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“The Kink In My Hair” : The Experience of Black Consciousness through the Sanctuary of Black Hair Salons

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“Hey sesi this way for 100% Brazilian hair, no Fong Kong!”

FIGURE : 1 **The classic “straight back” style also known as Cornrows. This style is worn by both sexes of all ages. (Picwar.blogspot.co.za, 2013)**

A common line echoing through the bustling streets of Johannesburg inner city flowing into South Africa’s central railway station. Here over a million people a day push their way, stumbling and bumping through hundreds of South African and Black African immigrant’s entrepreneurial makeshift salon stalls. The informal hair industry has taken its own form transcending African cultures, mixing with elements of beauty from the West to claim a lucrative share in the capital pedestrian market.

A sociocultural anthropology lens rather than strictly an architectural or economic one is used in this thesis with the focus on the socio-political plight and demise of Black hair in a democratic South Africa. The focus will be on how these factors persistently continue to feed the corrosion of cultural identity and resistance to the cultural diversity that permeates through lack of planning of inner-city spaces and architectural presence that embodies the culture and the socio-economic role of the Black hair industry. Over the years, Black hair has claimed its share of dominance throughout South Africa’s history, observable in socio-political illustrations; for example, the “Pencil Test”, which was a common practice to distinguish (the kink in the hair of) members of the Black community from white, Indian and ‘Coloured’ racial groups. Two decades since the inception of a democratic government, South Africa still struggles with embracing and conceiving the true meaning of diversity expressed through the hallmark statement “a Rainbow Nation” symbolically through the “Black hair”.

The sociocultural battles between the Black and white communities are manifesting for some members of the Black community through through “good hairdos”, which have remained a daily reminder of the deep-seated unresolved racial attitudes, perceptions of supremacy over others and historical biases. I attest through this thesis



00 ABSTRACT

The sociocultural battles between the Black and white communities are manifesting for some members of the Black community through “good hairdos”, which have remained a daily reminder of the deep seated unresolved racial attitudes, perceptions of supremacy over others and historical biases. Black hair has retained its inherent power, whether it be consciously or unconsciously expressing one’s view of self and the image through which the world perceives one.

This is evident through the contrasting schools of thought: to escape from or advance the kink in the hair, thereby evoking questions of identity vs. choice. These are evident through the bombarding by “marketing tools” from national and global television to the entrepreneurial street hustlers in Park Station displaying women of colour with light skin and straightened hair. This is a clear reflection of the endemic white supremacy phenomenon. The fair amount of willingness and individual attraction by some Black ladies to the idea of having the kink transformed into long curls is over whelming noticeable.

Equally, emerging is a movement to retain the kink in the hair and explore various traditional hairstyles that, while innovative, retain the original structure of the hair. This move is also carving its own print on the canvas, following in the footsteps of

“hairdressing” in the inner-city being marginalized to the periphery; i.e., street edges and abandoned spaces... salons as a spatial refuge and place maker, within the colonial City of Johannesburg, for the Black community

FIGURE : 2 **Zig -zag “straight back” style , an alternative to the classical version of the “stright back”. (Lym, 2009)**

the Black Americans' "Black is Beautiful" revolution in the 1960s and '70s, evoking a national debate on interpretations of which hairdo is regarded as "neat and acceptable" in the eyes of formal institutional policies. A landmark case is the matter of the Black girls at the Pretoria Girls High School who voiced their pain at the school's code of conduct that decimated against Black hairstyles (News24, 29 August 2016).

Through the thesis, I revisit the above issues, particularly how the apartheid regime heightened the discriminatory beliefs shown through the perspectives on Black hair through social and architectural means. I also point to Black women's informed freedom to be and express their choice through hair. A sociocultural anthropology lens rather than strictly an architectural or economic one is used in this thesis with the focus on the socio-political plight and demise of Black hair in a democratic South Africa.

The focus will be on how these factors persistently continue to feed the corrosion of cultural identity and resistance to cultural diversity that permeates through lack of built fabric of inner-city spaces and architectural presence that embodies the culture and the socio-economic role of the Black hair industry.

This thesis examines the consequence of "hairdressing" in the inner-city being marginalized to the periphery; i.e., street edges and abandoned spaces due to these narrowed perceptions. I draw from qualitative notes from my visits to the informal and semi-formal Black hair salons in Park Station during which I particularly noticed the significant role played by these salons as a spatial refuge and place maker, within the colonial City of Johannesburg, for the Black community where women of all walks of life, age, culture, and economic status can meet and commune.

I further solicited (through personal interviews with the women who run these salons) their conscious and/ unconscious or unconscious relationship with hair theirs and those of their clients. I noticed with care, their brevity to inhabit, adapt and claim space that others would regard as dead or unusable space. I turned the emerging lessons into themes that informed the architectural form, functionality, and cultural significance of the design for a Black hair plaza /complex.

FIGURE : 3 **"Straight back" style in waves , an alternative to the classical version of the classic "aight straight back". (Lym, 2010)**