'ideal' black woman. In keeping with the aforementioned class discourse, one participant explained how her colleagues at work would only wear their natural hair because they did not have money to go to the hair salon:

***Interviewer:*** *"And do any of your work colleagues wear their natural hair"?*

***Thembi:*** *"They do, when they've run out of money to go to the salon [giggles]. Yeah it's only when they don't have money that it's a problem. They say: "Eih, we don't have money for the salon. So they cut it, put in a spray, and they keep it like that, cause it's cheaper that way."*

It seems that Thembi and her colleagues fall on opposite sides of the spectrum when it comes to their choice of hair. Her colleagues only choose to wear and style their natural hair because they lack the funds to style their hair by professionals. This statement mirrors the perception of black women with natural hair as being "broke". Natural hair is treated as a back-up plan for these women because they lack the finances to 'get their hair done' and will only opt for natural hair until they can afford to style it. The class discourse plays a major role in the identities of these black women and shapes how they are labelled and marginalised regardless of the hair they choose to wear.

***'The easy way out?'***

*Straight hair as easy maintenance*

Across each interview it became clear that most of the participants shared a common sentiment that straight hair was more convenient for the workplace. Although the participants admitted that they work in spaces where they are not policed or scrutinized on their choice of hairstyle (as argued in Opie & Phillips, 2011; Rosette & Dumas, 2007), some gravitate more towards straight hair because it is an easy fit for their busy work

schedule, and because they do not have the time to familiarize themselves with the special care that goes into grooming their natural hair. The participants all expressed how it is difficult for them to groom and to take care of their natural hair because they are very busy at work or at home and feel that natural hair requires a lot of maintenance. They also felt that straight hair gives them the advantage of managing their time better because the grooming process for straight hair is easier and less time consuming than for natural hair. Participants also recounted their early memories, and referred to their childhood as a pivotal period in which imposed hair grooming practices by their mothers helped to cement their preference for straight hair, and their awareness of this led them to challenge the dominant view of natural hair as a problem that had to be fixed. All the participants reflected on their memories of constant visits to the salon, and even DIY moments of having their hair relaxed, permed or pressed. Through this ritualized practice, the perception of straight hair as easy maintenance was sold to them while the choice to keep their natural hair was not entertained and led some participants to develop a misguided view towards their natural hair. Relaxing hair has been a popular tradition among black women across the world since it was first invented, and this grooming process starts from as early as six years of age. This shows that the choice to relax the hair is not made by the child, but is rather made by the mother or female elder in the family.

The perception of relaxed hair or straight hair being the easy way out and convenient for styling has being ingrained and normalized for black women since childhood. In watching other black females who were key figures in their lives (mothers, sisters, aunts) the participants learned to construct straight hair as a temporary cocoon to hide their insecurities or dissatisfaction with their troubled hair, and their narratives allude to how having more experience (over eighteen years) in relaxing one's hair contributes to a lack of knowledge of how to maintain natural hair. This lack of knowledge and access to alternative ways of grooming natural hair is in accordance with Kelley (1997) who stated that during slavery, black women had no means or the proper tools to take care of their natural hair, nor to replicate the intricate hairstyles that their ancestors created. Also, in mothers using the "small-toothed comb of the master" to groom their children's hair, their 'kinky' curls became damaged. This resulted in young black girls developing a psychological avoidance and disdain towards combing their own hair (Kelley, 1997: 346). This pattern persists for decades from childhood to adulthood and as a result, black women accepted straightening as the ideal grooming practice and developed a heavy reliance on it.

*Untangling natural hair as a problem*

There were also striking similarities across participant narratives in terms of their personal views of styling their own hair. As adult women, styling their own hair became

a daunting experience, and a majority of them made reference to their hair as difficult, troublesome, hard to comb and unmanageable. Participants engaged in a dialogue where they revealed a feeling of disdain towards their own hair because it required a lot of maintenance and styling it was a difficult task. While the participants did not mention being told by their mothers or other adults that their hair was unacceptable or ugly, the ritual to straighten their hair sent a message to them that they needed to alter their hair texture as a normalized beauty practice. Straight hair as easy maintenance and natural hair as a problem that needs fixing are examples of myths that were appropriated by the mainstream beauty industry for many decades in the New World. The unique care that was required to groom natural hair and its strangeness to black women was the perfect catalyst for their contempt towards, and lack of knowledge about, it.

Another important aspect of participants' views regarding natural hair was how they simultaneously challenged these negative valuations. The participants' unmasking of their own negative perceptions towards their natural hair revealed ongoing psychological processes of decolonization and transformation in which they attempted to untangle and unlearn decades of internalized and self-taught devaluation of blackness. Spellers (2003) describes decolonization as a process of gaining a deeper understanding into the oppressive constructions of black female corporeality, but it also involves reconstructing hidden myths that manifest in black women's own rhetoric and pattern of thoughts. In doing this, black women can also engage in self-definition and disidentify with the wider aesthetic standards of beauty and controlling images of White-centric culture. Indeed, the participants in this study expressed a critical understanding of why they viewed their hair as unacceptable.

***Tapiwa:*** *I think that the ads on TV of relaxers show you the before and after picture. The before picture always has a black girl with her natural hair looking all over the place, and frizzy, while the after picture shows smooth straight hair. Natural hair was never shown as neat or beautiful, so that had a lot to do with why I thought my hair was ugly.*

Participants expressed how their immediate environment and the wider society shaped their personal beliefs of their natural hair as undesirable and ugly. Also, through images of natural hair being purposefully displayed as untidy in the advertisements of relaxers and the lack of positive affirmation for its beauty by their families, taught them to only value their natural hair after it has been treated or straightened. Indeed, the black hair industry relied on commonly-held beliefs of natural hair as wild, unruly and in need of taming to sell their products as a solution to the problem. Black women, reflecting on their negative valuations of their hair can be a difficult process but can also lead to a more conscious struggle to discontinue

the internalization of negative images still present. Another participant, Anashe, expressed a particular sentiment about her child's hair:

***Anashe:*** *I think it was…Lack of maybe access to knowledge—other ways of managing it. Cos [sic] when I look at myself now and I look at my child, who has natural hair, I know so many things that I can do to my hair. But when I look at my childhood, I don't think my mother knew.*

In this excerpt, Anashe recognizes the position she is in and refers to her having knowledge about other ways to take care of her hair, and in turn she can apply this knowledge to care for her child's hair. Black women's renewed focus on – and newfound appreciation for – natural hair can be credited to the 'hair-raising' phenomenon of recent years, in the form of the Natural Hair Movement that promotes the beauty and culture of African hair worldwide. This movement established an important knowledge platform that helped to grow an online community[5] of black women who share videos with valuable techniques (some rooted in ancient African practices) and guidelines for grooming and styling natural hair. Access to such knowledge can now be appreciated and utilised by black women as part of a process of decolonising their consciousness, in which longstanding perspectives on natural hair as difficult and unmanageable can be addressed.

***Silent struggle***

*Complex institutional power structure*

In recent years, there has been a shift in focus towards changing the climate in predominantly White institutions and the emergence of a wider public call for changes in policies that were historically set out for White males, in order to allow for greater diversity in gender and racial representations. Black women in particular have to navigate obstacles relating to gendered and racial discrepancies that impact their professional advancement (Mabokela, 2001; Patton & Haynes, 2018; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001). These findings are particularly important for this study as some participants expressed similar narratives of barriers encountered in their work environment. Some argued that they felt neglected within the institutional power structure and pointed towards issues of equity and lack of support:

***Nomfazwe:*** *"And the equity policy is being pushed so much that other black people are welcome, but once you're in here there's very little support for people, for things that are particular to being a black female academic. So, 'yes, come in we need you'. So it's almost like you coming because the University needs to tick some boxes… I feel with a black girl,*

[5] black Girl With Long Hair https://www.facebook.com/blackgirllonghair/

*listen, you get chastised for not getting it right. Never mind when you came in you didn't know how to do it right, and there was nobody to help you. It's well, 'why didn't you know how to do this?' Then it's, oh and, you've got an affirmative action post. You're getting the post because you're black but you're incompetent.*"

***Asha:*** *"Yeah, there's very few here at UCT, and also I think there's a lot of experience of alienation. Uhm, being you know denied promotion, being passed over on opportunities, not being respected. Uhm, yeah, it's, there's an assumption that we bringing down the standard, all kinds of, uh issues, you know racist, it's a racist institution, and it's no surprise because we come from a country that, had that institutionalized racism so we can't, just expect institutions to just change overnight. It takes a long time, and so that's why a lot of black staff feel very alienated here."*

Participants described their marginalization and ostracism in stating how there is a lack of support and accommodation from other staff members for their needs, and a lack of social networking for them to communicate their challenges, despite having the initial perception that the institution will provide a safe space of acceptance and a space where they will be treated equally. However, once they joined the institution they came to a realization that certain exclusionary practices existed and that there was an overall lack of diversity in their work environment. They also raised the issue of equity and a lack of respect by their peers because they obtained their jobs through affirmative action, leading to perceptions that they were somehow bringing down the standard of the institution. Participants also felt used by the institution and that they only accepted them in order to adhere to policies of affirmative action, not because they saw their skills and qualifications as valuable to the work environment. Their narratives show how affirmative action policies are interpreted as barriers because they confirm their feelings of being outsiders who need to prove themselves within the institution. The myriad issues mentioned by the participants demonstrate how institutional racism is pervasive and how it manifests through different processes that put black people at a disadvantage. Institutional racism can manifest as either direct or indirect discrimination through a lack of provision of services, a work environment that lacks inclusivity and is hostile to black people in subtle ways, and senior staff members being disproportionally White.

Participants also alluded to a high level of pressure to work harder and to prove their competency:

***Nomfazwe:*** *"So, you have to work extra hard to prove that not only are you competent, you are excellent, because you can't…White woman in this space can be mediocre, black women have to be excellent."*

***Kirabo:*** *"People do second guess you all the time, so as a black woman you always have to work harder, and show people that you have skills, but people don't question a White woman."*

Both Nomfazwe and Kirabo provide a description of differential treatment for White versus black women, and express how a black woman's competence and ability is questioned and undermined in the work environment whereas a White woman is given more respect and does not face the same pressure to work harder and to prove her competency. Both statements are consistent with Thomas and Hollenshead's (2001: 167) claim that black women are held to unrealistic expectations, particularly by their White colleagues, and are presumed to be "shining examples of their group and somehow different from other blacks and other women." Such expectations resulted in participants feeling incompetent and disempowered, and for some of them, the only way to regain some of that power was through various coping mechanisms.

*Hair as a response to the struggle*

Indeed, various studies have described the different coping strategies that black women have adopted in order to deal with racially inscribed institutional barriers (see, e.g., Patitu & Hinton [2003] on this particular topic). Several participants explained how they were taught to use their hair as a coping mechanism against any negative circumstance that they may experience in their life, and they duly applied this principle in the workplace:

***Masika:*** *"They say that your hair is an extension of who you are, and I do use my hair to show what I'm all about. I am hard working, I am highly skilled and I have what it takes to contribute my skills in this job."*

***Dikeledi:*** *"I can't change the environment around me, or the opinions of others here, but I can control how I feel about myself and how I look, and I get to decide what hairstyle I want to have on the next day."*

Their narratives reveal how hair is used as a means to gain control of their identity and how they represent themselves in an environment where they feel they are not valued. This shows that hair serves as a passive resolution or strategy to the stress they feel, allowing them to lessen subjectively the impact of the unequal treatment they receive in their work environment. They also describe hair as an indirect medium through which they can communicate their conviction of their competency and skills which are undervalued by their colleagues. Other participants emphasised how they use their hair as a self-protective strategy from the psychological and emotional distress they feel from being in a space that they describe as adverse and dysfunctional.

***Asha:*** *"My hair is like a cocoon because I feel secure knowing that my hair looks good, because there are days where I feel like I need to make my hair pretty, put my game face on and tackle the challenges ahead. People cannot see that I've given up."*

The abovementioned description of hair by Asha shows how it can assume symbolic value. Hair can be mobilized in a strategic manner by a black woman struggling to represent herself within the workplace, and regardless of the hairstyle being natural or straight, it had to be in good form. If their colleagues see that their hair is well groomed and looking good, their colleagues cannot know or recognise that they are in a state of turmoil, or they cannot see through their vulnerability. A language of resistance is imbued in their narratives and they use their hair as a means to defy the social structures where they are constantly under a microscope and scrutinized on a professional and social level.

***To shine or not to shine***

This current theme is linked to the theme of a silent struggle within the institution because of previous accounts by black women in historically White institutions who have experienced discrimination and alienation, and encompasses a further struggle by black women to specifically wear their natural hair. Black women have faced discrimination for donning African hairstyles in the workplace and this theme alludes to how they deal with this challenge. It is evident that hair remains a marker of racial identity, and previous research has shown that black women are particularly aware of how they present their hair in the workplace. Through their narratives, participants expressed how they were constantly politically awake, and could not switch off from issues of gender, race and inequality within the institution. Simultaneously, they also highlighted the need to negotiate how their hair receives attention in the workplace. Previous research shows that black women can feel pressured into downplaying certain racial markers like hair in order to make their race less salient or easier to ignore (Opie & Phillips, 2015). Similarly, the participants in this study experienced a dilemma around whether to shine or not to shine and accordingly had to juggle attention in the workplace. One participant who decided against downplaying her hair spoke about how she was the only black woman in her department, and because she wears a wide range of African hairstyles, she automatically draws attention from her work colleagues and other people in the workplace. This attention is also coupled with a racial awareness in the workplace.

***Lethabo:*** *But of course once you start you realise that it's not uhm... as it looks. You, you get to notice—I think this is just the culture at UCT. You get to be so aware of yourself and the other non-whites. Even if you could be just going to the kitchen. People know what my*

*hairstyle was the day before. They like, 'Oh, I didn't think that was you, because now you have changed your hairstyle'.*

***Lethabo:*** *And of course I'll tell them, 'I had it up the other day, and now I just let it down'. So, I mean it's small things, but you get to be—[giggle]—people get to recognise every hairstyle— Because it's different hair. It's kinda [sic] tiring… it's tiring, cos [sic] I mean why do I have to explain anything?*

Lethabo's narrative demonstrates a racial awareness in which she explains how much she is aware of herself and other black people and how this awareness is in part due to the culture at UCT, but also because she is in a space where black women are not in the majority. Lethabo also acknowledges the attention she receives in relation to her diverse set of hairstyles, but she also feels the tiring need to explain these changes in styles on a regular basis. Additionally, she points out that this perceived attention and inconvenience of having to justify her hairstyle is due to her hair being different. Lethabo's narrative alludes to the notion of "distinctiveness'' which explains how black people can feel vulnerable in social settings where they are the "numerical minority" and can experience heightened racial awareness because of a felt lower status in historically White institutions (Pollak & Niemann 1998: 955). Also, black people will attend to those characteristics or aspects of themselves that make them distinct or that make them shine (draw attention) in their social environment. Participants expressed a bold and unapologetic approach in their narrative and stated how a black woman who wears natural hairstyles such as an Afro or dreadlocks is drawing attention to herself because they consider these styles as a visual declaration of racial pride. They also refer to how society still attaches political significance to a black woman's preference for natural hairstyles. Natural hair becomes synonymous with a counterhegemonic stance and inversion of Whiteness in spaces such as UCT.

## Concluding remarks

With regard to the intersections of race, gender and class in South African higher education institutions, it would be premature to conclude that conscientization around the issues examined in this study can successfully overcome such problems as the racialization of standards of beauty – or their accompanying hegemonic ideologies – in society. Indeed, as suggested by critical race theory, racism and discrimination manifest themselves in specific social structures of our society – not as isolated or coincidental experiences, but as a mere consequence of the broader social ideologies that govern society and ensure the subordinate position of black people and other oppressed groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). History reveals that black women have been targeted for their physical characteristics, while the 'strangeness' of their natural hair was a prominent motif in White racism that relegated their hair to the lower end of

the beauty continuum. Black women's hair was a site of dehumanisation, degradation, and inspiration for White supremacists to reinforce a language of ugliness, otherness and inferiority. These imposed ideologies were reinforced not only with the emergence of straight hair technology as a valuable commodity in the beauty industry, but ultimately led black women to adopt such ideologies as truths that sustained their own devaluation. It can be concluded that black women's identities have been shaped by powerful ideologies that aimed to indoctrinate them with a flawed consciousness in which they saw themselves as inadequate, less than human, and incapable of defining their own standards of beauty and expressing their own standpoints.

The study's theoretical and practical significance is its commitment to challenging the interlocking systems of oppression that continue to marginalize black women's identities. As clearly outlined from an Afrocentric feminist stance, these narratives need to be identified and acknowledged on their own terms – that is, through the articulations of black women themselves – rather than inserting them within frames of analysis that are insensitive to the particulars of lived experience. Collins (2002) describes how this involves black women using their position as 'outsiders' to bring new perspectives to bear on their oppression – paradoxically via their political consciousness as 'insiders' who actively bring into question social relations that have not been taken into account before. This raises the importance of articulating the experiences of marginalized groups through their own cultural lenses – an aspect of central importance to debates about decolonisation and epistemic justice.

In this study, the narratives of black women on hair and its relation to their identity and their experiences in a historically White institution is an example of their boldness in expressing their own standpoints. As much as the distance between the university milieu and ordinary life can be substantial, it is equally true that changes in institutional discourses inevitably filter down into public spaces. Further research is necessary, therefore, that will provide opportunities for black women and other marginalized groups to offer novel insights that can aid in reconstructing powerful discourses and ideologies disguised as 'truths' and contribute to the related processes of transformation and inclusivity – not only in higher education institutions but in South African social life at large.

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