



BEYOND THE PENCIL TEST

Transformations in hair and headstyles, or communicating social change

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Why does Black hair have such potency? To whom is Black hair speaking? What messages does Black hair communicate? Each hairstyle choice tells an intimate story of the wearer, disclosing a personal narrative to spectators. In this article, Andre Powe analyzes hair as sign, symbol, text, and a highly specialized language of representation.

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (AP) - What struck the Brazilian woman most forcibly as she watched U.S. election returns on television was seeing President-elect Barack Obama's two young daughters. "I can't believe those two little girls with hair like mine will be in the White House," said 31-year-old Carolina Iootty Dias, putting her hand to her head, tears in her eyes as she watched the screen...

"Obama win forces Brazil to take a reality check", by David Bradley (November 5, 2008)

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HAIR AND COMMUNICATION

Why does Black hair have such potency? To whom is Black hair speaking? What messages does Black hair communicate?

Hairstyles are what every human being possesses, but few give the subject serious consideration, particularly as an aspect of communication. Fiske (1990) identifies two schools of thought in studying communication: one track recognizes communication as the transmission of messages; the other sees communication as the production and the exchange of meanings. According to Fiske, this second school of thought "does not consider misunderstandings to be evidence of communication failure – they may result from cultural differences between sender and receiver". In either case, most importantly, his view is that "Communication is talking to one another, it is television, it is spreading information, it is our hairstyle".

Hairstyles are signs, and communicators use signs to convey information. In this analysis, the production of meaning focuses on the interpretation of the receiver of the message. Or in other words, Fiske's second school of thought in communication regards Ms. Dias with more importance than the senders of the message and the medium used.

SIGNS AND REPRESENTATIONS

According to Byrd & Tharps (2001), even "In the early fifteenth century, hair functioned as a carrier of messages in most West African societies". The authors state that in cultures such as the Wolof, Mende, Mandingo and Yoruba, "hair was an integral part of a complex language system".

According to Stuart Hall (2003), "Signs stand for or represent our concepts, ideas and feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meaning in roughly the same way we do" (Hall, 2003). Hairstyles have memory and meaning. Each hairstyle choice tells an intimate story of the wearer, disclosing a personal narrative to spectators. It is my contention here that hair is sign, symbol, text, and a highly specialized language of representation.

SIGNIFYING BLACKNESS WITH HAIR

With regard to what constitutes Black hair and hairstyles, a standard definition is lacking. Africans and people of African descent use not only hair but also a variety of artifices to dress or decorate the head. "People use hats and hairstyles to express and explore shared and deeply held cultural beliefs and values towards ethnicity, gender, life stages, status and authority, occupation, and social decorum" (Arnoldi & Kreamer, 1995). Hair often masquerades as something else due to a tendency across Black culture both contemporary and traditional to show displacement, dislocation, misdirection, or mimeticism. Quite simply, for example, sometimes hats can be hairstyles and hairstyles can be hats.

Scholars have noted several common and consistent characteristics deriving from African expressive culture. The co-existence of these six uniquely African characteristics has been evident worldwide throughout the history of the African Diaspora. We are familiar with them as "rhythmic and metric complexity; individual improvisation and stylization; dialogic interaction or call-and-response; active engagement of the whole person and the whole community; social commentary or

competition through indirection and satire; and development of a group consciousness or sensibility” (Caponi, 1999). Today, many of us identify people of the African Diaspora as Black for these reasons. Using the term ‘headstyle’ interchangeably with ‘hair’ denotes the ephemeral and constructed landscape of Black people’s adornments of their heads. Therefore, in conformance with overall Black cultural production any of the elements above will probably appear when we look at Black hairstyles and associated motifs, processes, and adornments.

While acknowledging non-homogeneity, and non-uniformity of hair texture; Black people do have hair in common. According to Mercer (1994), “when hairstyling is critically evaluated as an aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life, all black hairstyles are political in that they each articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both social and symbolic meaning and significance”. Black identities and headstyles are produced within specific social and historical contexts around the planet.

HAIR IN CAPTIVITY: SLAVERY AND APARTHEID

In the United States, according to Byrd & Tharps (2001), “One of the first things the slave traders did to their new cargo was shave their heads”. With this maneuver, an important marker of cultural identity was neutered. Apart from not having combs, as they were accustomed in Africa, and in addition to working long hours and even seven days a week on the plantations, in Byrd & Tharps’ account, “the Africans had neither the time nor the inclination to care much about their appearance, including their hair”. The work the slaves performed decided how they wore their hair: in the fields, “the women wore head rags and the men took to shaving their heads, wearing straw hats, or using animal shears to cut their hair short”.

The enslaved Africans laboring in closer proximity to Whites often styled their hair imitating their owners. In response to the fashion of White upper class men who wore wigs, “some enslaved Africans took to wearing wigs as well; others shaped and styled their own hair to look like a wig”, state Byrd & Tharps. Enslaved Africans who worked inside the main house “were required to present a neat and tidy appearance or risk the wrath of the master, so men and women often wore tight braids, plaits, and cornrows”.

In South Africa, hair was also a location for oppression under apartheid. According to a thirty-six year old Rastafarian whom I interviewed in 2006, in the process of preparing my Master thesis in Communication for Development: “during apartheid you know, you couldn’t wear your dreads

and walk freely... they always suspect someone with dreadlocks” (Durban interview). Dreadlocks represented a feared hairstyle and were identified with resistance movements for independence. This interviewee explained that “some of the warriors were fighting in Zimbabwe, which was their distinction you know, most of them wore dreadlocks, because it was easy to maintain dreadlocks in the bush... it was just the most preferable style and they could easily identify one another from just a civilian and a guerilla” (Durban interview). Dreadlocks operate as a headstyle of resistance across the African Diaspora. My interviewee also reported the police forcibly cutting the dreadlocks off men in custody.

In South Africa under apartheid, as in the United States during slavery, hair was contested terrain. As evidenced by the quote of Ms. Dias reproduced in the opening of this article, Black hair in the 21st century is still a site of power and potency.

THE PENCIL TEST

Both in the United States during chattel slavery and in South Africa during apartheid, there were tests of hair that supported a racial hierarchy. Byrd and Tharps (2001) note anecdotal evidence of a comb test as slavery ended, instituted in churches by formerly freed slaves -often lighter in complexion, with straighter hair- to keep out the newly emancipated - often darker in complexion, with kinkier hair.

In nineteenth century America, many enslaved Africans had fair skin just like whites. According to Byrd & Tharps, “the rule of thumb was that if the hair showed just a little bit of kinkiness a person would be unable to pass for white” (2001). Hair acts as the true test of blackness, with Byrd and Tharps showing hair superseding skin complexion as identifier of race.

One nineteen-year old Xhosa male whom I interviewed explained how the pencil test was applied in South Africa during apartheid: “The pencil test, where they shove a pencil through your hair to test whether you are colored or whatever and if it falls they put you into that category of color according to the pencil test” (Durban interview). If a pencil placed in the hair fell, then one’s classification was Coloured. If the pencil stuck, the classification was Black.

According to Harper, “If the law cannot fix black identity in such a way as to minimize the possibility of ‘illegitimate’ upward social movement while simultaneously rendering potential transgressors identifiable at a glance, then it must obtain help from other quarters that are better equipped for the task at hand” (1996). Under apartheid, Black people and Coloured

people in South Africa were separated in housing, schools, and medical facilities. A different racial classification from the rest of one's family members mandated the use of separate facilities. My interviewee said he learned about the pencil test in school. He said the test was used in transportation, much as the Jim Crow laws enacted after slavery that racially segregated transportation in the southern United States.

POLICING THE COLOR LINE, POLICING HAIR

Consigning all ethnicities of Blackness to a single legal racial category, the 'one drop rule' has existed since chattel slavery in the United States. One drop of Black blood makes one Black. Harper explains that "This 'one-drop' rule, deriving from the customs of the slavery-era South has been recognized by the U.S. courts since at the least the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and it was reaffirmed as recently as 1986" (Harper, 1996).

According to Taylor (1995), in 1652, when the Dutch East India Company settlers arrived at the tip of the African continent, "They found a slight, yellow-skinned people whose odd appearance" was marked by peppercorn hair: the San people of South Africa are usually described as having yellow skin and peppercorn hair. Despite their light complexion, the San people have kinkier, more tightly curled hair than is associated with the darkest complexions of Black peoples.

The South African government was well aware that complexion was not the only identifier of race. In the apartheid system of division into White, Coloured and Black with attendant deprivations, hair was a tool of racial classification. The pencil test was an additional criterion determining the boundaries of Blackness. It policed the borders of Black and White identity and maintained Coloured identity as a buffer zone. It could only be Coloured identity that was in crisis when the pencil test was administered. Offspring of a White or Indian family would always pass, while offspring of a family of Africans would always fail. However, if one had both Black and White ancestry, there was an equal possibility of passing or failing the test. The pencil test was a tool that narrowly defined borders of Black identity through hair. Coloured identity was the nexus for the strongest contestations of both Black and White identity. "Black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin" (Mercer, 1994).

Application of the pencil test shows that both hair and skin complexion are equally important markers of Black identity. Hair often becomes the primary signifier of race.

CULTURE, GLOBALIZATION AND HAIR

Stuart Hall's (2003) view that "culture is a process, a set of practices ... concerned with the production of and the exchange of meanings" allows me to connect hair with both communication and culture. Tomlinson (1999) finds that "culture can be understood as the order of life in which human beings construct through practices of symbolic representation". Drawing on Stuart Hall (2003), I contend that hair as "language is the privileged medium in which we 'make sense' of things, in which meaning is produced and exchanged. Meanings can only be shared through our common access to language".

Headstyles are vehicles of shared meaning -shared in this case for people of African descent throughout the world, as the mainstream media transmits images.

According to Hall (2003), "In any culture, there is always a great diversity of meaning about any topic, and more than one way of interpreting or representing it". In his view, however, "culture depends on the participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways". It is important to keep in mind that "globalization fundamentally transforms the relationship between the places we inhabit and our cultural practices, experiences and identities" (Tomlinson, 1999). As a result of the process described by Tomlinson, "people can't be separated by physical obstacles or temporal distances" (Bauman, 1998).

The focus of Ms. Dias's statement is Barack Obama's children. The spectacle of the day, the inaugural, is all about Obama. But while he is the focal point of the event, Ms. Dias is moved to tears, specifically by the headstyles of his daughters. Black hair has achieved a central role on the world stage, overcoming a history of oppression. That achievement is personal for Ms. Dias, and using hair as hypertext in a globalized world, she links her hair to that of the Obama children.

HAIR, HABITATION AND HYPERTEXT

The Encarta encyclopedia defines 'hypertext' as a data storage system; "a system of storing images, text, and other computer files that allows direct links to related text, images, sound, and other data". Hair is a form of data storage with linkage. Ms. Dias reads the message within the message. Within this context, hair becomes a form of corporeal hypertext that transcends the spoken word.

Ms. Dias's quote at the opening of this article illustrates hair is ensconced like hypertext, as a parallel transmission within a mainstream broadcast. Hair, like a hypertext link on a computer screen, operates within the visual media which reflects an alternate, qualitative, and distinct source of communication. Headstyles are their own source and transmitter: a distinct thread of discourse for analysis within the mass media.

Inscribing the body with headstyles is a form of habitation; a way of responding to deterritorialization and contending with physical displacement, caused by globalization. Appadurai (2003) wonders about the meaning of locality "in a world where spatial localization, quotidian interaction, and social scale are not always isomorphic". His answer reveals the importance of hair in the production of locality: "Ceremonies of naming and tonsure, scarification and segregation, circumcision and deprivation are complex social techniques for the inscription of locality onto bodies". Hair is an important text in anticolonial discourse, as it links to alternate locations of identity construction circumventing colonial and national boundaries.

Afros link to the Black Panthers and to the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery in Alabama during the 1960s' civil rights era in the United States. Having origins in Ethiopia, dreadlocks are reconstituted with additional narratives in Jamaica, and then relink to Africa and guerrillas in Zimbabwe, and South Africans under apartheid. Headstyles have sounds: Afros chant "Black Power", "Peace", and "Africa, Africa, Africa!" Dreadlocks sing Bob Marley's "Redemption Song". Hairstyles link to narratives, and to people: they link to struggles and social movements, and places that Black people inhabit in the past and present. The plausible effects of this linkage to sites of transgression can provide options for self-identification and thus social transformation.

A SPECTATOR'S VIEW OF BLACK HAIR

As an enlightened spectator, one can read more into the images of the Obama family as they appeared at the inauguration. In Bauman's view (1998), "not every human creature occupies the same place and thus contemplates the world from the same perspective, not all sightings are likely to be equal in value". Just as people and places were colonized, so were "ways of looking" also colonized; including how Black people look at themselves.

The Obama daughters wear the same kinds of hairstyles as Black girls the same age around the world, relevant to who they are. They are the

children of well - educated, professional parents. On the day of the presidential inaugural, their hair appears straightened; however, they are held to a different standard from their parents. Sasha and Malia articulate a range of consistently age appropriate upper-middle class African-American hairstyles. Throughout their father's many campaigns, images of them show braided styles -cornrows, curly pony and pig-tails . The childrens' hairstyles change depending on the occasion. At formal events such as the inaugural, however, their mother defers to the colonial standard of pressed, straightened hair.

Even without having seen any previous images of the children, keener spectators can determine whether the hair texture is authentically their own. There are mechanical (heat) and chemical –processes that change the texture of hair, in accordance with a process popularized by Madame C.J. Walker very early in the twentieth century. The straightened style is adapted to appeal to a white aesthetic -hair that is long, straight, and that moves. This is the ubiquitous style of mainstream working Black women around the world. It is hair that is acceptable and adaptable to colonized situations. Depending on the length, color, texture, occasion, profession and age of the wearer, a different message is sent. For example, the headstyles the Obama children wear send a different message if worn by Ms. Dias or Ms. Obama. A different message would be sent if the daughters' heads were adorned with dreadlocks.

There are Black hairstyles that scare people, both Black and White. These are hairstyles of resistance, which the Obamas with their new global status must avoid at all costs. Similarly, anti-colonial insurgents alarm both the colonizers and the colonized. A famous issue of the *New Yorker* literary magazine (July 2008) carried a cover page cartoon that spoofed the Obamas, proving the point. The illustration, by Barry Blitt, is titled "The Politics of Fear". On the cover, Barack and Michelle exchange celebratory "fist bumps". Barack wears Arab clothing, sandals, and turban, while Michelle sports an Angela Davis Black Panther afro. She is dressed in combat boots and camouflage pants, with an AK 47 slung over her shoulder. The couple appears in the White House Oval office, in front of a portrait of Osama Bin Laden, which hangs over a fireplace where the American flag burns. This cover image illustrates the kinds of headstyles of resistance that the Obamas are discouraged from wearing; as are Black people who wish to be accepted in the mainstream.

What is quite telling about the headstyles as presented on the magazine cover is that in the case of Michelle, it is what her natural hair (and that of many other Black men and women) might look like. The afro hairstyle is what long Black hair is, without processing, or straightening. At increasing lengths, straight hair moves south, and Black hair defies gravity to move north. The afro became popular in the 1960s as an emblem of the civil

rights movement in the United States. Black people were motivated to wear their hair natural, and one of the synonymous words for afro is “natural”. The New Yorker illustration projects an image of militancy and violence through the adornments of the head, supported by other props such as the attire and weapon. The cover image warns that Michelle’s/Black peoples’ hair looking “natural” becomes a threat to the colonial order. In 1967 Frantz Fanon wrote “The white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast”, and more than forty years later, for some the afro hairstyle proves it. Neither Michelle nor Barack can grow their hair long and natural without being viewed as a threat -without being perceived as militant, angry and the Other.

What is most important about the hairstyles of young Black women is the relationship it shows to their mother. To care for and style Black hair requires time, money, and intensive labour -especially for women. It is usually the mother of each girl who expends the resources to care for her daughters’ hair. For a Black mother to spend time on her daughters’ hair requires the average working woman to sacrifice time on her own hair. It becomes a balancing act for a Black woman’s own hair to receive attention when she has daughters. It necessitates having to sacrifice her own beauty for the beauty of her daughter. Black women have come up with creative ways of balancing that responsibility to share their beauty. With boys, it is easier. Up till recently, many Black mothers had their sons’ hair cut low, so they could spend time on their own hair and the hair of their daughters.

Without either parent present, to people in the Black community, it is often apparent that a mixed race girl has a White mother. This is because the child’s hair often looks like hell. It takes time, effort, skill and craftsmanship to maintain Black hair. It is part of the culture within the Black community to support these rituals. What is essential as a cultural statement on the day of the inauguration is not the clothes the Obama daughters wear, but how their hair looks -their hairstyles testify to the attention, care, and love of their mother or grandmother, just like with other young Black girls.

SITUATING HAIR IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE ARENA

What does one call Black hair?

Communication for development is nuanced, multidisciplinary and uniquely positioned to contend with hair as a cultural concept, particularly from the perspective of the post-development school of

thinking.

According to Maharaj & Tawadros (2005), “In today’s interconnecting, globalizing world, the business of tackling unfreedoms and exclusions cannot be put off to some time ‘after development has taken place’. The communications sphere becomes an essential medium through which individual participants and players identify, interpret, and represent their social and cultural wants and needs. In doing this they begin to shape development itself”.

Banks (2000) states that “scholars focusing on blacks and hair emphasize the importance of hair among blacks in relationship to Africa, constructions of race, enslavement, skin color, self-esteem, ritual, aesthetics, images of beauty, politics, identity, and the intersection of race and gender”.

A very good starting point in contending with hair in the Black arena from a development and social change perspective is the nomenclature. What do we Black people call our hair? Curly? Nappy? Kinky? Maybe it should be called Kaffir hair as some do in South Africa, but it is certainly not woolly. Woolly becomes associated with ‘Othering’ (Fanon 1967), linking Black hair with animal rather than human attributes, and thereby circumscribing the value. People of African origin have mixed extensively with people of other races, and Black hair texture ranges from curly to straight. Hair is always a definitive representation of Black identity for Africans and people of African descent all over the world.

CONCLUSION

Hair is a deflected subject. An uninhibited conversation about hair leads to other subjects, yet the potency of hair is significant.

Headstyles are corporeal sites of consumption, production, and distribution. Hair embodies the convergence of the historical past, the historical text, and the post-colonial narrative. Hair is language, discourse, reason, and knowledge, and brings power to the body in line with the work of Michel Foucault. As explained by Vivyan Adair (2000), “Foucault positions the physical body as virtual text. His powerful and succinct scholarship points toward a body that is given form through semiotic systems and written on by discourse. For Foucault, the body and text are inseparable. In his logic, power constructs and holds bodies”.

Headstyles are inscriptions of social discourses that bind the body. The

Obama family's hair –as First Family of the United States of America- is emblematic of changing discourses and inscriptions.

As a recipient of the Memories of Modernity grant from Malmö University, in November and December 2006 Andre Powe conducted participatory action research in Durban, South Africa. His Masters thesis in Communication for Development, on which this article is based, is entitled "Changing Spectatorships in Communicating Hair for Development: Symbols and Significations of Identities, Masculinities and Maturations". arpowe@hotmail.com

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